Of all Madagascar's lemurs, golden-crowned and silky sifakas are among the most threatened and difficult to find, thanks in large part to illegal logging and gold panning. **Nick Garbutt** seeks them out in their ever-diminishing forest habitat

Here: the rare golden-crowned sifaka wasn't even photographed until 1982

GOLD & SILK

My guide kept motioning us forward and mumbling something that could have been "it not far now", but it was difficult to be sure. We slid down steep slopes and clambered over tree stumps and under fallen logs, and every time I thought we were getting close, the animals hurtled away through the forest; a flurry of white fur ricocheting through the trees.

After nearly an hour of lung-splitting exertion we eventually caught up with them. Unpacking my camera gear, the set up of my tripod like wrestling a demented octopus, I silently pleaded for them not to move again. Finally, I found myself looking through the lens at a silky sifaka, one of the world's most critically endangered primates, and one found only in the remote mountainous areas of Madagascar's far north east.

Inevitably the first shots were rubbish, but the rewards eventually came. Over the next pulsating hour, I followed the group of six adults, including (unusually) two females with offspring; watching them play, stretch, groom, feed and snooze.

Since my last visit to Marojejy, in 1998, there had been significant improvements in infrastructure and facilities. Yet the place's rugged beauty and raw wilderness had not diminished. It remains one of Madagascar's wildest places and leaves an indelible mark on the first-time visitor.

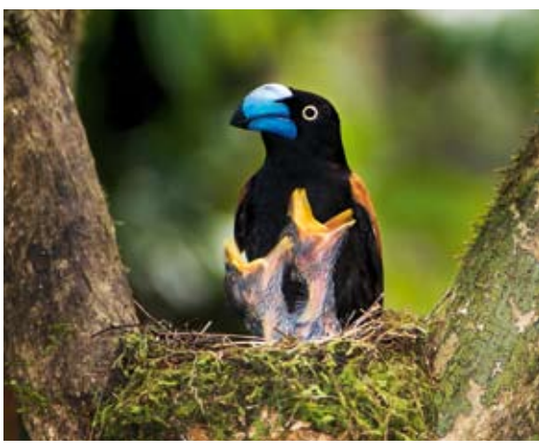
Two days before finding the sifakas, I'd set off with park guide Desiré. A last brush with civilisation was the roadside village of →

Manantenaina and, having stocked up with supplies, we were waved off by a crowd of beaming, barefoot children. An hour's hike brought us to the perimeter of the park, where cultivated areas abruptly gave way to forests that spread up the mountainsides towards purple-crested peaks wreathed in cloud. A light mist gave way to persistent drizzle, then a downpour. Soon, ribbons of water latticed the forest floor, the trails sodden and slippery.

However, conditions like this are always instantly forgotten when something special is glimpsed. Desiré had dropped a hint that we might see a rare helmet vanga, arguably Madagascar's most distinctive endemic bird. Even so, spotting it still set my pulse racing. The nest was in the fork of a tree fern and peering through the gloom I could clearly see the bird tucked into a deep bowl of moss. Suddenly an electric-blue flash and blur of chestnut and black plumage streaked across my vision as another bird landed on the edge of the nest. The huge, glowing blue beak was unmistakable. As the first adult flew off, the other immediately replaced it, settling into a comfortable incubating position (the sexes are cannot be distinguished).

After a night at Camp Mantella (named after the colourful, locally endemic frogs often seen in the vicinity), we continued to climb up through the rainforest towards Camp Marojejia (likewise named for a locally endemic palm), which is set on a rock outcrop and commands spine-tingling views across the rainforest valley to a sculptured outcrop called *Ambatotsondrona* ('leaning rock'). It was in the higher altitude forests above Camp Marojejia that I hoped to find the silky sifaka.

