

**LEMURS IN PARKS, PARKS IN MADAGASCAR.
THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES...**

This time at Berenty it isn't Christmas but ... nearly Easter. We are leaving the 5th March 2008 so as to be in the forest, in the Berenty reserve for the 7th March. The students of Antananarivo are preparing their thesis in the capital with the information they collected in 2006, while Danny, Madame Rakotomalala and Monsieur Alain are waiting for us with open arms. "Salama!". Danny shows us our room with enthusiasm, immediately indicating a bathroom door, with hot and cold water and electricity (from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.): our room not only has a bathroom but also a bathroom door! The windows have mosquito nets and miracle of all miracles, on the ceiling there's a strange object (not a lamp), with large blades, which remind you of old air fans seen in police films in the 40s. Maybe, it is exactly one of those! This room, which could seem standard in normal conditions, is in reality for us pure luxury in the forest of Berenty, usually reserved for tourists. For this we are grateful, especially to the zoos that have given us the opportunity to stay in a place so worthy.

This time the aim of our mission is to understand some secrets of the *gidro* lemurs socially similar to the *maki* (those with the black and white ringed tails), but apparently not as popular.

The strange Berenty *gidro*

What are the *gidro* doing in Berenty and to what species do they correspond? That's a good question. Let's take a step back, maybe two. Once there were only two daytime species of Lemurs present in the forest, the *maki* and the *sifaka*, *Propithecus verreauxi* (completely white in colour and bounce along sideways with their hands up in the air when they move about). But no longer. From a sparse group of less than 10 *gidro*, a population of nearly 300 individuals has sprung up over thirty years, today one of the biggest threats to the natives of Berenty. The *gidro*, are in fact the species of Lemur that are probably the most 'opportunists' from an ecological point of view, because they adapt well to different ambiances, and also on a behavioural point of view, because they always find something to eat. Their diet is so vast that they can even include birds' eggs and even other lemurs (this was observed at Berenty, a *gidro* was seen eating baby lemur *catta*). In truth the population of *gidro* in Berenty are hybrids. Some of them were originally imported from the dry forest of Kirindy (western Madagascar) and belonged to the subspecies *Eulemur fulvovus rufus*, whereas a minority came from the humid forest of Sainte Luce (south-eastern Madagascar) and belonged to the subspecies *Eulemur fulvovus collaris*.

The first days with the *gidro*

8th March - After an untroubled night, without beetles and nocturnal butterflies or other room mates, who usually swarm in abnormal groups at the beginning of the rain season, we get up at 5:30, and are relatively rested. The humid season is coming to an end and the rain, surprised us yesterday only at twilight. Winter is on its way and the sun rises later, at about 6:00. After a coffee and biscuit based breakfast, bought at Fort-Dauphin (remember? It's the nearest city to the forest and is about a three hour car drive away), we make our way to the heart of the forest. What better day, than The International day of Women, celebrated in Madagascar too, to start a study on the behaviour of the lemurs, of which its primordial community is based on the total predomination of females over males? As usual the first and most serious problem is to find and identify a group in order to observe it for a series of days. Our attention is turned to the *gidro*, lemurs with brown fur that camouflage themselves perfectly among the trees of the forest, hidden to the eye of the observer who, without noticing, passes under the branches without seeing them. We search we search, we walk and walk, our stubbornness is finally rewarded when we spot a group that, for composition (a number of male and female adults and non adults) and dimension are perfect for the study that we have in mind. Too few do not enable us to have an adequate sample for the analysis of the information, and too many would not be manageable for only two observers. The *gidro* do not move around in a compact group: this we soon discover at our own expense.

9th March - Where is the group that we identified, followed and observed all day yesterday? *Desaparecido*. Gone. Disappeared. Escaped. Dispersed. Not knowing the territory normally lived in by the group, all that is left to do is to scour the forest from top to bottom, in short everywhere. Desperate. Grief stricken. Powerless. Furious and at the same time exhausted, we end the day without finding the group.

10th March - it's a new day and..... the group is on our roof. Still eating biscuits and slippers on our

feet, we take a pen and notepad and, unbelievably, we rush outside. Maybe we are wrong. Maybe we made a mistake while looking out of the window. But no, it's our group: Pallettone, Coda Mozza, Tre Schizzi, Occhiali bianchi, Pennello & Co. We take it in turns with the observation: while one of us gets changed and gets the binoculars, tape recorder, food and above all water, the other keeps an eye on the group. Yes, the group which in 15 minutes has split into 3 different subgroups: only male, only female and some other individuals. Who do we follow? There are only two of us. We decide to split up and observe the two most numerous subgroups. We have to be able to watch them in turns, each one for thirty minutes. Easy to say, but not to do. In effect after not even two hours there are still subgroups but not the same ones we started with. And now what? Discouragement gets the better of us and we become agitated, like the waters of the Mandrarè (the river that crosses Berenty). The wind has started to brew and one of the last storms of the humid season is on its way. We have to go back to headquarters. All in all we have collected some information, but we are a long way from our usual standards.

Incidents... on the way

15th March- the method has been fixed. We observe each animal for 15 minutes: considering that the animals of the group mix together and often we lose sight of them in the branches that are richly decorated with leaves, it isn't easy to keep them in focus. Strong from our week long experience! We easily trace the group today, they are having 'breakfast' near the bank of the Mandrarè, and we begin the observation. One of us (for anonymity reasons we will call 'Observer A') begins to focus on Pallettone: the animal is relaxing on a tree trunk at about 15 meters in height. A minute goes by, then two, five, ten and then thirteen. Just as the observation is about to finish.... Here's what happens.

