



TROPICAL BIOLOGY ASSOCIATION

Field Guides



Birds of KIRINDY



KIRINDY FOREST

Kirindy is a dry deciduous forest covering about 12 000 ha and is managed by the Centre de Formation Professionnelle Forestière (CFPF). Dry deciduous forests are among the world's most threatened ecosystems, and in Madagascar they have been reduced to 3 per cent of their original extent. Located in Central Menabe, Kirindy forms part of a conservation priority area and contains several locally endemic animal and plant species.

Kirindy supports seven species of lemur and Madagascar's largest predator, the fossa. Kirindy's plants are equally notable and include two species of baobab, as well as the Malagasy endemic hazomalany tree (*Hazomalania voyroni*).

Many of Kirindy's birds are endemic to Madagascar at the genus or even family level. For example, the white-breasted mesite belongs to an endemic family, the Mesithornidae. The vanga family is found only in Madagascar and the Comoros and has many species represented in Kirindy. The couas belong to an endemic sub-family, and the jeries are an endemic genus.

This guide describes the common birds that you are likely to see during your stay in Kirindy forest and gives pointers towards their identification.

This document was developed during the Tropical Biology Association field courses in Kirindy. It was drawn together by Rosie Trevelyan and the TBA staff. We would like to thank all our TBA alumni and teachers who have allowed us to use their photos for this guide. A special thanks to Kate Lessells, Mike Danzenbaker, Mike Majerus and Scott Armbruster. This publication was funded by the European Commission (B7-6200/ 01/0370/ENV).

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MADAGASCAR'S BIRDS

in a nutshell

At least 50 per cent of Madagascar's bird species are endemic.
Of the 283 species recorded, 209 breed in Madagascar.

There are three families that are endemic to Madagascar:

MESITE (Mesithornithidae)

GROUND ROLLER (Brachypteracidae)

ASITY (Philepittidae)

There are two other families only found in the region of Madagascar and the Comoros Islands:

CUCKOO ROLLER (Leptosomatidae with only a single species)

VANGA (Vangidae: a group that has radiated into a very diverse family with 12 genera and 14 species)

The Elephant bird (*Aepyornis*) is a famous extinct species that measured up to 3 metres high and laid the largest known eggs in the world (capacity of 7-9 litres).

Most Malagasy bird species have Afro-tropical origins, though there are a number related to the Indo-tropics (e.g. Madagascar buzzard, Madagascar cuckoo and Madagascar bulbuls).



SOME COMMON BIRDS OF KIRINDY FOREST

This guide is designed to give you some key features to look out for to help you identify birds. It also tells you which family they belong to and includes interesting bits of information about their ecology and behaviour. For detailed descriptions, please see the bird guides (some of which are listed on page 23).

The list starts with the more primitive birds and ends with the passerines or perching birds.

Key

FAMILIES are given first in capitals.

E indicates endemic to Madagascar.

RE indicates endemic to the region, defined as Madagascar, the Seychelles, the Comoros Islands and the Mascarene Islands.

👁 Description/visual appearance

🐦 Behaviour

🎵 Song characteristics

🌐 Distribution/conservation status



ACCIPITERS

Most diurnal birds of prey belong to this cosmopolitan family.

Madagascar harrier-hawk

Polyboroides radiatus E



- 👁 This is a very large bird of prey. Aside from its size, it is unmistakable with its black and white stripes (called barring) on its underside, grey back, long bare yellow legs and bare pink or yellow skin patch around the eye. It is much larger than a sparrowhawk.
- 🦅 Eats small birds, rodents, reptiles, insects, small lemurs.

Frances's sparrowhawk

Accipter francesii RE



- 👁 Note the narrow brown and white barred underparts of this bird. Head of male is dark blue-grey
Length: ~30-35cm (females are larger than males).
- 🦅 Eats small birds, reptiles, frogs.

Madagascar buzzard

Buteo brachypterus E



- 👁 Large, with fan-shaped tail and short rounded wings. Underwings typically barred with white. Often soars high above forest. Length: ~48-51cm.
- 🎵 Thin, mewing call when flying.

