

The Comoro Islands Dec 4- 15th 2014

Sicklebill Safaris expedition

This trip had its germination on the Field Guides Madagascar tour in 2013 when I noticed a couple of new airlines operating in the Comoros, including Ewa Air as a subsidiary of Air Austral and flying from Dzaoudzi in Mayotte to Moroni on Grande Comore. This made the logistics suddenly look far better, so I invited Tom and Simon along to see how it was going to work out, basically as an expedition-style trip where we take it as it comes!

The Comoro Islands form an archipelago of volcanic islands situated off the SE coast of Africa, to the east of Mozambique and NW of Madagascar. They are divided between the Union of the Comoros, a sovereign nation formed by the three islands of Grande Comore, Anjouan and Mohéli, and the French overseas department of Mayotte, formerly part of the Union of the Comores but which voted to secede and join France. Political stability has been uncertain and in the past there have been frequent coups and changes of president, so do check the situation beforehand.

The island of Mayotte is the oldest of the islands, up to 15mya, with Anjouan around 11mya and Mohéli more recent. The ages progressively decrease from east to west. The most recent island is that of Grande Comore (around 0.5mya), and its huge volcano, Karthala, is still active, with spectacular old basalt outflows right by the airport and in Moroni. The Comoros has a tropical climate, with slight daytime temperature variations throughout the year of around 26 °C at sea-level, and abundant precipitation. There are two seasons: the hot and humid season from November to April and the dry season from May to October.

The native vegetation on the islands is evergreen forest, in various stages of intactness and pretty degraded on much of

Grande Comore and Anjouan. The forest on Mt Karthala naturally occurs up to c.1800m, above which giant heath vegetation predominates, sadly now much affected by burning for zebu pasture.

I found Markus Lagerqvist's Comoros Trip Report from 2012 of great value, and through this I was able to contact Omar Toiouil Hassani of Comores tours, who acted as our agent and proved to be a very capable fixer and expert on the bird sites. He fortunately accompanied us on both Grande Comore and Moheli, and was a star. Setting the trip up proved problematic with my frequent absences on tour, but Sue and Rowan Gregory of Sicklebill Safaris bore the brunt and set it up very nicely, our thanks to them for much hard work.

Payment proved extremely difficult and caused us more stress than anything else, basically we sent the money in early November to the bank details as provided by Omar, but it simply never arrived. I kept checking throughout the Field Guides Madagascar 2014 tour, and Sue wasted hours up and down to the bank to no avail. When I arrived in Moroni on Dec 4 it had still not arrived so I was scraping around to arrange funds, luckily having enough US\$ to pay for all our air tickets, and making several transfers to Western Union in Moroni once we knew that would work. By the time of writing this report in mid-December in Mauritius en route home, the missing funds have still not been traced, so be careful how you set this up, either take cash or use Western Union is my advice.

The Comoros is a very poor country, so there are few cars, roads are indifferent, but the people were friendly and the hotels unexpectedly better than anticipated. The only animosity we encountered was on Mayotte, (our least favourite island as it was the most developed, with yacht marinas and suchlike, a bit of a shock after the Comoros proper), where some of the youths in Mamoudzou seemed a bit dodgy, and our driver was worried about

being on the road up to Le Relais Forestier after dark.

Our booking at the Grand Retaj on Moroni was cancelled, as the place was taken over by some Saudi oligarchs, but **La Grillade** was fine with good a/c, hot water and mosquito nets, and helpful staff, though meal size portions were a tad austere and vegetables seemed hard to find.

Le Relais Singani on Moheli is fading fast and my a/c was useless, but despite the hot rooms the beds were comfortable, there was hot water and the mosquito nets also very good. Fuel was in short supply here and we had to buy it on the black market at 2 euros per litre instead of 1.25 euros, much to the delight of the black market lady seller. Power outages were also frequent and it is not on of a morning in Fomboni it seems. Simon single-handedly exterminated the local lobster population here, and I can recommend both that and the prawn curry, both very good.

The **Al Amal** in Ouani, Anjouan is large and surprisingly good, it had fans and good beds so we were fine there, forget about the a/c as the power supply is intermittent and they can't run it on their generators.

Our final place was **Le Relais Forestier** at Pic Combani on Mayotte, set up rather late as I was unable to get replies to my emails or call them direct, but happily Omar was able to facilitate it for us, as well as arrange Ibrahim the transfer guy, and it all fell into place very nicely, especially as I was able to do a bank transfer in payment which neatly solved my cash problem. The new owners Gilles and Nadine were very helpful and you can find all the endemics within 200m except for the Mayotte Fody, which is down near the town. Gilles even got out at 0400 to take Tom and I down to the airport, (inconveniently located on Petite Ile which necessitates a ferry ride), though Gilles whipped us across in his fishing Zodiac and we were there by 0510 for a 0700 flight. Our thanks to them for good cooking, the outing to Lac Korihani with

its amazingly vocal Moorhens, and a nice relaxing place to stay, it was a very good way to wind down the trip.

Thanks again to Sue and Rowan for the logistics, to Omar for his expertise, which made it such a success, to Patrice Keldi on Anjouan who pulled couple of stunners out of the bag and to Tom and Simon for good company and field skills, my thanks for the scopes and playback guys. Where next? Cameroon? Somaliland? CAR? Northern Madagascar rarities? Watch this space.....

Phil Gregory Mayotte and Mahebourg Mauritius Dec 2014



Itinerary

Thursday Dec 4 2014 Reunion- Dzaoudzi-Moroni (Grande Comore) o/n La Grillade in Moroni

Friday Dec 5 Chongodunda (=Salimani) area, Grande Comore
0700-1200 and afternoon 1600-1730 visit to Lac Ikoni and
adjacent beach in Moroni o/n La Grillade

Saturday Dec 6 Mt. Karthala (Grande Comore) trek began 100,
took about 5 hours to get to camp at 1300m

Sunday Dec 7 Mt. Karthala (Grande Comore), back to Moroni
1600, o/n La Grillade

Monday Dec 8 Depart 0630 to airport and Inter Iles flight to
Fomboni on Mohéli at 1040, 25 minutes, 1400-1730 Djando forest
area o/n Relais de Singani

Tuesday Dec 9 Fomboni-Miringoni 1 hr., then 0800-1100 Châlet
St. Antoine (Mohéli), Djando forest roadside area 1630-1815, o/n
Relais de Singani.

