
How to see Madagascar Pochard *Aythya innotata*, the world's rarest duck

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Comment voir le Fuligule de Madagascar *Aythya innotata*, le canard le plus rare au monde. La redécouverte, en 2006, du Fuligule de Madagascar *Aythya innotata* à Bemanevika, au nord-est de Madagascar, a donné une dernière chance de survie à l'espèce. Les revenus du tourisme sont nécessaires afin de démontrer aux communautés locales que la protection du site vaut la peine. Pour appuyer les efforts de conservation du Peregrine Fund et ses collègues, des informations sont données sur les moyens de visiter le site. À part l'occasion unique de voir le Fuligule de Madagascar dans la nature, le site offre la chance rare d'observer l'Effraie de Soumagne *Tyto soumagnei*. Des espèces des zones humides telles que le Canard de Meller *Anas melleri*, le Crabier blanc *Ardeola idae*, le Busard de Madagascar *Circus macrosclees*, le Râle de Madagascar *Rallus madagascariensis* et l'Amphilais tacheté *Amphilais seebohmi* sont également présentes, ainsi qu'une grande variété d'espèces forestières et de prairie. Une visite de 3–4 jours est fortement recommandée.

Summary. The rediscovery of Madagascar Pochard *Aythya innotata* at Bemanevika, north-eastern Madagascar, in 2006, has given the species a last chance at survival. Tourism-related income is needed to demonstrate to local communities the benefits of site protection. In support of the conservation efforts of The Peregrine Fund and their co-workers, information is provided on how to visit the site. Besides the unique opportunity of seeing Madagascar Pochard in the wild, the site offers the rare chance to observe Red Owl *Tyto soumagnei*. Wetland species such as Meller's Duck *Anas melleri*, Malagasy Pond Heron *Ardeola idae*, Malagasy Harrier *Circus macrosclees*, Madagascar Rail *Rallus madagascariensis* and Grey Emutail *Amphilais seebohmi* are also present, plus a wide range of forest and grassland species, making a 3–4-day visit highly worthwhile.

The sensational rediscovery of Madagascar Pochard *Aythya innotata* in November 2006 at a remote lake in north-east Madagascar has given the species a last chance at survival (René de Roland *et al.* 2007). An all-encompassing conservation programme is underway. Further research on the remaining population is being conducted to determine what its ecological requirements are, especially for successful breeding, and what factors make the site suitable for this sensitive species. Further searches for suitable habitat (both to release captive-bred birds and locate additional wild populations) are being planned. Site conservation is being pursued with the local community and formalisation of site protection is being sought with the government, while a captive-breeding facility has been established, where wild-collected eggs are being hatched and chicks raised to adulthood, and the first captive-raised birds have now produced young. All of this work is being undertaken by a partnership between The Peregrine Fund, the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust and The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust.

The site where the pochard lakes are situated, called Bemanevika, is remote and difficult to reach. Local people, despite being few in number, are having marked impacts on the habitat mostly through grazing of cattle and lighting of grassland fires. Madagascar's habitats appear to have little resistance to these disturbances, and activities that would hardly register as disturbing on mainland Africa are pushing back forest limits, and resulting in increased run-off and siltation of the lakes on which the pochard lives. The Peregrine Fund has established a permanent research and conservation camp near the main village of Bemanevika, and is engaging the local community in an effort to convince them to protect the remaining forest.

In a country with a strong government, one might expect that responsibility for site protection for such rare species should fall on the administration, but Madagascar's government is leaving conservation efforts largely in the hands of NGOs. To these ends, the Peregrine Fund is keen to encourage more visitors to the area. In exchange for the privilege of visiting, visitors are expected to pay fees directly to the local community, rather

than The Peregrine Fund. These fees will be used mainly to support biodiversity conservation, develop alternatives to subsistence farming methods that negatively affect the environment at the site and to create activities for generating some income for the local community.

On 5–8 November 2011, we visited Bemanevika, with the help of Lily-Arison René de Roland (Lily), head of The Peregrine Fund, Madagascar, on-site researcher Sam The Seing and research technician Loukman Kalavah.

Getting to Bemanevika

Prior to visiting, please liaise with The Peregrine Fund office in the capital Antananarivo ('Tana') to seek permission to stay at the research camp. Lily-Arison René de Roland can be contacted on lilyarison@yahoo.fr.

Getting to Bemanevika requires two full days of overland travel, whether you are arriving from Tana, Mahajanga or Antsiranana. The closest town with reasonable facilities is Antsohihy (14°54'S 47°59'E), situated on the main road c.430 km north of 'Tana' and 325 km south of Antsiranana (as the crow flies). It is a full day's drive from 'Tana' to Antsohihy (leave at sunrise and expect to arrive in the late afternoon), but the road is currently in good condition almost all the way, and in Antsohihy there are several comfortable hotels with air conditioning. Try Hotel Sofia or Le Paradisier Hotel on the southern outskirts of the town.