FALCONS

Madagascar kestrel

Falco newtoni RE

Madagascar and Aldabra



- 👁️ Small, with red-brown pointed wings. Often seen hovering – more open habitats. Length: ~25-30cm.
- 🐦 Kestrels (and other falcons) do not build nests like other birds of prey, but lay eggs in crevices or hollow trees.

MESITES

A primitive, endemic family.

White-breasted mesite

Mesitornis variegata E



- 👁️ Ground-dwelling brown skulking birds that can be heard sifting through dry leaf-litter to find seeds and insects. Length: ~31cm.
- 🎵 Loud trilling that gets louder and faster. Males and females sing duets.
- 🌐 Globally threatened; Kirindy is one of the five places in Madagascar (and therefore the world) that these are found.



BUTTONQUAILS

A small family of dumpy ground-dwelling birds.

Madagascar buttonquail

Turnix nigricollis E



- 👁️ Dumpy (rounded) bird always seen on the ground. Females are larger and more colourful than males – a reversal of the usual trend in birds. Length: ~14-16cm.
- 🐦 Use their feet to scratch at the leaf-litter for insects (listen for noisy leaf-rustling on the forest floor).

PIGEONS

Cosmopolitan family of medium-sized birds, usually plump-looking.

Madagascar turtle dove

Streptopelia picturata RE



- 👁️ Quite a large stocky dove. It is brown with a maroon chest; look for white tail tips in flight. Length: ~28cm.
- 🐦 Feeds on the ground (on seeds/ fruits).
- 🎵 A low solemn haunting note (sings from trees). Song carries quite far.

Namaqua dove

Oena capensis

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa



- 👁️ Smaller than the other pigeons, with a slender outline. Length: ~28cm.
- 🐦 Fast flight. Ground-feeding dove (on seeds).

Madagascar green pigeon

Treron australis RE



- 👁️ Green(!). Length: ~32cm.
- 🐦 Usually in the canopy of trees where it eats fruits.
- 🎵 Has a musical, unpigeonlike song which ends in a little whistle.

PARROTS

There are three species of parrot in Madagascar, all of which occur in Kirindy.

Greater vasa parrot

Coracopsis vasa RE

Madagascar and Comoros



- 👁️ Large brown parrot with big pale bill. Length: ~50cm. You can tell it apart from the lesser vasa parrot (aside from size) because it has a ring of paler skin around the eye and more white underneath the tail, visible when it flies.
- 🐦 Eats fruits and seeds. Very unusual breeding system where several males care for the young of one female (= cooperative polyandry). Males and females call during courtship.
- 🎵 Call typically two syllables, while the lesser vasa's is three syllables and a bit more tuneful. Makes raucous harsh noise when flying.
- 🌐 Found both in the forest and outside it.



Lesser vasa parrot

Coracopsis nigra RE

Madagascar, Comoros and
Seychelles



- 👁️ Large brown parrot. You can tell it apart from the greater vasa parrot (aside from size) because it has a smaller bill and a less-pronounced ring of paler skin around the eye, and is darker underneath the tail when it flies. Length: ~35cm.
- 🐦 Eats fruits, flowers and seeds, and is more forest-dependent than the greater vasa.
- 🎵 It makes a three-syllable call which is more tuneful than the greater vasa's. It also makes a raucous noise when taking off.

Grey-headed lovebird

Agapornis cana E



- 👁️ A small, plump member of the parrot family. Bright green body with grey head. Length: ~15cm.
- 🐦 Mainly feeds on grass seeds.
- 🎵 Always seen in groups, usually making persistent metallic noisy squeaks.
- 🌐 Lovebirds have been introduced to other Indian Ocean islands.

CUCULIDAE

Contains cuckoos, couas and coucals.

Subfamily Cuculinae

Madagascar lesser cuckoo

Cuculus rochii E



- 👁️ Note barring on chest. Length: ~28cm.
- 🐦 Like all cuckoos, is a brood parasite – commonly parasitizing jeries and the Madagascar flycatcher.
- 🎵 Can be heard singing all day.
- 🌐 Migrates to East Africa in May-August and breeds in Madagascar September-April.

