

Ascending Marojejy



Text & photographs by Nick Garbutt

Nick Garbutt first visited Marojejy National Park in north-eastern Madagascar in 1998 and immediately fell under its spell. Subsequently, he has returned four times to explore its rugged, multi-peaked granite massif – one of the wettest rainforest areas in Madagascar and arguably the most staggeringly beautiful wilderness that remains on this remarkable island. However, during none of those previous trips had he been to the top. Now this was to change. A small group of equally enthusiastic (and slightly mad) Marojejy enthusiasts had joined Garbutt, and they too were determined to reach the summit.

▶
ABOVE AND LEFT Rainforest clings to even the most rugged of the Marojejy massif's remote peaks.



'The leeches only get really bad when it's raining,' announced Ramastera gleefully

Our last brush with civilisation was at the roadside village of Manantenaina, 70 kilometres from the coastal town of Sambava. Having stocked up with supplies, we set off, accompanied by an excited crowd of beaming barefoot children who rushed around us like swarming ants. With giggling curiosity, they waved goodbye as we began the two-hour hike to the park's perimeter.

Walking with boyish enthusiasm next to me was Ramastera, a local whom I'd met on my first trip and who had now been taken under the wing of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and trained as a guide. As we strode out, he began to explain to the group the developments that were underway. I was immediately struck by the logistical improvements to the route. On previous visits, I had been sliding down muddy slopes and wading through rivers. Now a neat path meandered around the patchwork hillsides covered with rice paddies and vanilla plantations.

At the small village of Mandeina,

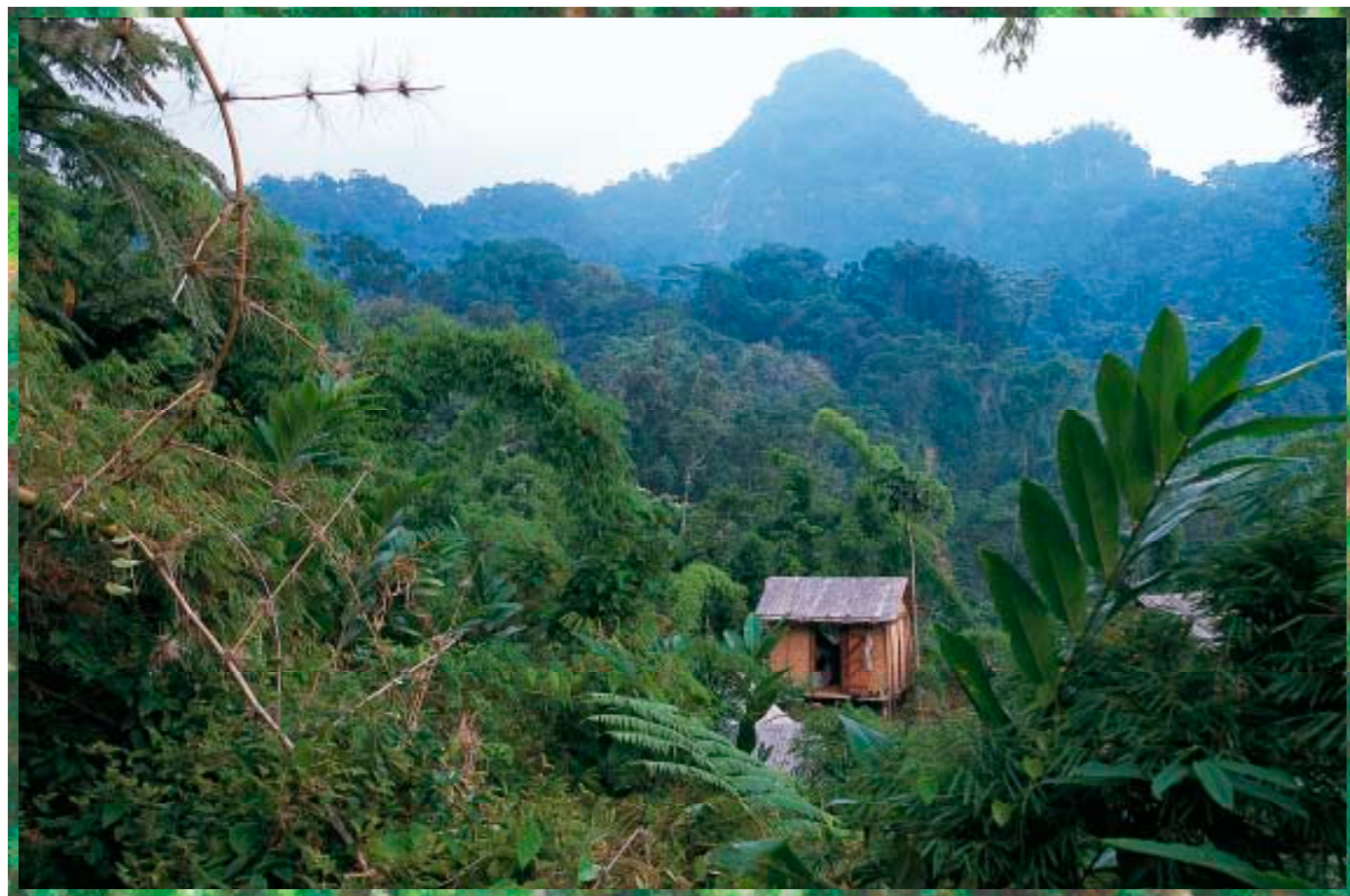
Ramastera proudly explained that a new school was being built with the help of money from WWF. Even more proudly he told us that his own sweat and toil had contributed to the half-completed construction. And as we passed through this collection of basic dwellings, shouts of 'Sali vasa' ('Hello, visitor') echoed around us. It was clear that our visit to their park meant a great deal to them.