Wednesday Dec 10 Lac Boundouni, Mohéli 0800-0930, then to
airport at 1330 for 1500 AB Aviation flight Fomboni (Mohéli)-
Moutsamoudou (Anjouan); trek to Lac Dzialandzee 1630-2400,
rain for several hours! O/n Al Amal Hotel

Thursday Dec 11 Al Amal gardens Moutsamoudou (Anjouan),
then depart 0630 for 2-hour drive to Moya area 0930-1800, o/n Al
Amal, lunch at Moya Plage hotel.

Friday Dec 12 0730 Moutsamoudou (Anjouan)-Dzaoudzi
(Mayotte) via Inter Iles Aviation, to Relais Forestier at Pic
Combani 1000 onwards, o/n Relais Forestier, Mayotte.

Saturday Dec 13 Relais Forestier area then Lac Korihani Reserve
1100-1200, pm to Pointe Mahabo (Mayotte) 1500-1600 and
Labattoir mangroves 1630-1730 o/n Relais Forestier, Pic Combani,
Mayotte

Sunday Dec 14 Relais Forestier area, Mayotte.

Monday Dec 15 Depart 0410 to Mamoudzou before Zodiac ride across to Petite Ile and airport at Dzaoudzi (Mayotte)-Reunion Air Austral 0730 arr. 1030, then flight to Mauritius 1330.

Species list

Taxonomy based on IOC with some HBW/BirdLife amendments; see taxonomic notes in the species list.

Introduced species indicated by (I) * Heard only

Comoro target taxa in bold typeface.

***Podicipedidae* Grebes**

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis capensis* I saw 75 at Lac Boundouni on Mohéli Dec 10, and Tom counted the same again on the other arm of the lake to give a total of 150 here, they were very vocal and chasing about. 4 at Lac Korihani on Mayotte on Dec 13.

***Ardeidae* Herons and Bitterns**

Madagascar Pond Heron □ *Ardeola idea* One breeding dress adult flew in and perched in a tree behind the Relais Forestier Dec 12 then 12 at Lac Korihani Dec 13 which included 5 in breeding plumage.

Striated Heron *Butorides striata rhizophorae* Tom saw one in Moroni Dec 4 when he arrived, then 1 at Lac Ikoni Dec 5, 1 at Fomboni Dec 8, 1 at Moya Dec 11 and 1 at Labattoir Dec 13. An endemic race.

Dimorphic Egret *Egretta dimorpha* 3 egrets at Dzaoudzi Dec 5 looked like this but were not confirmed and it seems to be a vagrant here. 2 at Lac Ikoni Dec 5, 2 on Mohéli Dec 8 and 2 near Moya, Anjouan Dec 10. All white morph.

Great Egret *Egretta alba* 1 in the road near Miringoni, Mohéli Dec 9, 2 at Lac Boundouni Dec 10 included one in black-billed breeding dress, 2 near Moya, Anjouan Dec 10 and two singles on Mayotte.

Western Cattle Egret □ *Bubulcus ibis* Small numbers seen at several sites on all 3 Comoro islands, nesting in Fomboni on Mohéli. Also seen on Mayotte in very small numbers.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea firsasa* □ 1 Labattoir, Petite-Terre Mayotte Dec 13.

***Phasianidae* Gamebirds**

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* * I heard one up above the farm at around 1500m on Mt Karthala on Dec 7, one loud close and typical call in dry grassland.

***Accipitridae* Kites, Hawks and Eagles**

Malagasy Harrier □ 1 ad ♂ and 1 ♀ around 1700m on Mt. Karthala with Tom and Simon seeing 3 there, Grande Comore Dec 7, a ♂ and ♀ below Châlet St Antoine Mohéli Dec 9 and 2 at Lac B Boundouni Dec 10 including one ♂. A good trip for this rare species which is now so hard to find in Madagascar and is one of the world's rarest harriers.

Frances's Sparrowhawk *Accipiter francesiae pusillus* Tom saw and photographed an adult around 600m above Moya on Anjouan Dec 11, a rare bird that is listed by IOC 4.3 as extinct! The sexes are seemingly the same in this taxon, another marked difference from Madagascar birds.

Frances's Sparrowhawk *Accipiter francesiae brutus* We saw at least 3 at Pic Combani, Grande-Terre, Mayotte Dec 12 where it was very vocal, and also 2 at Lac Korihani Dec 13, where similarly vocal. I am surprised this was not picked as split during the recent HBW/BirdLife re-evaluation since it is tiny, much more brownish

above, has some rusty barring below and has different vocals to Frances's Sparrowhawk in Madagascar.

[Frances's Sparrowhawk *Accipiter francesiae griveaudi*] I glimpsed what was almost certainly one fly into a mango at La Grillade in Moroni on Grande Comore Dec 6.

***Rallidae* Crakes, rails and gallinules**

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus pyrrhorrhoa* 7 at Lac Boundouni on Mohéli Dec 10, giving the usual "kirruk" call, then 145 on the small pond at Korihani on Mayotte Dec 13, giving some astonishing trumpeting, bugling vocalizations as they chased and splashed about, and nothing like any Moorhen vocals I've ever heard! Cut posted to IBC and XC.

***Dromadidae* Crab-plover**

Crab-plover *Dromas ardeola* Great views of 3 imm and 1 ad, Labattoir, Petite-Terre 13/12

***Charadriidae* Plovers**

Grey Plover □ *Pluvialis squatarola* One at Labattoir, Petite-Terre Dec 13

Common Ringed Plover □ *Charadrius hiaticula* 3 at Labattoir, Petite-Terre Dec 13

Greater Sand Plover □ *Charadrius leschenaultii* 1 Labattoir, Petite-Terre Dec 13

***Scolopacidae* Sandpipers etc**

Whimbrel □ *Numenius phaeopus* 2 at Ikoni Beach Dec 5, Tom saw 4 on Moheli at Fomboni and 12 at Labattoir, Petite-Terre Dec 13.