Subfamily Couinae – an endemic subfamily of nine existing and many extinct species.

Giant coua

Coua gigas E



- 👁️ REALLY big terrestrial coua. Length: ~62cm. Looks like Coquerel's but is bigger and has thicker bill.
- 🎵 Loud “grrrrree-oooo” call as well as a loud “coo-coo-coo-grrr”.

Coquerel's coua

Coua coquereli E



- 👁️ Big terrestrial green-looking bird that feeds on the ground. Length: ~42cm. You can tell it apart from the giant coua by its smaller size and thinner bill.
- 🐦 Eats large insects and spiders.



Crested coua

Coua cristata E



- 👁️ Look out for its crest, pinkish chest and white band at the end of the tail. Length: ~42cm.
- 🐦 The only coua in Kirindy likely to be seen in trees (= arboreal). Mainly eats insects.
- 🎵 Very loud “cha-cha-cha”, usually around sunset when you can hear several birds calling.

Madagascar coucal

Centropus toulou RE



- 👁️ Medium-sized skulking bird with a long black graduated tail. Reddish-brown wings. This is a juvenile – note the striped head and neck. Often seen in low bushes or on the ground (rarely flies far) and can move through very dense vegetation. Length ~45–50cm.
- 🐦 Eats insects, spiders and small lizards and also raids birds’ nests for the eggs and chicks.
- 🎵 Bubbling descending call.

OWLS

Madagascar scops owl

Otus rutilus E



- 👁️ Grey or rufous plumage, ear tufts, yellow ears. Length: ~22-24cm.
- 🎵 Monotonous “broo-broo-broo” call.

Madagascar long-eared owl

Asio madagascariensis E



- 👁️ Large owl with heavily mottled dark brown upper parts and paler, streaked underparts. Black bill, brown face and long ear tufts. The “ears” have nothing to do with the owl’s hearing but are just feathery tufts on the top of the head. Length: ~31-50cm.
- 🦉 Can be seen roosting by day around the Kirindy river bed (look out for pellets underneath the roosting site). Feeds at night on small mammals including lemurs.



NIGHTJARS

Madagascar nightjar

Caprimulgus madagascariensis E



- 👁️ Nocturnal but may be seen during the day camouflaged on the ground. Length: ~21cm.
- 🎵 Commonly heard calling at night.

KINGFISHERS

Small birds with short tails and long sharp beaks. Sit on perches and fly down to catch prey (not all kingfishers eat fish – they can eat large insects, small lizards). Nest in burrows.

Madagascar malachite kingfisher

Alcedo vintsioides RE

Madagascar and Comoros



- 👁️ Beautiful metallic blue above and orange below. Length: ~14cm.
- 🐦 Common at the Kirindy pond where they sit in the open on a perch and swoop down to catch fish, frogs, invertebrates, etc.

BEE-EATERS

A family of insect-eating birds found in the old world tropics.

Madagascar bee-eater

Merops superciliosus E

Africa and Madagascar



- 👁️ Green plumage, long tail and rufous throat. Length: ~23-31cm.
- 👉 Nests colonially in tunnels.
- 🕒 The ONLY bee-eater in Madagascar. Some migrate to Africa.

ROLLERS

Stocky birds that feed on large insects – have stout bills to crush them with. There are 11 species in the family.

Broad-billed roller

Eurystomus glaucurus

Madagascar and Africa



- 👁️ Large rufous bird often perching on exposed branches. Often seen in pairs. Length: ~32cm.
- 🎵 Makes a raucous noise like a creaking door: “sakarakarakaraka”.
- 👉 Summer-breeding visitor to Madagascar (after which it returns to East Africa). Nests in holes.



CUCKOO ROLLERS

Family of a single species found only in Madagascar and Comoros.

Cuckoo roller

Leptosomus discolor E



- 👁️ Stocky bird that perches upright totally motionless (looking a bit sinister!). Sexes are dimorphic: female (above) is speckled; male is soft grey. Length: ~50cm.
- 🎵 Sings when flies, three notes “weee weee weee” going up.
- 🐦 Feeds in canopy on insects and small vertebrates.