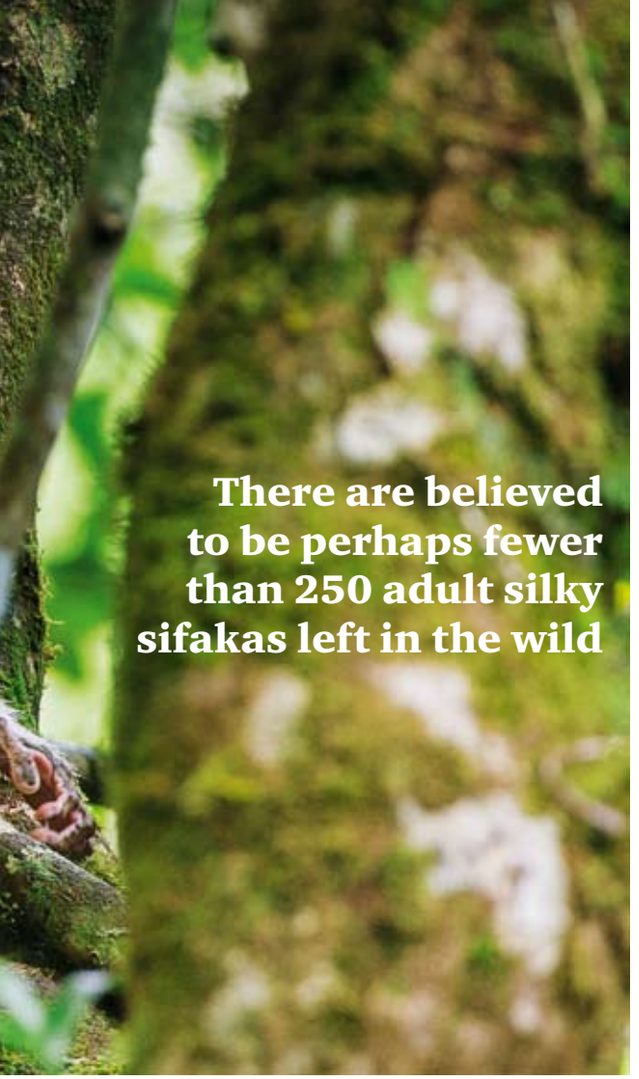
I hadn't seen much of them in 1998 and my mission this time was made immeasurably easier by the hard work and dedication of Erik Patel, from Duke Primate Centre. Erik and his team have been studying the silky sifakas for over a decade and know well their day-to-day movements and whereabouts. This is a far cry from the early days, when it took Erik several weeks to even find any sifakas at all.



POPULATION THREAT

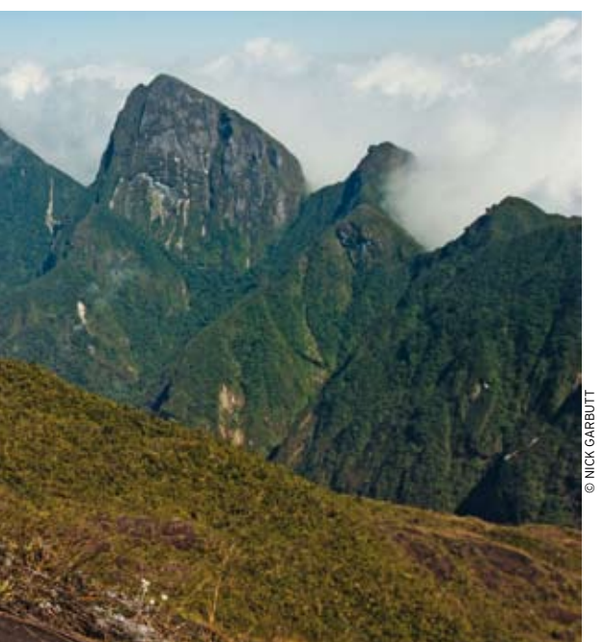
As luck would have it, Erik was in camp and kindly promised to help me find them; two of his students were following them daily and would take me with them the following morning. Over the next two days I got to follow the sifakas for prolonged periods, the guides Erik had trained incredibly adept at tracking these elusive animals.