Common Greenshank □ *Tringa nebularia* 6 at Lac Bunyoni, Mohéli Dec 10, 1 near Moya, Anjouan Dec 11

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* 12 at Ikoni Beach, Grande Comore Dec 5; 2 at Fomboni, Mohéli Dec 10

***Laridae* Gulls, Terns**

[Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*] Tom saw what he thought was a Caspian Tern from the ferry from Petite Ile Dec 12, it certainly did look large but I did not see the head so left it uncertain.

Greater Crested Tern □ *Thalasseus bergii thalassinus* A single off Petite Ile Dec 12

Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis bengalensis* 40 off Ikoni Dec 5, 15 off Fomboni, Mohéli Dec 8, Tom saw a few off Anjouan and 20 off Petite Ile Dec 13.

***Columbidae* Pigeons and Doves**

Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove *Columba livia*] (I) A handful of scruffy feral type pigeons seen on each of the Comoros in the big towns, but might be owned by someone?

Comoros Olive Pigeon *Columba pollenii* We made heavy weather on this one, with Tom and Simon seeing one at Chongodunda Dec 5, then a distant scoped single plus a rapid flyby up in the heathland on Mt Karthala Dec 6, though Tom saw 8 up here. None on Mohéli, 1 scoped nicely above Moya on Anjouan Dec 11, then a handful up around Pic Combani max. 3 birds Dec 12. Heard every day there, a quiet deep moaning double note.

Malagasy (Comoro) Turtle Dove *Nesoenas picturata comorensis* Small numbers on each island □ except Anjouan, max 5 on Mohéli Dec 9, only a handful seen on Mayotte. Split by Sinclair & Langrand as Comoro Turtle Dove, and does seem fairly distinctive with a different voice to Madagascar birds.

Ring-necked Dove *Streptopelia capicola* 2 at La Grillade in Moroni, 1 at Fomboni, Mohéli, heard on Anjouan, 1 on Mayotte.

Sinclair & Langrand says it is introduced but this is not mentioned in BoA.

Tambourine Dove □ *Turtur tympanistria* 2 at la Grillade in Moroni Dec 6, calling very well, and heard at Pointe Mahabo on Mayotte Dec 13. 1 heard, Pointe Mahabo, Grande-Terre 13/12. Sinclair & Langrand also says it is introduced but again this is not mentioned in BoA.

Comoros Green Pigeon *Treron griveaudi* Fantastic views of one of these rare birds above Miringoni en route to Châlet St Antoine, Mohéli on Dec 9. Omar was very confident of finding it, whilst we all thought we might get lucky and get a distant flyby of this, one of the trickiest endemics. We tried some fruiting trees about 10 minutes up the trail with no result, then again about 10 minutes later by a big fruiting tree with red cherry size berries, which Omar said they liked. Simon played some tape and we saw a dove shoot in, eventually getting to see it was this actually species! I got some good photos and we were impressed by how distinctive it was, with a very greyish head and deep cinnamon under tail coverts. It sat for ages, and we heard no calls at all, easily missed amongst all the foliage of course. One of the birds of the trip, particularly as it was so unexpected. Photos on IBC where it is still lumped under Madagascar Green Pigeon.

Comoros Blue Pigeon *Alectroenas s. sganzini*

First 2 at Chongodunda Dec 5, then 9 up Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore Dec 6, 3 on Dec 7, 4 at Châlet St. Antoine, Mohéli Dec 9, 5 at Moya Anjouan Dec 11 and up to 8 at Relais Forestier Mayotte Dec 12

Falconidae □Falcons

Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonarae* A fine pale phase bird with a pale tail tip over Chongodunda, Grande Comore Dec 5. Tom had a glimpse of an unidentified dark falcon at Châlet St Antoine on

Mohéli Dec 9 too.

***Psittacidae* Parrots**

Greater Vasa Parrot *Coracopsis vasa comorensis* I had some difficulties with the Vasa Parrots here, the birds we saw on Mt Karthala looked small to me and sounded quite shrill, I thought they were mostly Lesser Vasa but rather different to Madagascar birds. Greater seemed to be much scarcer, I heard a deeper raspy voiced bird at Mt Karthala and also on Anjouan, reminding me of an *Eclectus* squawk and presumed to be Greater. I only saw a single on Mt Karthala, a much bigger heavier bird flying near a Lesser Vasa on Dec 5. 2 presumed Greaters were seen on Mohéli too Dec 9 where this is seemingly the only species. Further research need to be undertaken, but a future split would not be surprising. The latest research awards subfamily status but could equally well be treated as an ancient family, the *Psitttrichasidae*.

Lesser Vasa Parrot *Coracopsis nigra sibilans* A single at Chongodunda, GC Dec 5, 30 Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore □ Dec 6 and 20 next day, with 10 at Moya on Anjouan Dec 11. They struck me as smaller and paler than Malagasy races and with different vocalizations. Further research need to be undertaken, but a future split would not be surprising. The latest research awards subfamily status but could equally well be treated as an ancient family, the *Psitttrichasidae*.

***Strigidae* Owls**

Karthala Scops Owl *Otus pauliani* One seen well just above our camp at 1300m on Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore around 2000m, and 3 others heard, very vocal and responsive. Heard the following morning too.

Anjouan Scops Owl *Otus capnodes* 4+ heard, Lac Dzilandzee 1500m, Anjouan in grim conditions at 2000m on Dec 10;

thankfully a triumph at Moya (350m or so) next day with 3 seen at dusk, I am pretty sure it was a pair and a juvenile. One of the birds of the trip, as we were perhaps expecting to only hear it. Tape on XC and IBC, photo on IBC.