HOOPOES

An old world family that only has one species (but many subspecies).

Madagascar hoopoe

Upupa epops marginata

Endemic subspecies



- 👁️ Orange with black and white wings, long down-curved bill. Length: ~32cm.
- 🐦 Commonly seen on Kirindy forest roads where it feeds on the ground on insects.

BULBULS

(Bulbul and greenbul family.) A mainly forest-dwelling family of the old world tropics. Five of the six species found in Madagascar are endemic.

Madagascar bulbul

Hypsipetes madagascariensis RE



- 👁️ Rather boring grey-brown colour but has a beautiful orange-red beak. Length: ~24cm.
- 🐦 Often seen sitting in the open – eats fruits.

Long-billed greenbul

Phyllastrephus madagascariensis E



- 👁️ Dull green bird found in denser layers of the forest; rarely seen in the open. Very long bill. Length: ~18-20cm.
- 🐦 Feeds on insects by picking them off branches and leaves.

VANGAS

A diverse family with 14 species in 12 genera. Have radiated in Madagascar (and one species on the Comoros) to occupy a wide variety of niches – like the finches on the Galapagos! Thirteen endemic species in Madagascar.

Rufous vanga

Schetba rufa E



- 👁️ Red back and wings, black head, white belly, blue thick bill. Female has black crown but is white below eye and throat. Length: ~20cm.
- 🐦 Usually in primary undisturbed forest.
- 🎵 Very conspicuous song: “tiki-tiki-tiki wow”. Also does bill snapping.



Hook-billed vanga

Vanga curvirostris E



- 👁 Big black and white vanga with a large hooked bill. Length: ~25-29cm.
- 🐦 Feeds on insects and even chameleons by sticking them in a twig fork and pulling off the limbs.
- 🎵 Flat, out of tune piercing whistle.

Sickle-billed vanga

Falcula palliata E



- 👁 Biggest of the family, white head and large down-curved sickle bill which it uses to probe crevices for insects. Length: ~32cm.
- 🐦 Often in groups.
- 🎵 Sounds like mewling or baby crying.

White-headed vanga

Leptopterus viridis E



- 👁️ All white underneath and black on top, but short bill. Length: ~20cm.
- 🎵 Bell-like whistling song.

Chabert's vanga

Leptopterus chabert E



- 👁️ Small vanga with black cap, white underneath, blue eye-ring. Length: ~14cm.

Madagascar blue vanga

Cyanolanius madagascarinus RE

Madagascar and Comoros – only vanga found outside Madagascar



- 👁️ Bright blue above and white below (no other Kirindy bird is this colour). Length: ~16cm.
- 🐦 Eats insects.
- 🎵 Voice is a churring “grrrrrr grrrrrr grrrrrr”.



ROBINS and THRUSHES

Large family with 300 species worldwide.

Madagascar magpie robin

Copsychus albospectularis E



- 👁️ Males are black and white (above left), females brown and white (above right). Length: ~28cm.
- 🐦 Hops around on forest floor looking for insects, or can be seen perching low down in trees.
- 🎵 Musical song.

OLD WORLD WARBLERS

Large diverse group of small, delicate-looking birds, slender bills. Usually seen moving among leaves picking insects off leaves and flowers. Fifteen species in Madagascar, of which 13 are endemic.

Common newtonia

Newtonia brunneicauda E



- 👁️ Head and wings all grey, white chin, brownish underparts, pale eye. Length: ~12cm.
- 🎵 Repetitive loud clicking call, “chippa chapa chippa chapa”.

Common jery

Neomixis tenella E



- 👁 Very small yellow-greenish bird with yellow chin and white underparts. Length: ~10cm.
- 🐦 Usually in groups.
- 🎵 Song is a high-pitched “sisisisis”.

Striped-throated jery

Neomixis striatigula E



- 👁 Distinguished from the common jery by its slightly larger size, longer bill, streaked underparts and yellow stripe above the eye. Length: ~12cm.

OLD WORLD FLYCATCHERS

Small insectivorous birds, two species in Madagascar.

