The endemic wildlife of Madagascar has evolved over millions of years of isolation, and there is no greater example of this than the exceptional, primitive primates that inhabit the island—the lemurs. In this issue, our author goes in search of some of the most elusive and endangered lemurs in the forests of Madagascar.

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have been visiting Madagascar for over 20 years now. Madagascar captivated me like no place has done before, and my enthusiasm is yet to diminish. Since my first visit in 1998, one place on the island has been my favourite the Marojejy National Park in far north-east, one of Madagascar's wildest places.

SILKY AFFAIRS

I initially visited the park with just one aim – to get photos of the incredibly rare Silky sifaka (Propithecus candidus). After considerable effort, I did manage to capture something; but this was in the days of film, and by today's standards, the pictures were poor. Over the last couple of times, I have returned to Marojejy to try and improve on those images and document more of the park's diverse wildlife.

On my most recent trip, I set off with park guide Desiré to track down the sifakas. Marojejy has a challenging terrain – mountainous and covered in dense, tangled rainforest. We slid down slopes, climbed back up again, clambered over tree stumps and stooped beneath fallen logs, and every time I thought we were getting closer, the sifakas moved away through the forest in a flurry of movement; bundles of flowing white fur ricocheting through the trees.

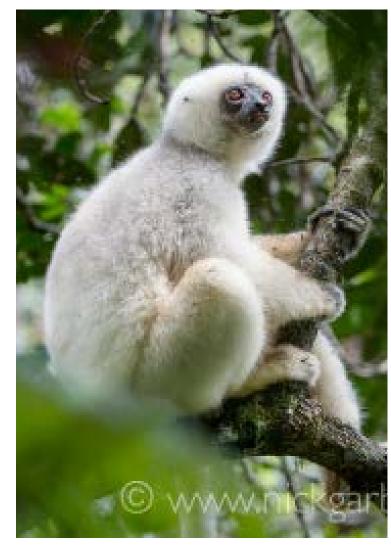
We finally did catch up with them. Dripping in sweat, I began to piece together my gear, silently pleading that they do not move again. Eventually, I began taking pictures and was looking through the lens at a Silky sifaka – one of the most endangered primates in the world.

My initial shots were rubbish, but as my heart rate slowed down and coherent thought began to return, the rewards came. Over the next pulsating hour, I followed the group of six adults with their offspring, watching them play, stretch, groom, feed and snooze.

Marojejy has other treasures too, including the rare Helmet Vanga, arguably Madagascar's most distinctive endemic bird. We found a nest in the fork of a tree adjacent to the trail. Peering through the gloom, I could clearly see the bird tucked into a deep bowl of moss. Suddenly, an electric blue flash cut past my eyes with a blur of chestnut and black plumage; another bird landed on the edge of the nest. The improbably large, glowing blue beak was unmistakable. As one adult vacated the nest and flew off, the other immediately replaced it and settled into a comfortable incubating position. Sexes are impossible to distinguish in this species.

GOLD HUNT

After Marojejy, I travelled further north to Daraina to track down another of Madagascar's most threatened lemurs – the Golden-crowned sifaka (*Propithecus*







MADAGASCAR'S DARK SECRET

The Aye-aye is more a mystery than an animal. Discovered in 1795, it took scientists a lot of time to figure out that the Aye-aye was actually a lemur and a primate. Continually growing incisors, its fur colour, squirrel-like toes and bushy tail, led taxonomists to classify it as a rodent. But the head shape, eyes, ears and nostrils resembled a feline. Although it was already classified as a lemur earlier, it was only in 2005 that molecular tests revealed that the Aye-aye was related to primitive lemurs.

The myths and superstitions revolving around the nocturnal animal also illustrate how poorly it is understood by the local communities. Ancient Malagasy legend says that the Aye-aye is a symbol of death. Even the local stories concerning the lemur revolve around death, with Aye-aye being denoted as the harbinger and predictor of death. In some places, people believe that if the Aye-aye points its long, slender and weird-looking middle finger at someone, the person is marked to die, and the only way to avoid it is by killing the animal. As a result of such superstitions and rapid declining habitat, the Aye-aye is classified as an Endangered animal by IUCN. It was in fact declared extinct in 1933 and rediscovered in 1957, post which captive breeding programmes were started for the mysterious animal.

tattersalli). In contrast to the verdant Marojejy, this area is dominated by depressingly denuded, sunbaked hillsides. The valley does contain pockets of forest, though; some interlinking to form large tracts. This is where these sifakas live.

The tiny village of Andranotsimaty lies near Daraina, whose villagers eke out a living digging for gold for a very meagre reward. A day's panning produces a little more than a few grains of the metal, perhaps equivalent to some cups of rice. Despite their austere lives, these people have built a remarkable relationship with the neighbouring sifakas. What is even more remarkable is that the sifakas are able to happily survive in forests ravaged and degraded by mining.

Again, with the help of a local guide, it did not take long to find the sifakas. In the distance, boughs bounced and leaves rustled as three gorgeous and apparently inquisitive Golden-crowned sifakas bounded through the forest towards us. Within seconds, they sat on a branch close to me and getting photos this time was far easier.

My guide explained that it had always been 'fady' (forbidden) for his community to hunt these animals and through continuous interactions, groups around this particular village had become slightly habituated and approachable. Beyond these, numerous groups of



The Aye-aye kept coming closer, stopping periodically to tap on the trunk with an elongated digit and then listening intently for any revealing sounds from an insect grub hidden beneath the bark. Coming further down the bark, by the time it stopped to look around for the next branch or trunk to jump onto, it was a mere two metres away from me; its leathery, dish-like ears twitching and swivelling, no doubt to pick up the 'unnatural' sound of the camera clicks.

sifakas tolerated the daily traffic of villagers wandering through the forest.