Back in camp, my euphoric mood was tempered when Erik explained that the sifaka population is critically small and probably dwindling. There are believed to be perhaps fewer than 250 adult silky sifakas left in the wild. For a long time it was assumed that Marojejy and the adjacent forests of Anjanaharibe-Sud were strongholds, but Erik's ➜



There are believed to be perhaps fewer than 250 adult silky sifakas left in the wild

Clockwise from top left: a well-camouflaged leaf-tailed gecko; known locally as 'simpona', the silky sifakas' situation is critical; deforestation in Daraina; illegally logged rosewood; the view 2,133m up from Marojejy's summit; the helmet vanga and its chicks



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Seeing the wood for the trees

ILLEGAL LOGGING OF PRECIOUS HARDWOODS IS ENDANGERING MADAGASCAR'S BIODIVERSITY

The biggest single threat to Madagascar's extraordinary biodiversity is habitat destruction. This is especially so in the rainforests of the far north east because of the high levels of illegal logging in the region.

Following the 2009 *coup d'état* that brought Malagasy President Andry Rajoelina to power, international donors suspended most aid, including environmental funding. The timber traders swiftly moved in to take advantage of the breakdown in law enforcement and there has since been a catastrophic increase in the illegal logging of precious hardwoods, in particular rosewood.

Undercover work has identified blatant collusion between timber traders and government officials that contributed to the felling of more than 200 rare hardwood trees a day in the months following the coup. The Malagasy government has since banned all exports of precious wood and there has been some evidence of enforcement. In July 2011, for example, authorities confiscated six containers of rosewood worth up to £400,000.

While these and other measures have eased the crisis, they have not solved the problem and some timber continues to be exported, with most of the illegally felled wood going to China to supply the burgeoning demand for hardwood furniture. A smaller quantity is shipped to Europe and the US, where it is turned into musical instruments. The US guitar maker Gibson has been identified as using illegal wood from Madagascar.

Meanwhile, the issue of what to do with existing stockpiles of illegally logged timber continues to be debated. President Rajoelina recently told the BBC that the Malagasy "do not need rosewood, they need funding". He scorned the idea of developing value-added industries for rosewood within Madagascar, saying that this would take too long, and stated his support for exporting illegally cut wood. The international community is exploring ways of helping Madagascar to sell its existing timber stockpiles and using the proceeds to finance conservation efforts, but some argue that a better approach would be to sell the timber off more gradually, over time.

work suggests otherwise, with fewer than 30 individuals having been identified here.

After Marojejy, I continued further north to track down another of Madagascar's most threatened lemurs. From past experience I knew that finding golden-crowned sifakas would be quite straightforward; the hard part is getting to them. After two days of driving, we arrived in Daraina in the far north of Madagascar. Gone were the verdant mountains and lush valleys of Marojejy, to be replaced by depressingly denuded, sun-baked hills. It was hard to imagine finding forests with sifakas in such a sun-parched landscape.

At the offices of FANAMBY, a Malagasy non-governmental organisation (NGO) that has been focusing its efforts on the environmental problems facing the area during the past decade, I got some good advice. I knew I needed to head for the village of Andranotsimaty but instead of the two hour walk I'd endured in the past, I was directed to a track suitable for a 4x4.