The second day of travel is rough and tiring, and requires a sturdy 4x4 vehicle with good ground clearance. From Antsohihy head first for Bealanana (14°33'S 48°45'E). Just north of Antsohihy a road branches east from the main road to Antsiranana at 14°51'35.3"S 48°05'20.6"E, climbing into the central highlands. Despite the recent edition of the Madagascar Bradt Travel Guide's (Bradt 2011) claim that a 'good road' links Antsohihy to Bealanana, c.120 km distant, this was not our experience. At first, the road is in reasonable condition with only the occasional wash out, but after c.50 km, as it starts to climb, the road becomes horribly pot-holed and, finally, rough, rocky and dusty. One should allow at least four hours to drive from Antsohihy to Bealanana, where it is possible to purchase last-minute supplies. However, only a small range of products and food

is available here, so it would be preferable to bring everything that you'll need from 'Tana'.

From Bealanana it is 39 km to Bemanevika, which can be expected to take between 3.5 and five hours' drive under reasonable / dry weather conditions. Initially you should return along the main road in the direction of Antsohihy for c.2 km, before taking a right turn (left if coming from Antsohihy) at 14°32'55.0"S 48°44'11.5"E. Shortly afterwards one crosses a large river, which at the time of our visit had a very poorly maintained bridge, requiring us to carefully reposition wooden planks in order to get across safely (Fig. 1). From here one first travels along a gravel road, but this soon peters out to a rough track with many forks. It is advised to carry a GPS and upload a Garmin GPS file with the route, available on the Birds Angola website (www.birdsangola.org/downloads).

The entire journey from Bealanana to Bemanevika is slow and bumpy, dusty when the weather is dry, and muddy and slippery when wet. Numerous stream / river crossings and steep sections make the journey slow and difficult. Even with 4x4 you may get stuck if it has rained. During the wet season (December–April) the project staff members walk between Bealanana and Bemanevika over two days! Attempting the drive to Bemanevika after November is ill-advised, and probably the best months to visit are September and October, when the pochards are breeding and the area is fairly accessible, although even then early rains can be a problem.

For those wishing to do the journey on the cheap, it is possible, if somewhat uncomfortable, to reach Bealanana by public transport, with daily 'taxi brousses' making the journey from Antsohihy. But upon reaching Bealanana you will have to find private transportation. We have heard that other visitors have managed to hire motorbikes here to drop them at Bemanevika, but we are unable to provide details of how to go about this. It is much simpler hiring a vehicle from 'Tana' to bring you all the way to Bemanevika and back. We hired the services of Eugène Rakotobe (eliotlestar93@yahoo.fr), who drove us in his sturdy Toyota 4x4 with good ground clearance. He spoke reasonable English and navigated the difficult roads ably.

Alternatively, join an organised expedition with a bird tour company (Birding Africa are

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Figure 1. Bridge near Bealanana on the road to Bemanevika, north-east Madagascar, November 2011 (Michael Mills)

Le pont près de Bealanana sur la route de Bemanevika, nord-est de Madagascar, novembre 2011 (Michael Mills)

Figure 2. Red Lake, Bemanevika, north-east Madagascar, November 2011 (Michael Mills)

Le Lac Rouge (Matsaborimena), Bemanevika, nord-est de Madagascar, novembre 2011 (Michael Mills)

Figures 3–4. Madagascar Pochards *Aythya innotata*, Bemanevika, north-east Madagascar, 5 November 2011 (Michael Mills)

Fuligules de Madagascar *Aythya innotata*, Bemanevika, nord-est de Madagascar, 5 novembre 2011 (Michael Mills)

Figure 5. Red Owl *Tyto soumagnei*, Bemanevika, north-east Madagascar, 5 November 2011 (Michael Mills)

Effraie de Soumagne *Tyto soumagnei*, Bemanevika, nord-est de Madagascar, 5 novembre 2011 (Michael Mills)

Figures 6–7. Swamp adjacent to Red Lake, where a pair of Malagasy Harriers *Circus macroscleles* breeds (female shown), Bemanevika, north-east Madagascar, 6 November 2011 (Michael Mills)

Le marais près du Lac Rouge, lieu de nidification d'un couple de Busards de Madagascar *Circus macroscleles* (à droite la femelle), Bemanevika, nord-est de Madagascar, 6 novembre 2011 (Michael Mills)

Figure 8. Rainforest (=Madagascar) Scops Owl *Otus rutilus*, Bemanevika, north-east Madagascar, 5 November 2011 (Michael Mills)

Petit-duc malgache *Otus rutilus*, Bemanevika, nord-est de Madagascar, 5 novembre 2011 (Michael Mills)

running one in 2014; see www.birdingafrica.com for details).

Bemanevika

Bemanevika is named after the main village in the area located at 14°22'00.0"S 48°35'05.6"E. The village is small and home to only c.60 adults.