As we neared Marojejy, cultivated areas abruptly gave way to forest that spread up the mountainsides to the purple-crested peaks disappearing into banks of cloud. The light mist gave way to persistent drizzle, then a downpour. 'The leeches only get really bad when it's raining,' announced Ramastera gleefully. I hadn't been sure how the group would react to this prospect, so I had intended to avoid the subject. Now, trying to play down the issue, I quickly interjected, 'Oh, they're only tiny, and quite harmless.' But my words provided little consolation – everyone began nervously inspecting the exposed parts of their anatomy.

As dusk drew in and the forest darkened, the rain became heavier and the prospect of more leeches loomed. ▶

ABOVE The blue-nosed chameleon, a rainforest denizen of Marojejy.

BELOW At Camp One, the most frequented of the national park's campsites, simple bamboo huts provide accommodation.



Marojejy National Park

Proclaimed a national park in November 1998, Marojejy lies at the heart of a project administered by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) that aims not only to conserve the biological richness of the area, but also integrate and reconcile the needs of the local people whose livelihood depends on the land and forests.

For two years before its proclamation, discussions were held with local communities to identify the immediate threats to the forests and gauge the requirements of the 70 to 80 villages that are situated around the park. Some of the threats were clear: population increases and forest clearance were escalating. In 1970 there were 10 hectares of forest per person; today there are 10 people for every hectare. Other threats were less obvious. Marojejy lies adjacent to the Andapa Basin, 130 square kilometres of rice paddies and Madagascar's third most important rice-producing area. Its water supply is entirely dependent on the Marojejy watershed, so if Marojejy disappears, the rice growing goes with it.

Jean-Marc Garreau, a genial Frenchman and committed conservationist who previously worked in the forests of West Africa, is WWF's senior technical advisor on the project. He explained how the water supply is now being regulated by numerous micro-dams, each of which irrigates a small number of paddies. This, in conjunction with new germination and nursery techniques, has increased rice production four-fold. In addition, the project has helped to negotiate 'forest transfers', whereby the administration of plots outside the park but adjacent to it has been transferred from the government's Water and Forest Department to the local communities. The communities are thus directly responsible for the protection of 'their own patch', although the project continues to offer input so these areas can be used sustainably.

Education is another sphere in which the WWF project is playing a role. It has helped finance the building of new schools in some villages around the park, including the one in Mandeina that 200 children will attend. WWF organises workshops for local teachers so that they can learn about environmental education, and the German Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), in co-operation with the Malagasy authorities, has funded the publication of a new environmental textbook.