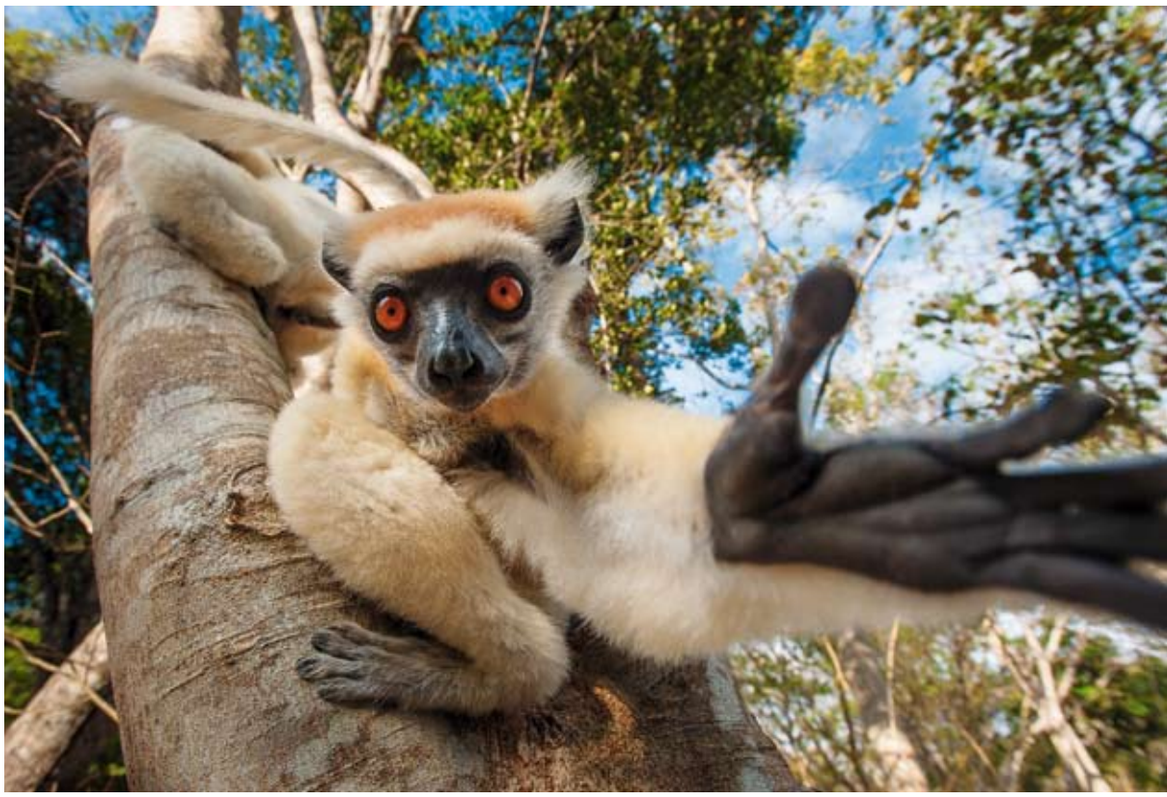
It still took nearly an hour to reach the ridge-top. In the valley below I could see the beginnings of pockets of forest, interweaving to form larger tracts in the distance. As I neared the village, parched grasslands gave way to a riverbed flanked by more vibrant forest, which looked promising.

Entering Andranotsimaty I was greeted by clucking chickens, barking dogs and Lucienne, the *chef de village* whose help FANAMBY had suggested I seek. I pointed to my cameras and uttered the magic words, "Ankomba malandy" – the local name for the sifaka. He understood immediately and offered to be my guide.

Andranotsimaty is a tiny village of perhaps

Cultivated areas abruptly gave way to forests that spread up the mountainsides towards purple-crested peaks wreathed in cloud

Here: Marojejy's lowland forest, the 'Leaning Rock' as backdrop. Left: male panther chameleon. Right: the golden-crowned sifaka is also known as Tattershall's sifaka after its discovery by Ian Tattershall in 1974. Below right: gold panning



20 people and a dozen huts. They eke out a living digging for gold, excavating backbreaking tonnes of soil for just a few grains of metal and around $10 a week. Yet despite their hard lives, the villagers have a touching relationship with their sifaka neighbours. Even more remarkably, the sifakas are apparently surviving in forests ravaged and degraded by mining.

We picked our way through ruts to the edge of the forest. There was already movement in the canopy ahead, and then Lucienne whistled. Boughs bounced and leaves rustled and then three inquisitive and gorgeous golden-crowned sifakas bounded towards us and settled on a nearby branch.

Further into the forest we soon found another troop, higher up in the trees. They were curious but reluctant to leave the safety of the canopy. Lucienne explained that it had always been *fady* (forbidden or taboo) for his community to hunt these animals and continuous interaction with several troops nearest the village had made them habituated and approachable.