Just before the village a track branches off right and winds across grasslands towards the base camp at 14°20'54.5"S 48°34'47.5"E. There are four lakes in this area. The most important, and the only one on which the pochard breeds, is called 'Red Lake' (Matsaborimena; Fig. 2). It is fringed by reedbeds and swamps, and surrounded by beautiful forest. The second lake, where the pochards are sometimes seen during the non-breeding season, is 'Green Lake' (Matsaborimaitso). It is fringed by trees being located well inside the forest itself.

Birding at Bemanevika

During our visit the pochards were easy to see, especially as they were confined to a single lake for breeding (Figs. 3–4). We saw several pairs each time we visited Red Lake, obtaining great views. Two other species of particular interest here are Red Owl *Tyto soumagnei* and Madagascar Serpent Eagle *Eutriorchis astur*. Two Red Owls were fitted with radio transmitters during our stay, and the project staff kindly tracked one of them for us, permitting superb views on its day perch (Fig. 5). Madagascar Serpent Eagle is much less predictable. In the past the project staff have found active nests of this secretive species, but there had been no recent sightings prior to our visit, and no active nest site was known.

Besides these three rare species, there is a plethora of other birds to be found, making a 3–4-day stay worthwhile. Most of the common eastern rainforest species occur, but the unique feature of the area is the richness of its wetlands. One of the main attractions is a breeding pair of Malagasy Harriers *Circus macroscleles* that were very active at their nest in a large swamp adjacent to Red Lake (Figs. 6–7). Red Lake and Green Lake are also excellent localities for Madagascar Grebe *Tachybaptus pelzelinii* (at least 40 birds seen) and Meller's Duck *Anas melleri* (>10 birds). A colony of Malagasy Pond Herons *Ardeola idae* (up to 18 birds observed) occurs in the reedbeds on Red Lake. Swampy areas around the margins of Red Lake should yield Madagascar Rail *Rallus madagascariensis*, and the 'harrier swamp' holds several pairs of Grey Emutail *Amphilais seebohmi*.

The forests are a good place to get to know a wide range of Malagasy birds, including Madagascar Ibis *Lophotibis cristata*, Madagascar Flufftail *Sarothrura insularis*, White-throated Rail *Dryolimnas cuvieri*, Madagascar Blue Pigeon *Alectroenas madagascariensis*, Red-fronted Coua *Coua reynaudii*, Blue Coua *C. caerulea*, Rainforest (=Madagascar) Scops Owl *Otus rutilus* (seen in camp at night; Fig. 8), Madagascar (Long-eared) Owl *Asio madagascariensis*, Madagascar Spinetail *Zoonavena grandidieri*, Pitta-like Ground Roller *Atelornis pittoides*, Cuckoo Roller *Leptosomus discolor*, Velvet Asity *Philepitta castanea*, Common Sunbird-Asity *Neodrepanis coruscans*, Dark Newtonia *Newtonia amphichroa*, Stripe-throated Jery *Neomixis striatigula*, Crossley's



Figure 9. Nelicourvi Weaver *Ploceus nelicourvi*, Bemanavika, north-east Madagascar, 7 November 2011 (Michael Mills)

Tisserin n licourvi *Ploceus nelicourvi*, Bemanavika, nord-est de Madagascar, 7 novembre 2011 (Michael Mills)

Figures 10–11. Grasslands in the Bemanavika area, north-east Madagascar, November 2011 (Michael Mills)

Les prairies dans la zone de Bemanavika, nord-est de Madagascar, novembre 2011 (Michael Mills)

Figures 12–13. Research camp, Bemanavika, north-east Madagascar, November 2011 (Michael Mills)

La station de recherches, Bemanavika, nord-est de Madagascar, novembre 2011 (Michael Mills)

Vanga (Babbler) *Mystacornis crossleyi*, White-headed Vanga *Artamella viridis*, Tylas Vanga *Tylas eduardi*, Madagascar Starling *Hartlaubius auratus* and Nelicourvi Weaver *Ploceus nelicourvi* (Fig. 9). Two rather localised species that we saw several times are Grey-crowned Tetraka *Xanthomixis cinereiceps* and Forest Rock Thrush *Monticola sharpei*. The surrounding grasslands (Figs. 10–11) also hold most of the island's widespread avian inhabitants of such habitats, including Madagascar Buttonquail *Turnix nigricollis*. In total we recorded 85 species during our short visit.

What to take

Although there is a research camp at Bemanevika (Figs. 12–13), visitors should be entirely self-sufficient and bring enough food and water for their entire stay. You will also need your own tent, bedding, utensils, etc. With prior permission from The Peregrine Fund it was possible for us to stay at the camp, and we were allowed to use their basic shelters (under which to pitch our tents) and the permanent long-drop toilet. The staff kindly prepared food for us (they have a permanent kitchen area and a full-time camp attendant / cook).

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