Madagascar paradise flycatcher

Tersiphone mutata RE

Madagascar and Comoros



- 👁 Extremely long tails in males, small crest on head. Males have two colour forms (morphs). One is mainly black and white, the other a beautiful red-brown colour (above). The female is always rufous and black. Length: ~18-30cm plus ~12cm tail feathers in male.
- 🎵 Scratchy notes followed by descending tuneful song.

SUNBIRDS

Small birds that feed on nectar (and insects). Males are usually bright metallic colours. There are 112 species throughout the old world tropics.

Souimanga sunbird

Nectarinia souimanga RE



- 👁️ Small colourful sunbird with a yellow belly and red breast band, usually seen feeding on flowers. Length: ~10cm.
- 🎵 Quite talkative, singing all day long.

Long-billed green sunbird

Nectarinia notata E



- 👁️ All-green sunbird, larger than Souimanga. Length: ~14cm.

WHITE EYES

Small yellow or green birds with white ring just around the eye.

Madagascar white eye

Zosterops maderaspatanus RE



- 👁️ Small green bird with white eye – the only white eye in Madagascar. Length: ~12cm.

WEAVERS

Large family of seed-eating birds with short stout bills; many nest colonially.

Sakalava weaver

Ploceus sakalava E



- 👁️ Sparrow-like bird with yellow head. Length: ~15cm.
- 🐦 Very gregarious, often seen feeding on ground around the camp. Nests colonially.



DRONGOS

Distinctive metallic-black/grey birds. The whole family contains around 20 species in Africa, Australia and India.

Crested drongo

Dicrurus forficatus RE

Madagascar and Comoros



- 👁️ Metallic black bird with forked tail and crest on head. Length: ~26cm.
- 🐦 Sits upright on perches in the open and flies out to catch insects.
- 🎵 Metallic tuneless song – often mimics other birds.

REFERENCES

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PHOTOS

Scott Armbruster: *Accipter francesii*; *Asio madagascariensis*; *Centropus toulou*

Brigid Barry: *Coua gigas*; *Dicrurus forficatus*; *Eurystomus glaucurus* (lower); *Leptopterus viridis*; *Mesitornis variegata*

Daryl Dell: *Cuculus rochii*

Isabelle Baumgarter: *Caprimulgus madagascariensis*

Mike Danzenbaker: *Alcedo vintsioides*; *Buteo brachypterus*; *Copsychus albospectularis* (left); *Cyanolanius madagascarinus*; *Falco newtoni*; *Hypsipetes madagascariensis*; *Leptopterus chabert*; *Streptopelia picturata*; *Tersiphone mutata*; *Turnix nigricollis*; *Upupa epops marginata*; *Vanga curvirostris*

Giuliano Gerra and Silvio Sommazzi: *Coracopsis vasa*; *Merops superciliosus*

M. Herremans: *Leptosomus discolor* (upper)

Kate Lessells: *Oena capensis*; *Agapornis cana*;

Copsychus albospectularis (right); *Coua coquereli*; *Newtonia brunneicauda*; *Neomixis striatigula*; *Otus rutilus*

Martin Kramer: *Nectarinia notata*

Murray Lord: *Leptosomus discolor* (lower); *Treron australis*

Mike Majerus: *Coracopsis nigra*; *Coua cristata*; *Polyboroides radiatus*

Adam Riley: *Nectarinia souimanga*

Marsha Steffen and Dave Semler: *Falculea palliata*; *Zosterops maderaspatanus*

Tropical Biology Association: *Ploceus sakalava*; *Schetba rufa*

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TROPICAL BIOLOGY ASSOCIATION

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This guide was developed to help participants on Tropical Biology Association field courses to learn about the birds of Kirindy forest. It is not designed to be a complete field guide. It provides pointers to the most distinctive features of each species to help distinguish them from other Kirindy species, coupled with notes on their ecology or behaviour.

Tropical Biology Association

The Tropical Biology Association is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing professional training to individuals and institutions involved in the conservation and management of tropical environments. The TBA works in collaboration with African institutions to develop their capacity in natural resource management through field courses, training workshops and follow-up support.

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