Mohéli Scops Owl *Otus moheliensis* Simon played the tape and amazingly a bird flew across the road and perched up for us, with a terrific daylight view at Djando (Djoumadounia), Mohéli Dec 8, with another heard nearby. Also heard there next day. Photo on IBC.

Mayotte Scops Owl *Otus mayottensis* After the strife on Anjouan, this one came easily with a fine responsive bird at Relais Forestier, Pic Combani at 1600 on Dec 12, and seen again very nicely Dec 14. There were 3 pairs calling softly at dusk here on Dec 14, the presumed female being the higher pitched series, the male the lower pitched one. Cuts on XC and IBC, photo on IBC

***Apodidae* Swifts**

Madagascar (Karthala) Spinetail *Zoonavena grandidieri mariae* One flew over the trail as we entered the heathland around 1400m on Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore, a very brief view, and Tom saw one later shoot over up at 1700m near the farm. Lagerqvist states “Usually considered conspecific with Madagascar Spinetail (*Z. grandidieri*) but geographically isolated and morphologically distinct and maybe better treated as a distinct species endemic to Grande Comore.”

African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus griveaudi* Very few, Tom saw one near Moroni, and we had three sightings from Mohéli over 3 days, with 2, 4 and 1 bird respectively.

Malagasy Black Swift *Apus balstoni mayottensis* Also very scarce. with just 4 day records, 2 from Moroni Dec 5, 2 then 1 on Mohéli and a single at Mayotte.

Leptosomidae Cuckoo-Rollers

Grand Comoro Cuckoo-Roller *Leptosomus discolor gracilis* 1♂ and 1♀ Chongodunda (? = Salimani) Grande Comore Dec 5 and heard, Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore Dec 6 and 7. Lynx/BirdLife rate the 3 subspecies as very close to species rank (score 6, with 7 giving species rank) and likely to be split with *gracilis* from Grande Comore and *intermedius* from Anjouan as two distinct species, while retaining birds from Mohéli and Mayotte within Madagascar Cuckoo-Roller. Sinclair and Legrand split *gracilis* based on smaller size, plumage differences and a faster, higher pitched call (and in an earlier edition split the Anjouan bird too!) Rheindt however considered plumage differences to be minor and calls to be similar. A split of *gracilis* and *intermedius* with Madagascar Cuckoo-Roller on Mohéli and Mayotte creates a very odd biogeographic distribution pattern and more research – especially on the Mohéli birds – is needed to settle the issue. We found both Grande Comore and Anjouan birds to be quite distinctive in plumage but vocally I thought all sounded fairly similar, see calls on XC (xenocanto).

Madagascar Cuckoo-Roller□, *Leptosomus discolor* Heard Châlet St. Antoine, Mohéli Dec 9, heard Lac Boundouni Dec 10; 1♂ Pic Combani, Grande-Terre□ Dec 11 and heard again Dec 14, 1♂ in display Lac Korihani Dec 13

Alcedinidae Kingfishers

Malagasy Kingfisher *Corythornis vintsioides johannae* Two singles on Moheli, at Djando Dec 9 and Miringoni same day, and 1 at Lac Korihani on Mayotte Dec 13. Duller than Madagascar taxon and seemed to like forest near streams, which was odd.

Meropidae Bee-eaters

Madagascar (Olive) Bee-eater□ *Merops superciliosus* 6 at Djando Dec 8, 4 at Châlet St Antoine on Mohéli, 4 at Moya on Anjouan

Dec 11 and 5 at Pic Combani with 5 at Lac Korihani on Mayotte
Dec 13.

Vangidae □ **Vangas**

Comoros Blue Vanga *Cyanolanius comorensis bensoni* 4 at Djando, Mohéli Dec 9 and 1 Dec 10, very like Madagascar Blue Vanga but more lilac blue and looked longer billed. Tom saw an additional 2 here on Dec 9, and Omar has reported up to 12 at this site. Considered conspecific with Madagascar Blue Vanga by most authorities but split by Sinclair and Langrand based on larger size, subtle colour differences and different bill shape. Race *bensoni* from Grande Comore is possibly extinct, making this a Mohéli endemic. Call very similar to Madagascar birds, see XC.

Campephagidae Cuckooshrikes

Comoros Cuckooshrike *Coracina c. cucullata* 4 on Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore □ Dec 6 and 3 next day, all males except for one presumed immature that had a yellowish wash to the breast and pale fringes to the head. Very smart and distinctive, very white below and with a very different call to Ashy Cuckooshrike. Split by IOC but retained within Ashy Cuckooshrike by Clements. IOC separates the (rare) birds on Mohéli as race *moheliensis*, but Clements treat *moheliensis* as a synonym of *cucullata*. We tried taping for them without success, but the cut we had sounded more like juvenile birds than the call from Grande Comore.

Dicruridae Drongos

Grand Comoro Drongo *Dicrurus fuscipennis* Omar knew exactly where to take us at Chongodunda (? = Salimani) on Dec 5, and sure enough he walked up small ridge and there were two of them, with 3 more seen later. Very brown wings and tail on one bird, maybe an immature? Photo on IBC.

Crested Drongo *Dicrurus forficatus potior* Up to 6 birds in the

forest patch above Moya on Dec 11, chasing and vocalizing, this must be a rare bird as the habitat is now so restricted. Tom saw another 2 on his foray higher up here too. Only otherwise found in Madagascar, odd how it is also here. Photo on IBC.

Mayotte Drongo *Dicrurus waldenii* 4 near Relais Forestier on Dec 12, then the same pair near there the next two days, actually seen from the lodge veranda one day. A large drongo with a very deeply forked tail with outer feathers that curved up, very tape responsive and seemed very low density, probably needs good forest, which is not over-abundant on Mayotte. Photo and sounds cut on IBC (both) and XC. Here is Tom's note on breeding: "the nest seen higher up the ridge was a loose cup, finely woven of small straw-grass strands, about 12+ cm. across at the lip, and perhaps 8 cm. deep, with no apparent eggs, although I did not try to search, & quickly left the site, the 1 drongo present clearly rather upset, flying away but then returning to a point just above the nest, as I walked away. The nest appeared to me to be moderately freshly made, almost certainly not that old, anyhow. I did not note any "whitewash" under, on, or near the nest, or adjacent branches. This was in fairly dense primary or good secondary forest, with much understory, and in the particular setting, jagged rocks, large & small roots, & steeply sloping ground. The drongo was mainly quiet but for a short burst just as I came upon it & the nest. I was not fast enough to see if the bird actually came off the nest, but that was certainly my first & lasting impression."