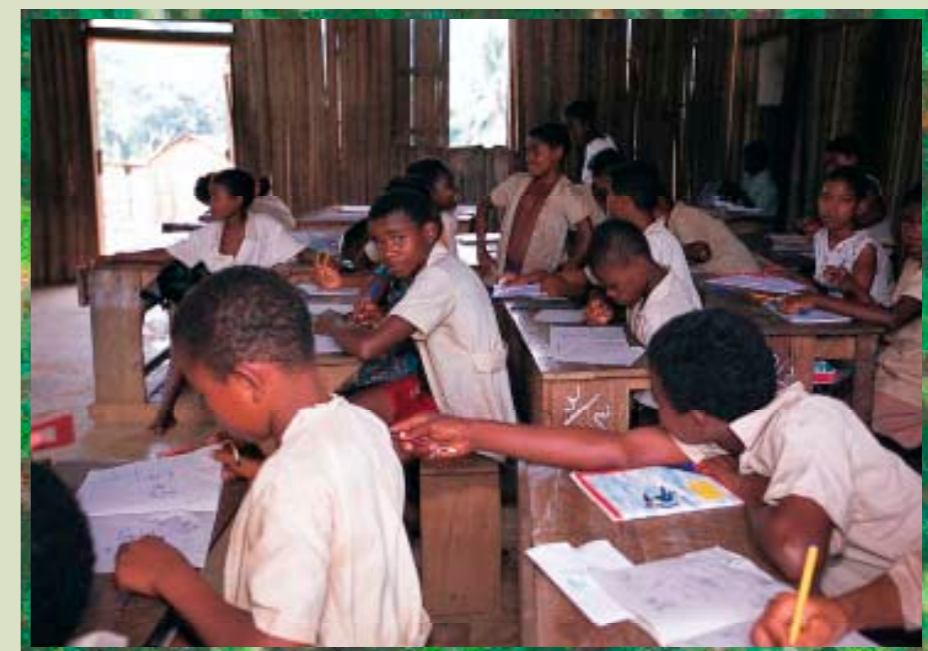
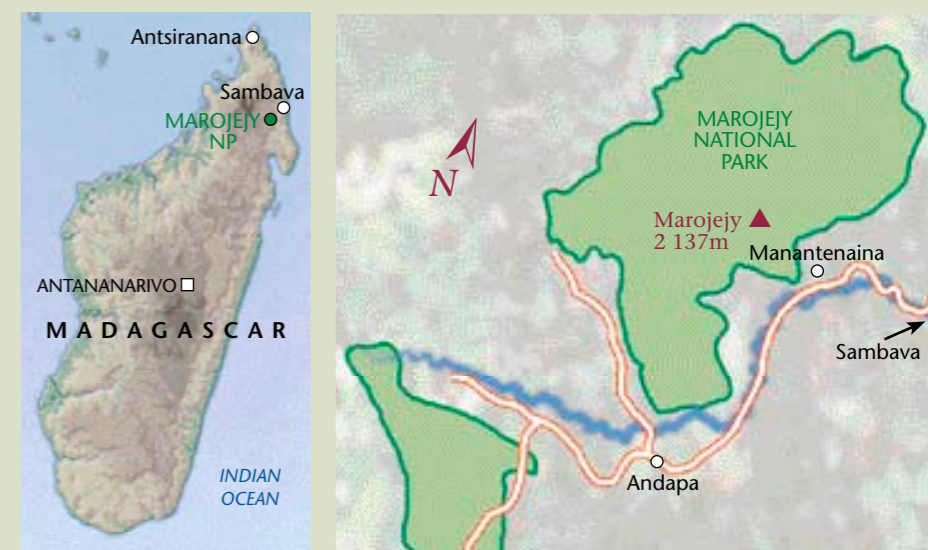
WWF acknowledges the importance of involving the local people in the workings of

the national park at every possible level, and more than 70 locals are directly involved in the project. Visits by tourists to 'their' park enhance their pride in it, and foster a feeling for their environment that creates a clear incentive to protect it.

Because Marojejy is remote and its terrain demanding, it is acknowledged that the number of potential visitors will be low in comparison with Madagascar's more established rainforest reserves, such as Périnet, Mantadia and Ranomafana. Nevertheless, the aim is to increase the current number of visitors a year (between 100 and 150) to around 2 000

within two to three years. The initial tasks of improving paths and access have been completed, and the first camp now consists of permanent huts with bunks, an open-plan cooking/eating shelter and a flushing toilet. If visitor numbers and revenue increase, then more improvements are planned at the campsites at higher elevations. Further trails will also be cut, and the route to the summit – currently a return trek of four or five days – will be improved.

