

Madagascar – the Odonata of the Eighth Continent

Tour dates: 7th to 20th January 2016

Number required for tour to run: 10.

Start location and date/time: Antananarivo Ivato International airport (TNR), evening 7th January 2016

End location and date/time: Antananarivo Ivato International airport (TNR), very early morning 20th January 2016.

Cost: £3650 (deposit therefore £365).

Identification guru: KD Dijkstra.

Tour manager: Phil Benstead.

There can be few naturalists who have not drooled over the prospect of a trip to Madagascar, an island that drifted away from the African mainland some 160 million years ago. Over time the island has evolved an incredible wealth of biodiversity and a staggering number of endemic species. Justly famous for its endearing lemurs, it also boasts six endemic bird families, one of the most diverse floras in the world and the world's largest and smallest chameleons. Much of this spectacular wildlife will provide the backdrop of our journey but it is Madagascar's dragonflies and damselflies that will be the focus of this tour - an Odonate fauna stuffed with endemics that has largely been ignored in the last 50 years and within which new discoveries doubtless await. Remember this is very much a pioneering tour, Phil is familiar with the sites we will visit but has only scratched the surface of the Odo fauna in visits during the dry season. Much remains to be discovered and puzzled out.

Our tour starts with a short internal flight into the dry south-west, famous for its spiny forest biome. No time in this fantastic dry landscape though as we will be driving straight to Zombitse National Park to search waterbodies and rivers in the park for the stunning bright green libellulid *Viridithemis viridula*. The forest here appears in front of us like a mirage as we drive over the plateau through a rather dreary agricultural landscape largely devoid of trees. On arrival the protected forest is obviously full of wildlife. Cuckoo-rollers are a special feature of this site and we may also bump into a number of photogenic lemur species including Verreaux's sifaka and Hubbard's sportive lemur. It will be hard not to be sidetracked by the wealth of wildlife on offer at this site and all subsequent ones of course!

Our three-night stay in this area will include time spent in the sandstone country of the Isalo National Park, great for Odonates and a good spot to catch up with the iconic ring-tailed lemur. We will also have time to return to Zombitse if necessary to search out *Viridithemis* if we are unsuccessful the first time. Night walks after mammals, amphibians and reptiles will be a post-dinner feature of the tour to ensure we spend some time looking at other taxa!

Moving on we head for the lush mid-altitude rainforest at Ramanofana, the sandstone giving way to granite as we drive. At Ramanofana we will keep our fingers firmly crossed for good weather. Mist is a possibility here and so we have allowed three full days just in case of inclement conditions. With good weather we should be able to get to grips with some great Odonates including some very appealing *Nesolestes* flatwings. Whatever the weather though, Ramanofana supports a fabulous fauna, including 12 species of lemur and some great reptiles and amphibians (including some stunning *Mantella* frogs). Night-walks here are often very rewarding for mouse-lemurs and especially chameleons. We will always have something to look at that is for sure.

After four nights at Ramanofana it is time to cover some ground in the bus. Our journey to Perinet will be broken halfway at a suitable hotel and then we continue on to our final destination. From Perinet we will explore both nearby parks; Mantadia and Andasibe. Expect plenty of *Proplatycnemis* and *Tatocnemis* species along the streams here.

This tour gives follows an incredibly diverse transect of the southern half of the country that should produce a good number of dragonflies and damselflies and associated wildlife.

You also have the chance to contribute further to the study of the Madagascan Odonata, as the tour is part of the research required for an introductory fieldguide to be written by KD Dijkstra together with Callan Cohen and Kai Schuette. It will be published and distributed among local guides, scientists and conservationists by the foundation Vahatra. Not only are your photographs likely to be used, but we also hope that donations to support the writing process will be forthcoming. All donors of £100 or more will be listed as sponsors in the eventual publication.

We are very excited by the prospect of the tour and KD and I look forward to seeing you in 'Tana!

Itinerary

- Day 1: arrive 'Tana and assemble late evening, o/night 'Tana
- Day 2: fly Toliara and on to Zombitse, o/night La Relais de la Reine
- Day 3: Isalo, o/night La Relais de la Reine
- Day 4: Zombitse or around hotel, o/night La Relais de la Reine
- Day 5: transfer to Ramanofana, o/night Ramanofana
- Day 6: Ramanofana, o/night Ramanofana
- Day 7: Ramanofana, o/night Ramanofana
- Day 8: Ramanofana, o/night Ramanofana
- Day 9: Ramanofana to Antsirabe, o/night Antsirabe
- Day 10: Antsirabe to Perinet, o/night Perinet
- Day 11: Mantadia, o/night Perinet
- Day 12: Andasibe, o/night Perinet
- Day 13: am transfer to 'Tana and shower before transfer to airport
- Day 14: early morning Air France flight back to Europe.