***Monarchidae* Monarchs**

Pale Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone vulpina vulpina* 3 in the forest patch above Moya, Anjouan Dec 11, with Tom seeing a pair higher up. Again must be a rare bird as so little habitat is left.

Pale Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone vulpina voeltzkowiana* 2 at Djando (Djoudadounia), Mohéli Dec 8 and 6 at Châlet St. Antoine, Mohéli Dec 9, with one at Lac Bunyoni Dec 10.

Grand Comoro Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone (mutata) comorensis* Small numbers from Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore with 2, 4 and 2 from Dec 6, 7 and 8, only in good forest.

Madagascar Paradise-Flycatcher (Mayotte) *Terpsiphone mutata pretiosa* A noisy flock of 6 was hanging about below Relais Forestier at Pic Combani, Grande-Terre, giving quiet contact calls as they foraged often high in the trees, maybe a family group as it seemed to be one male amongst them. Also 3 from Lac Korihani Dec 13. Lagerqvist states that “all Comoro races are usually retained within Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher (*T. mutata*), however a recent study by Bristol et al (2013) found substantial genetic distances of \approx 2.9-3.5% between three subspecies clusters: (1) *vulpina* (incl. *voeltzkowiana*) from Anjouan and Mohéli respectively; (2) *mutata* (incl. *singetra* and *pretiosa*) from Madagascar and Mayotte and (3) *comorensis* from Grande Comore. We provisionally treat them as three species calling the *vulpina* group Pale Paradise Flycatcher after the paler plumage of *vulpina/voeltzkowiana*.”

***Corvidae* Crows**

Pied Crow *Corvus albus* Small numbers on each island, max. 6 on Mohéli Dec 8 and 4 on Dec 9. Max on Mayotte was 3.

***Pycnonotidae* Bulbuls**

Malagasy Bulbul *Hypsipetes m. madagascariensis* Small numbers on all 4 islands, usually 2-4 each day with a max. of 10 on Anjouan, and seen in Moroni. We found them tricky to tell from Grande Comore Bulbul, but vocally distinct and the latter was much paler beneath.

□ **Grand Comoro Bulbul** *Hypsipetes parvirostris* 7 on Dec 6 and 10 on Dec 7 from Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore, we mostly felt confident of the identification at the higher altitudes, this species being paler below with different vocals, a nice long cut is on XC.

Tom had up to 20 higher up on Mt Karthala, with a flock of 8 on Dec 7, and at least 15 above 1550m the day before.

Mohéli Bulbul *Hypsipetes (parvirostris) moheliensis* 10 around Châlet St. Antoine, Mohéli, much darker grey below than Grande Comore Bulbul and with a noticeably thicker and longer orangey-red bill. This was split in BoA and then by IOC 4.4 just as the trip ended! Photo and sounds on IBC and XC. They seemed to be in close contact if not sympatric with Madagascar Bulbuls here at the lower altitudes.

***Hirundinidae* Swallows & Martins**

Swallow sp. *Hirundo* sp. 1 by the pond at Dzaoudzi airport on Dec 5 was probably a Barn Swallow, but planes don't make ideal vantage points.

***Acrocephalidae* Reed Warblers and allies**

Madagascar (Mohéli) Brush Warbler *Nesillas typica moheliensis* A couple of brief sightings of this skulker from Djando on Mohéli Dec 8, keeping low down in thick undergrowth and with a dry tacking call. Tom and Simon saw it much better than I did when I squeaked one in but was unsighted, though I saw one later when recording it. We were confused by the name too, and played the tape of Benson's Brush Warbler until we realized what had happened. Lagerqvist states "Usually treated as a race of Malagasy Brush Warbler (*N. typica*), but differs from *typica* □ by colouration, heavy streaks on breast, size, longer bill and quite different calls. As noted by Rheindt, it also creates an odd biogeographical pattern to retain *moheliensis* within Malagasy Brush Warbler while treating *longicaudata* as a separate species. Note that sometimes Benson's Brush Warbler is also □ called Mohéli Brush Warbler"- a point which caused us great confusion initially.

Anjouan Brush Warbler *Nesillas longicaudata* Heard close by on

the fateful march up to Lac Dzilandzee, then heard and seen in the hotel garden next day by Tom and I, causing Simon some angst until we found it along the trail above Moya. Finally two seen on the last morning in the hotel garden as we were leaving for the airport

Grand Comoro Brush Warbler *Nesillas brevicaudata* 2 at 1100m Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore Dec 6 and a single at 1400m later, then 4 next day as we came down the mountain, a dull rather olive *Nesillas* with a shorter tail than some and very little throat streaking, also quite arboreal climbing about 3-4m up in small trees.

Benson's (Mohéli) Brush Warbler *Nesillas mariae* 2 at Djando, Mohéli on Dec 8, foraging along branches quite high in large trees by the road, and 2 there next day, odd behaviour for a *Nesillas*, which are usually major skulkers. Seemed quite unstreaked below, not as long tailed as *typica*, more olive-greenish above, as well as arboreal. We got thoroughly confused by the English names but eventually sorted it out; it seems to be sympatric with the other Mohéli *Nesillas* species here but occupies a different niche. Oddly we found neither of them around Châlet St. Antoine despite considerable playback.