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

For the next two days I travelled back and forth between Daraina and Andranotsimaty, photographing the sifakas. Scanning from the ridge-top with my binoculars I could pick out groups of gleaming white sifakas feeding in the canopy but, looking over the fragmented forest towards the most barren hillsides, I wondered how many sifakas might once have lived here, and what the future may hold for these charming and beautiful primates.

A survey by FANAMBY has confirmed that fragmentation is severe, with fewer than 10 forest fragments considered large enough (greater than 1,000 hectares) to support viable, long-term populations of sifakas. Nevertheless, where good habitat remains, the sifakas appear to be thriving. Their total population is estimated at between 6,100-10,000 individuals, including 2,500-4,000 potential breeding adults.

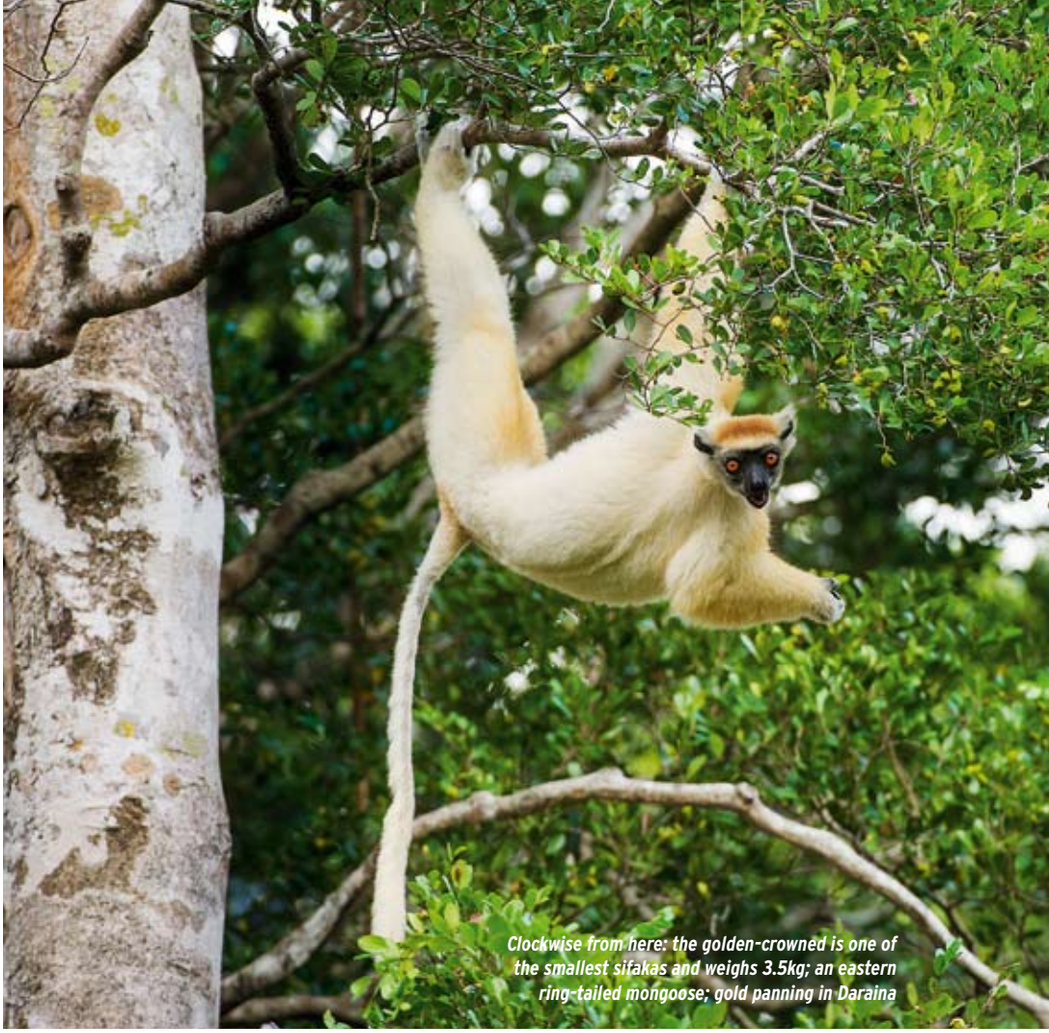
However, there is still much cause for concern. Illegal logging continues, while grass fires and 'slash and burn' (*tavy*) agricultural ➜