For further information about Marojejy, contact the WWF Marojejy Project, B.P. 34, Sambava 208, Madagascar. E-mail wwfrep@dts.mg



Bringing education to the communities that live around the national park is one of the priorities of the WWF-administered Marojejy Project.

An electric-blue flash cut past my eyes and a blur of chestnut-and-black plumage landed on the edge of the nest. The glowing blue beak was unmistakable

Ribbons of water latticed the forest floor and the trails became increasingly slippery as we trudged on, guided by narrow tunnels of light from our head-torches. By now, the only things drying up were my ideas for boosting morale. Thankfully, just as I mumbled 'Nearly there,' yet again, the trail opened into a small clearing where a handful of bamboo huts was dimly lit by kerosene lamps and candles. At last we had reached our camp.

Ravenous after our exertions, we immediately set about demolishing a meal – never had veggie soup, stodgy rice and stringy chicken tasted so good. Over supper, one by one my companions began to notice the tell-tale blood stains on their socks. Ankles and legs were reluctantly inspected and the pin-prick vampiric leech marks discovered. With relief, everyone soon realised that the Malagasy leeches are the pygmies of the leech world – even when gorged and bloated they are only the size of a juicy baked bean.

The following morning we set off on the long climb from Camp One at 350 metres up to Camp Three, a thousand metres higher. But first Ramastera had something special he wanted to show us. Excitedly waving his hands just above head height, he repeated enthusiastically, '*Euryceros, Euryceros prevostii*'. I knew what he meant, but this jumble of scientific jargon brought only bemused

looks to the faces of everyone else.

We followed Ramastera down a slope and over a tumbling stream. He pointed ahead and we crept forward. 'Over there,' he said, indicating a tree fern some 30 metres away. I peered through the dappled light and could just about make out the shape of a bird tucked into a deep bowl nest. Suddenly an electric-blue flash cut past my eyes and a blur of chestnut-and-black plumage landed on the edge of the nest. The glowing blue beak was unmistakable – it belonged to a helmet vanga *Euryceros prevostii*. The male vacated the nest and flew off, and the female immediately replaced him and settled into a comfortable incubating position. We watched for a while but she hardly moved, just turned her head occasionally as she surveyed the surroundings.

Continuing, we slogged up ever steeper, ever muddier and ever 'leechier' slopes. Lowland forest gave way to montane forest with more lichens and epiphytes, and paths became nothing more than walkways on moss mats and root networks. Four hours later we arrived at our 'campsite', straddled precariously on top of a ridge. For 'campsite' read 'a small clearing with a postage-stamp piece of flattish ground'. We 'shoe-horned' our tents into the spaces available and erected a tarpaulin for shelter. Scarcely a dozen visitors had come this far in the past two years.

By now a cold damp mist had descended and visibility was reduced to a stone's throw. There was an eerie ►



RIGHT With its extraordinary beak, the helmet vanga has no difficulty in despatching its prey of chameleons and other small vertebrates.

OPPOSITE Local guide Ramastera led us unerringly along well-laid forest trails, and even negotiating a slippery log wasn't difficult.



BELOW Its face strangely without pigment, a silky sifaka observed us curiously. Was this the first encounter between man and this particular beast?

BELOW RIGHT A leaf-tailed gecko, its disguise revealed, calls up the reinforcements of an extravagant threat display.

BELOW FAR RIGHT Both shy and strictly nocturnal, the fanaloka is seldom seen.

silence; the birdsong had stopped and the frogs would remain quiet until nightfall. Only the occasional creak of an old tree penetrated the calm. Suddenly branches bounced and leaves rustled – in a flurry of movement bundles of flowing white fur ricocheted through the trees. A group of silky sifakas *Propithecus diadema candidus* was passing through.

It paused a little way out of camp and, eager to observe this extremely rare lemur that is largely restricted to Marojejy, we scurried down the path to

get a better look. The sifakas – five of them – had come to rest on a large bough and sat close together to keep the cold at bay. I noticed the curious lack of pigment on some of their faces. All other types of sifaka (from different parts of Madagascar) have dark grey or black faces, but the faces of some of these individuals were strangely pink with dark blotches.