***Zosteropidae* White-eyes**

Anjouan White-eye *Zosterops (maderaspatanus) anjuanensis* 10 Lac Dzilandzee area, Anjouan Dec 10 and 8 around the forest above Moya Dec 11, quite vocal. Seemed much yellower on the upperparts than the birds on Mohéli. Lagerqvist states "Usually treated as a race of Malagasy White-eye (*Z. maderaspatanus*) but Malagasy White-eye belongs to an explosive radiation of white-eyes also including Kirk's and Mayotte White-eye from which Anjouan White-eye differ by 3.2 % (see note under Moheli White-eye). Anjouan White-eye is thus better treated as a separate species."

Mohéli White-eye *Zosterops [maderaspatanus] comorensis* 15 at Djando (Djoumadounia), Mohéli □ Dec 8 and about 50 from Châlet St. Antoine, Mohéli and Lac Bunyoni Dec 9. Lagerqvist states “Usually treated as a race of Malagasy White-eye (*Z. maderaspatanus*) but a study by Warren et. al. (2006) shows that *maderaspatanus* from Madagascar, *mayottensis* from Mayotte, *comorensis* from Mohéli, *aldabrensis* from Aldabra and *kirki* from Grande Comore belong to what was an explosive radiation, probably originating from the African mainland. All five are groups about equally diverged (2.3 %) so it would make sense to treat them as five species rather than two (like Clements who split *mayottensis*) or three (like IOC which splits *mayottensis* and *kirki*).”

Kirk’s White-eye *Zosterops kirki* Tom saw 2 in Moroni near La Grillade Dec 4; 4 at La Grillade at Dec 5, 6+ at Mt Karthala Dec 6 and 2 on Dec 7. Very bright yellow below and with a distinctive yellow frons, it was everyone’s first Comorian endemic. See comment under Mohéli White-eye above.

Mayotte White-eye *Zosterops mayottensis* 4 at Pic Combani, Grande-Terre Dec 12, 2 next day there and 6 at Lac Korihani, with 6 at Pointe Mahabo and 4 on Petite Ile same day. Also heard early morning at Pic Combani the next two days, as well as on Petite Ile en route to the airport. Another white-eye with bright yellow underparts, this one with a distinctive orangey wash on flanks and sides of lower breast, which was only obvious in good light. Seemed quite common nearer sea level.

Karthala White-eye *Zosterops mouroisiensis* The first were on Dec 6 just as the heath formation started to mix with the forest on Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore, at around 1300m, then it proved quite common in the heath proper, we saw around 20 and heard more, and Tom had 30+ in one large flock on Dec 7 with a total of 50+ that day. Seems to have marginal overlap with Kirk’s at the ecotone, and not always easily told as it could look quite bright yellow below when seen in bright light, the duller flanks only

apparent in duller light, also the lack of a yellow frons.

***Sturnidae* Starlings**

Common Myna □ (I) *Acridotheres tristis* This pest species that competes with some species for hole-nesting sites was seen in small to moderate numbers seen at many sites on all dates and islands.

***Turdidae* Thrushes**

Karthala Thrush *Turdus (b.) comorensis* Tom and Simon saw this on Dec 6 above the Mt Karthala camp whilst I did not attempt the trek up to the heath that afternoon. Then 2 there on Dec 7, which I only glimpsed in flight in thick cover, before happily 1 was taped in very nicely as we were descending Mt. Karthala (thanks Simon!), showing well quite high in trees and coming to feed on fruits on a trunk. Tom saw at least 4 on Dec 7, with 2 seen in a dry stream-bed off-trail not far from the farmhouse "La Convalescence" area, under a very thick grove of trees and shrubs with fruits and flowers - first attracted by a v. large flock of white-eyes; the 2 thrushes were on the stream-bed ground. Rather uniform fawny-brown plumage with a whitish throat, dark grey legs and dark bill. I actually thought these not unduly large thrushes, with relatively short tails.

Mohéli Thrush *Turdus (b.) moheliensis* Seen from the car by the road at Djando Dec 8 where we had about 7 or 8 birds, very distinctive with white cheek whiskers and white throats. Also a couple up near Châlet St. Antoine, Mohéli, and vocalizations taped at two sites, see XC.

Anjouan Thrush *Turdus (b.) bewsheri* One singing at dusk en route to Lac Dzilandzee flew out overhead, then 2 singing in forest 11/12 above Moya, Anjouan and seen very well. Tom saw 6+ this day. Distinctively scalloped brown on flanks, song taped, see XC.

Lagerqvist states “The three races of *Turdus* on the Comoros are usually considered races of Comoros Thrush (*T. bewsheri*)” although now split in the Sinclair & Langrand Field Guide. They are certainly three very distinct birds plumage wise, and songs seem to show some differences.

Muscicapidae Old World Flycatchers

African (Madagascar) Stonechat □ *Saxicola torquata voeltzkowi* 10+ in the heath zone around 1300-1700m on Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore Dec 6, the males with extensive white collars, blackish mantles and white rumps, but apparently quite like *torquata*. Tom and Simon saw 15+ as they went slightly higher up after a purported *Humblotia* that came to nothing. Treated as a race of African Stonechat by both IOC (who split Madagascar Stonechat) and Clements (who treat Madagascar Stonechat as the *sibilla* subspecies group within African Stonechat). Genetic comparisons between *sibilla* and *voeltzkowi* show no significant differences so it may be better treated as a subspecies of Madagascar Stonechat, but stonechat taxonomy remains vexatious!

Humblot’s Flycatcher *Humblotia flavirostris* 2 below camp around 1200m at Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore Dec 6 and then two sightings of 3 birds next day, one just above and one below the camp at 1300m. One of the star birds of the trip, it flew in close to me when I was resting on the steep climb up, and then foraged around a huge tree nearby, acting a bit like an Australasian robin in clinging on the sides of the trunks at times and sitting quietly at low to mid-height. Call is a quiet dry trill. Luckily everyone caught up with it next day after a fruitless climb high up to 1700m gave no sign, but it then came quite late on as we were beginning to fret.....

Nectariniidae Sunbirds

(Grand Comoro) Humblot’s Sunbird *Cinnyris humbloti* 2 at Chongodunda, Grande Comore □, Dec 5, 2 on Mt. Karthala, Dec 6

and 3 Dec 7.