THE GHOST OF MADAGASCAR

Madagascar is also one of the best places in the world for night walks. The forests are not only safe to wander around at night (as there are no big predators on the island), but also support a huge diversity of nocturnal creatures. Like virtually all of the island's wildlife, they are found nowhere else. The nocturnal lemurs, such as the mouse lemurs, dwarf lemurs, and sportive lemurs or lepilemurs are relatively easy to find. However, one nocturnal species is shrouded in mystery. It is extremely rare and elusive and because of its extraordinary appearance, is entwined in local folklore throughout Madagascar. This is Aye-aye (*Daubentonia madagascariensis*), and the forest of Daraina is one of the few places where there is a slim chance of seeing one. I simply had to try my luck.

This time, the President of Andranotsimaty was my guide and I met him on a forest track near the village just after dusk. He immediately set off into the forest at a brisk pace. Encumbered with the camera gear and staring at a modest pool of light thrown by a head torch, it was challenging to pick an appropriate footfall for each step on the forest floor that was pockmarked with holes and tree roots.

Above the rhythmic thud of my stride, I could hear the eerie night time sounds of one of Madagascar's strangest forests. The high-pitched chatter of the Fork-marked lemurs repeatedly pierced the air, the monotonous call of a Madagascar Cuckoo set its own rhythm in the background, and there was an omnipresent hum of insects.

After route-marching for over a kilometre, we could see a tell-tale torch beam of another guide shining through the trees. I was unaware that the President had sent out one of his sons to begin looking in

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advance. For the last 50 metres, I battled through a tangle of narrow trunks and scratchy undergrowth, with the bulky camera bags constantly snagging. As I reached the guide, he pointed straight up into the canopy. Although it wasn't high, its many crisscrossing branches and twigs meant that it was hard to get a clear view and make out any detail – I was looking for a black animal in the darkness!

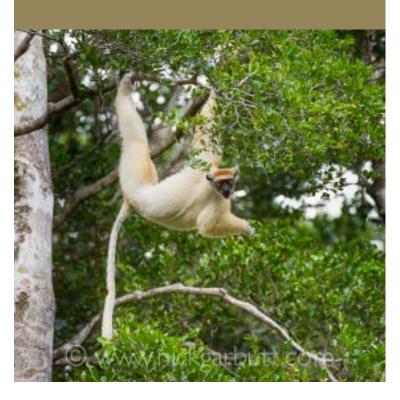
With my heart still pounding, it was hard to focus and concentrate. But I soon got my eye in and could see the Aye-aye towards the top of the tree. It moved surprisingly nimbly through the thinner branches. It then began to descend, moving down head first on one of the trunks, its fiery reflective eyes unmistakable and its remarkable hands pulled into shapes resembling contorted tarantulas.

The Aye-aye kept coming closer, stopping periodically to tap on the trunk with an elongated digit and then listening intently for any revealing sounds from an insect grub hidden beneath the bark. Coming further down the bark, by the time it stopped to look around for the next branch or trunk to jump onto, it was a mere two metres away from me; its leathery, dish-like ears twitching and swivelling, no doubt to pick up the 'unnatural' sound of the camera clicks. The Aye-aye leapt onto a neighbouring tree and paused before climbing higher, again tapping at the trunk as it ascended.

I was able to follow the Aye-aye for nearly an hour before I decided to leave. At the start of the evening, I would have been thrilled with just a few seconds glimpse of the least often seen of Madagascar's lemurs. This encounter has surpassed my wildest expectations. It was past midnight when I returned to the hotel and I would be up again at 3:45 am to head back to the forest; but I did not care.

THE DANCING LEMURS

Sifakas belong to a genus of lemurs, which contains nine species. As all lemurs are found on the island of Madagascar, sifakas are also endemic to the island nation. Their name comes from the 'shi-fak' calls they make when they sense danger. Sifakas are very acrobatic and powerful jumpers and move swiftly across trees. But it is their movements on the ground that gives them the nickname of 'dancing lemurs'. They hop sideways on their hind legs, holding their forelimbs wide for balance. All species of sifakas are threatened, and range between Vulnerable and Critically Endangered in the IUCN Red List.







PHOTOGRAPHY TOURS

WITH Nick Garbutt

TRAVEL WITH NICK GARBUTT

Madagascar can be accessed via sea and air routes, the latter the most preferred option. Air Madagascar, the national carrier, has recently begun direct flights from Antananarivo – the capital of Madagascar – to Bangkok, Thailand that is well connected to all the major metros in the country. For wildlife and photography,



September to December is the best time to visit, as the lemurs are with young and the birds are also beginning to breed; most other wildlife is also active. January to April is best avoided because of heavy rainfall.

Wildlife Worldwide Photography Tours with Nick Garbutt are offering a 20-day wildlife and photography tour starting October 13, 2015 to the forests of north-east Madagascar that include staying in Marojejy NP and Daraina to see the Silky and Goldencrowned sifakas and hopefully the Aye-aye as well. Masoala NP, home to the Red ruffed lemurs, and Andasibe-Mantadia NP, where Indri and Diademed sifakas can be seen, will also be on the itinerary.

The cost, exclusive of international flights, start from £ 5,745 per person, twin-share.

More details at www.nickgarbutt.com or Wwww.wildlifeworldwide.com.

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