



As we paddled back across the lake towards our camp, the group's sense of achievement bordered on the euphoric. 'If I borrow your dress this afternoon,' said David, 'I could be the first cross-dresser to see it.'

Until this point, I'd had David (not his real name) pegged for a fairly level-headed chap, but then I'd not known him for long and first impressions have never been my strong suit. Thankfully, the owner of the dress decided she'd better hold onto her garment and at least try to maintain a grasp on reality and credibility. The 'it' responsible for our elation was the Sakalava Rail *Amaurornis olivieri*. To look at, if truth be told, it is not the most spectacular of birds – it resembles a Black Crake *A. flavirostris* with a chestnut back. What made the rail so special was that, prior to that morning, perhaps fewer than 10 birders had ever seen it. In fact there had only been five authentic records in the whole of the 20th century and its continued survival was only confirmed late in 2002. ▶

# TRAVELLING THE RAIL ROAD

TEXT &  
PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY NICK GARBUTT



The object of much desire – the elusive, rare and endemic Sakalava Rail.

Five hours earlier, we'd gingerly wedged ourselves into a small armada of dugout canoes and set off as the first hints of light began to nudge away the darkest of nights. Buoyed by optimism, we paddled slowly across Lac Kinkony in a remote corner of western Madagascar. The only noise was the soothing ripple at the bow as the dugouts parted the glassy waters.

In the first canoe Marc Rabenandrasana, from BirdLife International's Madagascar Threatened Wetlands Programme, plotted our course towards a huge bank of *Phragmites* reeds that loomed ahead. In places the reeds presented a seemingly impenetrable wall of tightly packed stems, but here and there were gaps and we eased our way through one. Inside was a maze of narrow channels between islands of

*Phragmites*, with no obvious points of reference to offer a sense of place or position. Yet Marc knew exactly where to go. He'd spent countless hours combing these reedbeds looking for rails and had developed an eerie ability to find his way around.

When I met Marc for the first time I had been immediately taken by his rabid enthusiasm and dedication. As we chatted about his work, he described the elation he'd felt when he saw the Sakalava Rail for the first time in April 2003. He went on to explain that in 2004 he had searched the reedbeds intensively since the start of the breeding season and had managed to pinpoint the territory of a pair and that he was seeing them reasonably often. However, he was also keen to sound a note of caution. 'There are times when they're very difficult. They hide deep in

the *Phragmites* and are impossible to find.' He made it clear we were far from certain to find the elusive bird.

So the night before, sitting around a fire under a star-speckled night sky, I chatted to the group of intrepid British birdwatchers I was leading. Even after a decade of leading wildlife tours, I still don't know how to find the words to prepare a group for potential disappointment. Although no one was actually saying as much, it was clear that failure to see the rail would be a huge blow to everyone.

We continued to weave our way through the reeds and it struck me what an inhospitable environment it was: a monoculture of impenetrable stems and razor-sharp leaves. Not surprisingly, other birds were few and far between – the occasional Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* or Great Egret *Egretta alba* patrolling the margins or a shy Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* poised motionless among the stems. The latter is a distinctive chestnut-coloured endemic race, *I. m. podiceps*, noticeably different from the more straw-coloured ones seen on the African mainland.

Ahead, Marc's canoe navigated a very narrow channel. Our four canoes behind followed. In front, Marc was instantly animated and waving at me frantically.

'Nick,' he called in as restrained a way as he could, 'it's here, come quickly.'

Our boatman desperately tried to force our canoe through the gap, while the matted roots skulking beneath the surface constantly snagged the hull and dragged us back. Eventually we lurched forward and drew alongside Marc, who pointed to the edge of the reedbed no more than 12 metres away. On a fallen reed stem, bathed in early morning sunshine, stood a Sakalava Rail.

I turned to the canoes behind, urging them forward as quickly as possible. The next two or three minutes seemed to take an age; those in my canoe had seen the bird too, but the rest of the group in the canoes behind hadn't yet. If the rail disappeared now, I'd never live it down.

Thankfully, the bird causing the frantic excitement was oblivious and stayed exactly where it was. One by one, all 10 ecstatic birders looked through binoculars held in trembling hands. In those two minutes, the number of birders who'd ever seen the Sakalava Rail tripled: these

included the first three women and the first octogenarian.

In keeping with so many other enigmatic species in Madagascar, the rail that had been so elusive and remained such a mystery for so long confounded our worries that it would disappear like a wisp of smoke the moment we found it. The bird continued to preen unconcernedly for several minutes before clambering back through the forest of reed stems and out of sight. We thought that was probably that. But to our delight the rail emerged again, this time with three tiny bundles of down in tow. Adult and chicks came out onto a mat of reeds and scurried back and forth, foraging. Then the other adult called and appeared – five Sakalava Rails together.

We later worked our way around the margins of the giant *Phragmites* bed, catching glimpses of one more rail and a handful of other species that inhabit the lake area: another endemic species, the Madagascar Jacana *Actophilornis albinucha*, as well as Allen's Gallinule *Porphyrola alleni* and African Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*.