(Mohéli) Humblot's Sunbird *Cinnyris (humbloti) mohelicus*

Good views in Fomboni at the Relais Singiani Dec 8 and 9, also at Djando, Mohéli Dec 8, and at Châlet St. Antoine, Moheli Dec 9

Lagerqvist states “Warren et al (2003) show that the two races of Humblot's Sunbird are deeply divergent (3.8 %) and thus better treated as two separate species”. The two taxa also differ in several plumage characters, the Mohéli ♂ birds seeming much duller.

Grand Comoro Green Sunbird *Cinnyris (notatus) moebii* 2 at Salimani, Grande Comore □ Dec 5, 2 Mt Karthala Dec 6 and 1 on Dec 7. Tom saw a pair near La Grillade Dec 5, the ♂ quite territorial around a flowering shrub. This was an obvious split, it's much larger than Madagascar Green Sunbird, very long billed and has a blue and purple head, not green, with a very different voice.

Mohéli Green Sunbird *Cinnyris (notatus) voeltzkowi* Small numbers on Mohéli, especially at Djando and a few at Châlet St Antoine Dec 9. Lagerqvist states: “IOC and Clements regard *moebii* and *voeltzkowi* as races of Malagasy Green Sunbird □ (*C. notatus*) while Sinclair and Legrand split Grande Comore *moebii* as Comoro Green, while retaining Mohéli *voeltzkowi* within Malagasy Green Sunbird. Warren et al (2003) show that *moebii* and *voeltzkowi* form sister groups to *notatus*. The two Comoros taxa are separated by 3.0 % and also differ in several plumage characters, thus it seems appropriate to separate them as two species given vocal and plumage differences from the Madagascar birds.”

Anjouan Sunbird *Cinnyris comorensis* Seen at dawn Dec 11 at the Al Amran Hotel in Moutsamoudou with a very vocal male, small numbers at Moya same day (5+ for Tom) plus a fine pair at the Plage Hotel in Moya and again at the Al Amal hotel next morning. The vivid rich burnt orange pectoral tufts showed very

well when one was singing to a female at the hotel.

Mayotte Sunbird *Cinnyris coquerellii* Surprisingly uncommon and low density, we saw a fine pair at Le Relais Forestier on Dec 12, a pair at Lac Korihani next day with another pair at Pointe Mahabo that afternoon. Tom did a fair bit of walking higher up and encountered very few (if any?), we wonder if it may be commoner at lower altitudes?

***Passeridae* Old World Sparrows**

House Sparrow □ (I) *Passer domesticus* Small numbers in the urban centres on each of the 4 Comoro islands.

***Ploceidae* □ Weavers and Widowbirds**

Madagascar Red Fody (I) *Foudia madagascariensis* A handful on Grande Comore, it seems very sparse and in the disturbed habitats here. Also 1+ seen at Fomboni on Mohéli, where it again seems uncommon.

Grand Comoro Fody *Foudia (e.) cosobrina* 1 ♀ at 1200m on Mt. Karthala, Grande Comore Dec 6, and 5 ♂ around 1100-1300m, very much a forest bird here. Red only on the head, and lacks a red rump, quite unlike the birds on the other islands.

Mohéli Fody *Foudia eminentissima* The Sinclair Field Guide is very misleading here, only showing the Grande Comore Fody and not mentioning that the other taxa have much more extensive red on head and chest, and red rumps! This mislead us no end, I saw a ♂ fody at Châlet St Antoine Dec 9 that with hindsight was clearly this species, but only reference to HBW cleared up the problem for us! There was also a ♀, there same day and we saw two more ♂ at Djando. Finally there was a fine ♂ at Lac Boundouni Dec 10. I would think there is a good case for splitting all 4 Comoro taxa as species, they seem morphologically distinct and probably sound a bit different too. These birds were on the edge of forest each time.

Anjouan Fody *Foudia (e.) anjuanensis* 2♂ and 2♀, above Moya, Anjouan Dec 11, on the edge of native forest at around 350m. This taxon has quite extensive red on head and orangey at sides of chest, with a red rump.

Mayotte Fody *Foudia (e.) algondae* 3♂ + 1♀, Pointe Mahabo, Grande-Terre Dec 13, found right away once we got into the scrubby lower altitude habitat, which was degraded woodland with many exotics on the edge of the mangroves at near sea-level. Voice also fairly distinct, the ♂ has much red on head and chest and a red rump, seems very local here as we did not find it at Lac Korihani in degraded forest, or up in the hills in good forest. This was our very last endemic taxon.

Lagerqvist states “All four endemic Comoros taxa are usually treated as races of Comoros Fody (□) (*F. eminentissima*). However, differences in plumage between the four taxa are equal to or exceed those of other fody species and Rheindt also noted that the vocalizations of the different taxa are “very dissimilar from one another”. Treating them as four species seems a sensible approach”.

***Estrildidae* Waxbills, Munias and allies**

Bronze Mannikin (I) *Lonchura cucullata*

Up to 5 at La Grillade, Moroni Grande Comore Dec 5 and 6, and a couple at Fomboni on Mohéli Dec 10 and up to 4 at Châlet St Antoine.

MAMMALS

Large Lemurs *Lemuridae*

Common Brown Lemur] (I) *Eulemur fulvus* Up to 35 at Pic Combani, Grande-Terre, very common and vocal in the good forest here and with a great feeding show at Relais Forestier after breakfast. Three of the females had youngsters. Tom also saw 3 of them higher up above Moya, Anjouan Dec 11. Common Brown

Lemur on Mayotte is sometimes classified as belonging to the endemic subspecies *mayottensis*. However, the lemurs on Mayotte were probably introduced to the Comoros by man, presumably several hundred years ago.

Mongoose Lemur (I) *Eulemur mongoz* 3 at Djando Mohéli Dec 8, great views of a male and female with a baby in clove trees late pm. 6 at Moya, Anjouan working along the forest edge late afternoon Dec 11.