practices constantly gnaw away at the forest margins. The whole area is also littered with low-concentration gold deposits – the incentive for a recent major influx of prospectors. They dig deep pits near and under tree roots, ultimately killing them. Although small-scale, these mining operations are many and widespread; their cumulative impact considerable.

SYMBOLIC SIFAKA

This imminent threat to the rich biodiversity of the region means that the forests within the vicinity of Daraina have long been recognised as a major conservation priority in Madagascar. However, efforts to establish a national park have so far proved unsuccessful.

FAMAMBY is making the golden-crowned sifaka an emblem of efforts to alter attitudes. It hopes to create protected areas and educate children, who already sing a song about the sifaka and have a mural of it on the school wall. But even as these efforts begin to bear fruit, new problems loom. To the south, the discovery of one of the region's largest gold reserves yet has created a new wave of mining. Ultimately, it might end up being a choice between the golden-crowned sifaka and gold in the ground. WT



Clockwise from here: the golden-crowned is one of the smallest sifakas and weighs 3.5kg; an eastern ring-tailed mongoose; gold panning in Daraina

TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING ★★★★☆

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR: Wildlife Worldwide offers an 18-day wildlife and photography tour from 19 October to 5 November to the forests of north east Madagascar, including stays in Marojejy NP and Daraina to see silky and golden-crowned sifakas as well as visiting Masoala NP (home to red ruffed lemurs and aye-ayes) and Andasibe-Mantadia NP (where indri and diademed sifakas can be seen). Including international flights, prices per person start from £5,025, based on two sharing (www.wildlifeworldwide.com).

GETTING THERE: Flights are with Kenya Airways via Nairobi or with Air Madagascar and Air France via Paris. Various other carriers go through Johannesburg. Return flights cost between £900 and £1,100 depending on season. Once in Madagascar, there is an extensive domestic flight service in and out of the capital Antananarivo to all regional centres. From here, local buses and taxis will take you to the reserves. This can be arduous and time consuming so an organised wildlife or photography tour is the best option.

VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK: A 30-day visa is needed to visit Madagascar and is purchased on arrival at Antananarivo airport. There is no Madagascar embassy in London; for more information contact the embassy in Paris (info@ambassade-madagascar.fr). Passports must also be valid for at least six months after your return date.

TIPS & WARNINGS: All wildlife watching in the parks is on foot. In eastern rainforest areas the terrain can be tough: hills are often steep and trails slippery. In the drier western and southern regions the terrain is generally flatter, but it can be very hot.
When visiting a park, it is compulsory to employ the services of a local guide. In the more popular reserves, most guides can now speak some English and have a very good knowledge of the wildlife.
In cities and larger towns, hotels vary in standard from very good (up to £75 per night) to cheap and seedy (less than £5 per night). In rural areas (including around the parks and reserves), hotels and lodges are rustic but generally adequate (£15-30 a night). In remote parks like Marojejy, self-sufficient or organised camping is necessary.

WHEN TO GO: September to December are the best months as there are lemurs with young and birds beginning to breed. Most other wildlife is also active. Avoid January to April's heavy rains.

TOUR OPERATORS:

- **WILDLIFE WORLDWIDE**, Tel: 0845 130 6982, www.wildlifeworldwide.com
- **PAPYRUS TOURS**, Tel: 01405 785 232, www.papyrustours.co.uk
- **GREENTOURS**, Tel: 01298 835 63, www.greentours.co.uk