Over lunch at our makeshift campsite on the lakeshore, we relived the success of the morning and bathed in the euphoria. Could I really have been only the seventh birder to see the rail? As we chatted, Marc began to outline some of the problems facing the rail if it is to survive. Pressure on its specialised habitat has increased ▸



● Sakalava Rail sites

Marc Rabenandrasana, from BirdLife International's Madagascar Threatened Wetlands Programme, has been monitoring the Sakalava Rail since 2003.





Highly vulnerable to predators in the first days of its life, a Sakalava Rail chick ventures forth.

dramatically in recent years as lakes have been drained and reedbeds destroyed.

There has been massive input from the international conservation community in Madagascar during the past decade, but virtually all of this effort has concentrated on forests, and other environments have largely been neglected. BirdLife International has been quick to pick up on this and its research has revealed that 10 of the island's 14 Endangered or Critically Endangered species (Madagascar's most threatened birds) are predominantly wetland, rather than forest species.

Worldwide, wetlands in general have been neglected, as it has often been assumed there are more benefits for local people if these areas are drained and converted to other uses, such as agriculture. This has certainly been the case in Madagascar and it prompted BirdLife to launch its Threatened Wetlands Programme. In western Madagascar these threatened areas consist of a complex of lakes, rivers, marshes, deltas, shorelines and mangroves that cover some 26 000 square kilometres.

Western Madagascar is dry for much of the year, so people tend to congregate around lakes and wetlands as these offer crucial life-support systems, supplying not only water, but also opportunities for fishing and hunting. The communities and

their beliefs and cultural traditions are inextricably linked to the wetlands, so the accepted approach of creating protected areas would, in many ways, be unworkable here.

The BirdLife solution is to dovetail scientifically-based resource management principles with traditional approaches, so that local people enforce sustainable use and promote long-term planning that will ultimately benefit their communities. Continuing our discussion, Marc made it clear that ecotourism was also a central component in BirdLife's plans: the concept is not only to promote Lac Kinkony and the Sakalava Rail to birdwatchers, but also to try and appeal to those travellers looking for an authentic experience in a remote part of the island where appreciation of local lifestyles as well as adventure is the attraction.

The precarious situation facing the Sakalava Rail at Lac Kinkony was illustrated the following day. We returned to the reedbeds at first light and found an adult rail in virtually the same place we'd seen it previously. After a few minutes, the second adult appeared, but there was only one chick. We watched the three birds potter around the reed stalks and on the floating mats of vegetation for a good 20 minutes. They remained



Two of Madagascar's other rare endemics that occur in wetlands, the Madagascar Plover (above) and the Madagascar Jacana (juvenile shown, opposite above).

completely unperturbed by our proximity and at times wandered to within five or six metres of the canoes. It was magical.

But our excitement was tempered by the realisation that two chicks were missing and at their age it seemed highly unlikely they wouldn't be with their parents. Marc outlined the potential hazards they constantly face. 'At such a young and vulnerable age, predators like large fish, herons and some birds of prey could easily take a rail chick.'

The following day, Marc took us on a boat trip around the Mahahavy Delta. This intricate coastal network of mangrove islands and brackish water channels is one of the key areas in the BirdLife programme and is home to large numbers of threatened birds. Recent field work has revealed counts of more than 300 Madagascar Sacred Ibis *Threskiornis bernieri*, 200 Madagascar Teal *Anas bernieri*, more than 40 Humblot's Herons *Ardea humbloti* and 30 Madagascar Plovers *Charadrius thoracicus*, as well as several breeding pairs of Madagascar Fish Eagles *Haliaeetus vociferoides* in the vicinity.

These statistics alone would be enough to excite most birdwatchers as there are very few locations elsewhere in Madagascar that offer the chance to see these birds (the nearby Betsiboka Estuary is the only realistic alternative). During

our afternoon boat trip we saw most of these species, together with Greater Flamingos *Phoeniconaias ruber* and Crab Plovers *Dromas ardeola* on mudflats at low tide. There were countless other waders, too, set against a backdrop of remote coastal scenery, intermingled with sedate fishing communities whose way of life has remained largely unchanged for centuries. The juxtaposition was alluring.

At dusk we returned to base along one of the Delta's broader channels, but night closed in quickly and the banks of mangroves on either side soon became imposing walls of blackness. Every so often there were rippling pulses of green light – hundreds of tiny bulbs in a synchronous display of insect pyrotechnics as swarms of fireflies displayed to one another. It was a magical conclusion to our trip.

Visiting Lac Kinkony and the Mahahavy Delta is certainly one of the most memorable experiences I've had in Madagascar. The sense of trail-blazing adventure is a constant thrill and the interaction with the daily lives of local people is intimate and touching. And if you're lucky enough to see the Sakalava Rail, you'll join a very select group indeed. As yet this doesn't include any cross-dressers, and I'm certainly not about to start wearing ladies' clothes to lay claim to this particular accolade. □

#### OFF YOU GO...

The Sakalava Rail Tour in 2004 was run by Naturetrek [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) or tel. (+44-1962) 73 3051. They are offering this tour again, between 19 October and 3 November 2005, and a tour is planned at a similar time for 2006.

Nick Garbutt leads groups and arranges and leads private tours. He also organises trips for keen amateur and professional photographers. Visit [www.nickgarbutt.com](http://www.nickgarbutt.com) or [www.naturalselectionphototours.co.uk](http://www.naturalselectionphototours.co.uk)

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