Old World Fruit Bats *Pteropodidae*

Seychelles Fruit Bat *Pteropus seychellensis comorensis* □
Surprisingly widespread and quite common on all the islands, especially Grande Comore and Mohéli, with counts of up to 60. Often seen flying in daylight.

Unidentified mammals

Tomb-bat sp. 2 small quite long-winged dark bats at dusk at 1300m at the Karthala campsite Dec 6.

A rat-like rodent at the Mt Karthala campsite one morning, climbing a tree, possibly a *Rattus* sp.

Herps

A green *Phelsuma* gecko on Mayotte at Le Relais Forestier, probably *Phelsuma v-nigra pasteuri*.

Various skinks photographed on the islands.

The following summary is based on the excellent trip report from Oct 2012 by Markus Lagerqvist:

The islands form an endemic bird area (EBA) with 21 endemics recognized by Clements and 24 by IOC. The birds of the Comoros are however poorly known with many very distinct forms today classified as subspecies. It is the most taxonomically outdated

country I have visited, with so many taxa close to or above species level status yet unacknowledged in major checklists. With more studies on the Comoro avifauna I expect that the number of recognized endemic species will surpass 40 in the near future.

All the restricted-range species occur in forest, largely in the uplands, where there is forest remaining, apart from Karthala White-eye which is confined to the higher-altitude heath zone of Mt Karthala. Today, forest has been largely cleared from the lowlands and grazing by cattle prevents regeneration; on Mt Karthala cultivation now extends as high as 1,400m in places. Very little intact upland forest remains on Anjouan, the most badly degraded and heavily populated of the islands, whilst that on Grande Comore is under threat from burning and clearing, with large tree-felling evident and burning of heathland much in evidence. Mohéli seemed a little better with much more extensive fairly intact woodland in the hills, whilst Mayotte was patchy, the area around Relais Forestier at Pic Combani was pretty good and quite extensive.

Four species restricted to Mt Karthala are considered threatened, and, consequently, the forests here rank highly amongst the key forests for threatened birds in Africa. Further habitat degradation and fragmentation in this region are particularly threatening to Karthala White-eye and Karthala Scops Owl. On Anjouan, the recently rediscovered Anjouan Scops Owl, confined to c. 10 km² of native forest (all that remains), is estimated to number around 50 birds and Anjouan Cuckoo-Roller less than 100 pairs; accelerating habitat clearance and capture for food render both highly threatened. On Mayotte, Mayotte Drongo occurs at low density and the entire population may not exceed a few dozen pairs.

Endemic species per IOC, HBW/BirdLife or Sinclair & Langrand (2012) 27
species **Bold** indicates accepted as species in this report

Comoros Olive Pigeon (*Columba pollenii*)

Comoros Green Pigeon (*Treron griveaudi*)

Comoros Blue Pigeon (*Alectroenas sganzini*)

Karthala Scops Owl (*Otus pauliani*)

Anjouan Scops Owl (*Otus capnodes*)

Mohéli Scops Owl (*Otus moheliensis*)

Mayotte Scops Owl (*Otus mayottensis*)

Comoros Cuckooshrike (*Coracina cucullata*)

Grand Comoro Drongo (*Dicrurus fuscipennis*)

Mayotte Drongo (*Dicrurus waldenii*)

Grand Comoro Bulbul (*Hypsipetes parvirostris*)

Mohéli Bulbul (*Hypsipetes moheliensis*) IOC 4.4, BoA

Anjouan Brush Warbler (*Nesillas longicaudata*)

Grand Comoro Brush Warbler (*Nesillas brevicaudata*)

Benson's (Moheli) Brush Warbler (*Nesillas mariae*)

Kirk's White-eye (*Zosterops kirki*)

Mayotte White-eye (*Zosterops mayottensis*)

Karthala White-eye (*Zosterops mouroniensis*)

Comoro (Anjouan) Thrush (*Turdus bewsheri*) Sinclair

Karthala Thrush (*Turdus (bewsheri) comorensis*) Sinclair

Moheli Thrush (*Turdus (bewsheri) moheliensis*) Sinclair

Humblot's Flycatcher (*Humblotia flavirostris*)□

Grand Comoro Humblot's Sunbird (*Cinnyris humbloti*)

Grand Comoro Green Sunbird (*Cinnyris (notatus) moebii*) Sinclair, also indicated in BoA

Mohéli Green Sunbird (*Cinnyris (notatus) voeltzkowi*)□ indicated in BoA

Anjouan Sunbird (*Cinnyris comorensis*)□

Mayotte Sunbird (*Cinnyris coquerellii*)□

Grand Comoro Fody (*Foudia eminentissima cosobrina*)□

Likely splits pending

Frances's Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter francesiae*) ssp *griveaudi/pusillus/brutus*
Could be 2 or even 3 species

Comoro Turtle Dove (*Nesoenas picturata comorensis*) (Sinclair)

Grand Comoro Cuckoo-Roller (*Leptosomus (discolor) gracilis*)

Anjouan Cuckoo-Roller (*Leptosomus (discolor) intermedius*)

Comoros Blue Vanga (*Cyanolanius (madagascarinus) comorensis*)

Mohéli Brush Warbler (*Nesillas (typica) moheliensis*)

Anjouan White-eye (*Zosterops (maderaspatanus) anjuanensis*)□

Mohéli White-eye (*Zosterops (maderaspatanus) comorensis*)

Mohéli Humblot's Sunbird (*Cinnyris (humbloti) mohelicus*)

Pale Paradise Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone (madagascariensis) vulpina*)□

Grand Comoro Paradise Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone (m.) comorensis*)

Mohéli Fody (*Foudia eminentissima*)□

Anjouan Fody (*Foudia (e.) anjuanensis*)□

Mayotte Fody (*Foudia (e.) algondae*)

Endemic subspecies that may warrant species status

Persian Shearwater ssp. temptator □

Greater Vasa Parrot ssp. comorensis □

Lesser Vasa Parrot ssp. sibilans

Karthala Spinetail (*Zoonavena grandidieri mariae*) □

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