Observer B: 'Come and look! Pallettone is trying to mate with Occhiali Bianchi: but isn't the mating season in April?'

Observer A: 'What? You're wrong, Pallettone is here sleeping peacefully on a tree trunk.'

Observer B: 'That's not possible, Pallettone is without a doubt here in front of me, at 3 meters distance.'

Observer A: 'So, who's sleeping here on the tree?'

Observer B: No one, that's just a knotty Tamarindo branch... there's no lemur on it!'

The situation is clear: the branch has been 'resting' for fifteen minutes. We screw up the paper which we will later throw away.

17th March - Today's the day of another interesting discovery but at the same time misleading. One of the animals that we are following, moves to another group, this puts us off our track completely, unsuspecting of the fact that there are Lemurs that 'pay visits' to family and friends, we find ourselves following a new group. It takes us thirty minutes, the same time it takes for them to come down from the top of the trees, before we realize our mistake. The cause of our error is the female Coscia Bucata, who in reality hasn't been present very much in the previous days. So, we have to find our group. But it's nearly twilight so after 'thanking' Coscia Bucata, who obviously hasn't decided in which group to be, we give up.

When research doesn't lead to Water

19th March- It may be because the days of the holy passion are coming up. It may be that Easter is on its way, but this is the day of judgement. Or so we think. The heat is unbearable. A shower is necessary. When we turn on the tap we get a surprise: the liquid, not identifiable, that comes from the tube of our wonderful bathroom, looks like coca cola or coffee without milk. When analysing the liquid, the denseness of it excludes that it could be tar or one of its non refined derivatives. After sniffing it, we exclude that it is one of the above mentioned beverages. Then we get it, if it isn't coca cola and it isn't coffee, then what is it? 'Water from the Mandrarè!' And voilà, no shower!

20th March- Autumn starts, even if here there are no half seasons. The heat is still so unbearable, a shower is even more necessary, and today after twelve hours in the forest we go to open the tap in the bathroom. Nothing. 'turn it on'. Still nothing. 'Turn it on to full blast'. Nothing, absolutely Nothing, not a drop. *Nada de nada*. There is no water today not even that of the river. Here's what happens for complaining about the colour of the water the day before. We ask Danny if and when the water will be back. He answers 'Tsy misy ... angamba miverina rampitso' in other words, 'There's no water, maybe tomorrow'. Tomorrow is Easter. Will there be a miracle? As we wait for the coming of the water

we go to sleep, smelling like roses.

Easter on edge

23rd March - It's Easter Sunday, but we can't celebrate until this evening as we are busy censuring the *sifaka* in the prickly forest. Working in this kind of forest is extremely difficult, because of the thick thorn bushes and because of the total absence of trees with large foliage, complete areas with no shade at all and 45°C all over the forest. This might be the reason why no one knows how many *sifaka* there are in the fragments of the forest away from the Berenty reserve, and more in general, in the south of Madagascar. While one of us goes into the thick forest of thorns, the other stays on the path to guide the way. So as not to get lost the lucky winner of the thorn searching shouts out 'OhOh' every now and again, and the other answers with a convenient 'AhAh'. We soon realize that others join in our voice game: those of children who are carrying water, zebu shepherds and pickers in the fields. The shouting can be heard everywhere, the result: our home made compass is confused and it takes us an hour before we find 'home'.

If we are suffering from the heat and the thorn bushes, the *sifaka* haven't got it much easier: the animals have deteriorated fur and a body weight which appears to be well under average. The groups are few and difficult to trace. The animals are very wary, because they have little contact with man (and the contact that they do have isn't a 'friendly' one). This makes counting them and identifying their gender very difficult: we don't always manage to, but we are still the first to collect sufficient information in order to carry out an accurate analysis of their level of 'health'.

Upon re entry we decide to assist a religious function held in the little church at Berenty, with songs and dances that try to match those of the *tandroy* tradition (remember? The *tandroy* are the Berenty tribe) in a most classical catholic way. A 'bouncer' keeps the situation under control: sending away children that are too vivacious and controlling the flow of people entering and exiting the church. As soon as we step into the church, we become the centre of attention. Not to our credit, but because of our emaciated faces and our washed out colour, that by contrast, stand out from the many dark faces and explosive colours of the people's clothes. The attention brought on to us means that we have to follow the service all the way through to the end.

24th March - We are on our way back through the thorny forest. It's two o'clock in the afternoon and, looking at each other we realise at exactly the same time that a very small fragment has missed our attention: we have to censure three hectares of forest in order to really complete our work. We ask the driver to stop the car. He does, but mutters something in Malagasy that we do not understand, but sounds very much like a sigh. But never mind: we take the binoculars and start to count. We only count three *sifaka* a small family. Now we can really leave Berenty, at least for now. Danny and the others have warmly said their goodbyes to us, and this time their songs were less Christmassy than the last time we were here.

And the *gidro*? We have all the precious information in our rucksacks. On the road to Fort Dauphin we find, first of all, a cluster enjoying the shade of the Baobab and later, a stream of people dancing and shouting, the roads are full. They are coming out of the fields, cars and taxis stopping us from going ahead: What is happening? The driver answers: '*Picniky! Picniky*'. Of course, it's Easter Monday. Even here they celebrate Easter Monday by having picnics, just like in Italy. And with this image we leave Madagascar in the hope of returning to it soon.

Veloma!