I reflected that this encounter might well be a first for both parties, the sifakas and us. If it was, they appeared completely unfazed by our attention and continued to gaze quizzically down at us from the upper canopy. They stretched and groomed and then, as the shadows lengthened, huddled and snoozed, the outline of one animal merging imperceptibly into the next.

As darkness fell, a new cast of characters began to emerge on to the forest stage. Our head-torches threw shafts of weak light into the inky blackness as we tried to pick up the tell-tale red reflection from the eyes of nocturnal lemurs. A sudden shower of water droplets betrayed a feeding greater

dwarf lemur *Cheirogaleus major* that was busily gorging itself on berries. Lower down in the understorey we found a roosting Madagascar pygmy kingfisher *Ceyx madagascariensis*, chirruping green tree frogs *Boophis luteus* and a blue-nosed chameleon *Calumma boettgeri*. I even caught sight of a fanaloka *Fossa fossana*, one of Madagascar's secretive small carnivores.

Then we noticed a faint reflected glow near the base of a tree trunk and all moved forward to investigate. There was nothing immediately apparent – just the gnarled, lichen-covered bark of the tree. I peered closer. Instantly there was a flash of scarlet and shimmering movement as an annoyed leaf-tailed gecko *Uroplatus fimbriatus* appeared to emerge from the bark's surface. In an extravagant threat display it waved its tail angrily, opened its gape even wider to reveal more of its mouth's red-lined interior, and glared at us with its marbled peach-stone eyes. We could only marvel at the intricacy of the lizard's amazing camouflage. I unzipped the tent the next morning,

A the freshness of dawn niggled my face. Drips of water from the night's rain drummed a regular beat on the leaves and forest floor, but the swirling cloud of previous days had lifted and the sky was clear and deep blue. Marojejy Peak, rising 2 137 metres into the sky, was waiting.

The distinctive call of a rufous-headed ground roller *Atelornis crossleyi* caught my attention. Through a gap in the foliage only a few metres away I could see the bird clearly, sitting upright on a low broken branch. It ignored me as I tugged on my sodden boots and walked over to the campfire to grab a warming cup of coffee.

After a good night's sleep we were in good shape for the ascent, and free-flowing adrenalin initially made light work of the inclines confronting us. As we climbed higher, the forest became more and more stunted and festooned with hanging mosses and lichens. Occasional breaks in the cover allowed us to enjoy the amazing views over ►

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ABOVE The calls of tree frogs, such as the northern green tree frog, are characteristic of Marojejy's forests at night.

BELOW Almost there... We just beat the clouds to the top of Marojejy.

the rugged, rainforest-clad ridges of Marojejy. Once we had climbed above 1 800 metres the trees thinned out dramatically and dense stands of bamboo became dominant. Among the stems we caught a fleeting glimpse of a male yellow-bellied sunbird asy *Neodrepanis hypoxantha*, an endemic species that is known to occur only at a handful of high-altitude locations around the island.

As the day grew warmer, cloud began to creep insidiously up the valleys. Looking back, I could see that it had already engulfed the camp several hundred metres below. I couldn't bear the thought it would beat us to the top and hide the view we anticipated so keenly. My pace increased again, grim determination driving me even harder. We were well above the tree-line now and the summit ridge loomed into view. Around us grew giant heathers and stunted palms no taller than 50 centimetres, but there was no time to pause and look at them. The cloud was

still rising, with new wisps forming and disappearing around the ridges.

The final 300 metres remained clear. A last scramble over slippery granite and we'd reached the top of Marojejy. The 360-degree vista rivalled anything I'd ever seen before – jagged peaks, plunging rock faces and wave after wave of forest-covered ridges. There were congratulations all around as we drank in the spectacle, panted, sighed and drank it in some more. This was a place designed for contemplation. And my only disappointment? I had to come down. ■

Nick Garbutt is a wildlife author, photographer, artist and tour leader who regards Madagascar as his second home. Having first visited the island in 1991, he has subsequently returned every year to investigate and photograph its unique wildlife. He is the author/photographer of Mammals of Madagascar (Pica Press, 1999) and has co-written Madagascar Wildlife: A Visitor's Guide (Bradt Publications, 1996). He also regularly contributes articles and photographs to a wide range of magazines, including National Geographic, BBC Wildlife, Africa Geographic (formerly Africa – Environment & Wildlife), Africa – Birds & Birding and NaturFoto.



Infotravel MAROJEJY

GETTING THERE

Fly from Antananarivo to Sambava, then catch a bush-taxi heading for Andapa, but get off at Manantenaina. The first camp is four hours' walk from there (all provisions must be taken).

WHEN TO VISIT

September to December is the best time. Avoid the rainy season, January to March.

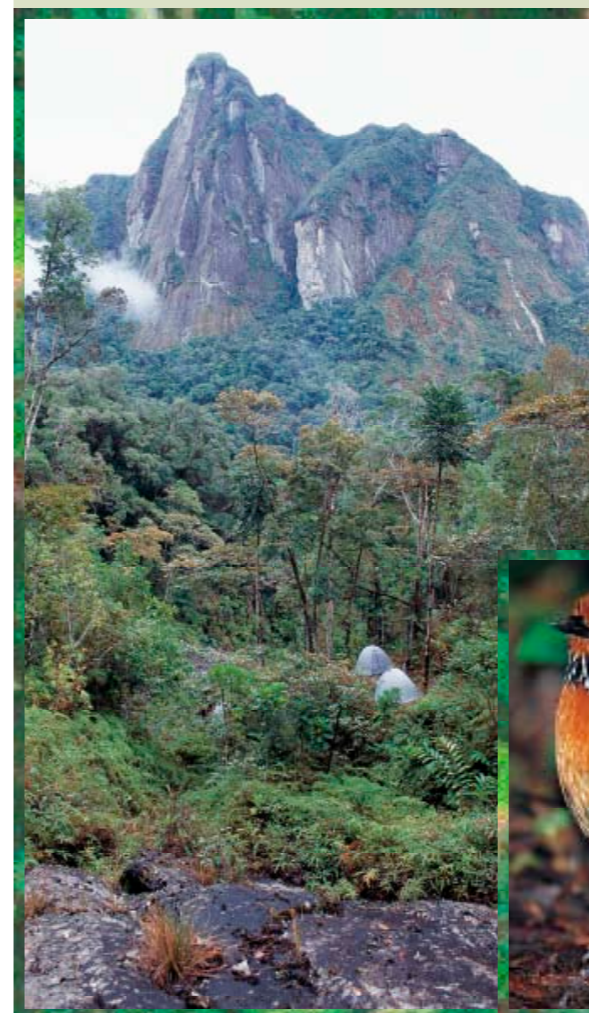
TOUR OPERATORS

Unusual Destinations is a South Africa-based operator that specialises in tours to Madagascar. Tel. (+27-11) 706 1991, fax (+27-11) 463 1469, e-mail info@unusualdestinations.com website www.unusualdestinations.com Nick Garbutt escorts trips for the following UK-based operators:
To Marojejy National Park
 Reef & Rainforest Tours, tel. (+44-1803) 86 6965, website www.reefrainforest.co.uk
Elsewhere in Madagascar
 Papyrus Tours, tel. (+44-1405) 78 5232.
 Worldwide Journeys & Expeditions, tel.

(+44-207) 386 4646, website www.wjournal.demon.co.uk
 Locally, Sambava Voyages organises full camping excursions in Marojejy. Contact them at B.P. 28a, Sambava, Madagascar. Tel. (+261-20) 889 2110, e-mail sybcpm@dts.mg

FURTHER READING

Madagascar: The Bradt Travel Guide by Hilary Bradt (Bradt Publications, 1999, sixth edition).
Madagascar Wildlife: A Visitor's Guide by Hilary Bradt, Derek Schuurman & Nick Garbutt (Bradt Publications, 2001, second edition).
Mammals of Madagascar by Nick Garbutt (Pica Press, 1999).
Birds of Madagascar: A Photographic Guide by Pete Morris & Frank Hawkins (Pica Press, 1998).
Birds of the Indian Ocean Islands by Ian Sinclair & Olivier Langrand (Struik Publishers, 1998).
Guide to the Birds of Madagascar by Olivier Langrand (Yale University Press, 1990).
A Fieldguide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of Madagascar by Frank Glaw & Miguel Vences (Zoologisches Forschungsinstitut, 1994).



LEFT Just below the summit of Marojejy, the last campsite on the route to the top is no more than a small clearing.

BELOW Rufous-headed ground rollers forage around the camp.

