

**Black and white ruffed lemurs represent just one of 93 different species of lemur that cling to a precarious existence in the dwindling forests of Madagascar.**

*Text and photos by Sean Crane*

## OLD WORLD PRIMATES FACE NEW WORLD CHALLENGE

**T**here's one with blue eyes. One with orange eyes. One that dances a ballet. Another that worships the sun. There's one that grunts like a pig while yet another meows like a cat. And then there's the one that defies all logical description. It has teeth like a rodent, ears like a fox, and fingers that look like something only Tim Burton could dream up. Depending on who's doing the counting, there are more than 90 different kinds. The largest is about four feet tall — the smallest, slightly larger

than a golf ball. And although they come in every possible shape, size and color, they're all classified as lemurs. And they all live in one magical place called Madagascar.

At its best, Madagascar is a beguiling Eden of otherworldly landscapes, teeming with exotic life. At its worst, it's an environmental disaster, ranking as one of the most heavily deforested nations on

the planet. To call the situation desperate is far from an overstatement. Habitat preservation in Madagascar isn't so much an initiative as it is an epidemic. New national parks are popping up all the

time, but not nearly at the rate that forests are disappearing. Slash and burn farming, logging, and the cultivation of rice are largely to blame. To date, nearly 90% of the native forests are gone. At stake

is a mind-boggling diversity of flora and fauna. Approximately 70% of Madagascar's animals are found nowhere else on earth, including half the world's chameleons, more than 300 species of frogs, and

Nikon D200,  
Nikkor 17-35 f/2.8







Of all the lemurs, unquestionably the most celebrated is the ring-tailed lemur. It's the one that graces the covers of most tourist brochures. It's also the one most commonly found in zoos throughout the world. And, of course, it's the one that played the king in DreamWorks Animated feature film, Madagascar. Unfortunately, it's also one of the lemurs most likely to lose its habitat.

Ring-tailed lemurs live in the dry, southern portion of Madagascar. It's here that you'll find the most bizarre landscapes of all on an island full of bizarre landscapes. Conical spires of prickly vegetation spiral toward the sky. Huge baobab trees, the ones that haven't yet been chopped down, keep watch over fields of sisal — the swollen circumference of their bulbous trunks almost cartoon-like on the horizon. Isolated stands of gallery forest hug the banks of rivers that cut deep furrows through the red, sun-baked earth.

In the heart of this region sits Berenty Private Reserve, Madagascar's most famous tract of protected land. It was more than 70 years ago that a sisal farmer from France named Henri De Heaulme, set aside for protection 643 acres



63 species of geckos. Endemism is also high among birds, with 75% of the country's avian species being local only.

And, of course, there are the lemurs. If you want to see one outside of Madagascar, or the nearby Comoros Islands, you'll have to visit a zoo — an incomplete experience at best, as most lemur species can't survive in captivity. Not surprisingly, Madagascar is considered by many experts to be the world's top priority for nature conservation. Visit the island and meet a few of its furry residents, and you're sure to share the concern.

Lemurs belong to the group of primates known as prosimians, or pre-monkeys. How they got to Madagascar in the first place is uncertain, although it is commonly believed that they floated over on large clumps of land after Madagascar separated from mainland Africa some 160 million years ago. Monkeys, apes, and other primates eventually displaced the lemurs that stayed behind, while the seafaring pioneers thrived in their new home. Over time they would evolve, predator-free for the most part, into the many diverse species that exist today.

**ABOVE LEFT:** *Diadem sifaka, Perinet — with ruby eyes and black/buff coat, one of the most striking lemurs of all. LEFT: Golden brown mouse lemur, Ankarafantsika National Park — a small, nocturnal lemur listed as critically endangered.*

**ABOVE:** *Verreaux's sifaka, Berenty Private Reserve — doing the dance. RIGHT: Indri indri, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park — the most distinctive call in the forest.*

DIADEMED SIFAKA: NIKON D200, Nikkor 17-35, SB-800 Flash. MOUSE LEMUR: Nikon D200, Nikkor 80-200 f/2.8. VERREAUX'S SIFAKA: Nikon D200, Nikkor 80-200 f/2.8. INDRI: Nikon D200, Nikkor 80-200 f/2.8.





of forest along the Mandrare River. Ever since, visitors have delighted in the morning ritual of the ring-tailed lemurs.

Just after sunrise, the lemurs creep from the forest and into the open fields of copper-colored sand that surround the tourist bungalows. Upon finding a suitable spot in the

sun, they sit back, arms extended, eyes closed, and soak up the rays. It's hard not to smile watching these charming primates, with their inquisitive faces and long ringed tails, as they appear to worship the great ball of fire in the sky. Considering that most lemurs are arboreal and spend most of their time in trees, it's a rare treat to see these ground lov-

ers at Berenty.

Ring-tails, however, aren't Berenty's only lemurs famous for their antics on the ground. Even more amusing are Verreaux's sifakas. Sifakas are a genus of lemur consisting of a handful of species distributed throughout Madagascar. Coloration varies from species to

***BELOW: Ring-tailed lemur, Berenty Private Reserve — morning time is sun bathing time for Madagascar's most celebrated lemurs. RIGHT: Brown mouse lemur, Nosy Mangabe — about half of all lemurs are nocturnal and they tend to be smaller than their diurnal counterparts.***

RING TAIL: Nikon D200, Nikkor 80-200 f/2.8.

MOUSE LEMUR: Nikon D200, Nikkor 80-200 f/2.8.



species, but all sifakas are medium-sized, diurnal and have a round, hairless black face. The Verreaux's sifaka has a white head and body that contrasts sharply with the black face and gives the appearance of a living stuffed animal. The “awww” factor is in full effect when watching a Verreaux's sifaka resting in the fork of a mandarin tree's branches — the lemur's proportionately short arms hugging the trunk in a seemingly heartfelt embrace.

Albeit not quite as bold as the ring-tailed lemurs at Berenty, the sifakas are also well habituated to people. They aren't quite as sure of themselves on the ground, however, preferring to use terra firma solely as a means of getting from one group of trees to another. But it's these brief moments away from trees that are so memorable. The best way to describe it is ballet. The sifakas don't so much jump, or run, or shuffle when on the ground, it's much more elegant than that. Arms raised high in the air, legs spread to shoulder width, body positioned sideways to the direction of movement, they hop along as if performing a well choreographed dance routine.

Rounding out Berenty's lineup of prosimians is the







**LEFT:** Red-fronted brown lemurs, Perinet — they were recognized as a unique species in 2001 when they split from the similar common brown lemur. **BELOW TOP:** Coquerel's sifaka lemurs, Ankarafantsika National Park — a mother and baby high in the canopy of the dry western forests. **BELOW BOTTOM:** Milne Edwards' sportive lemur, Ankarafantsika National Park — primarily a nocturnal lemur, taking a quick look around in the late afternoon.

RED-FRONTED: Nikon D200, Nikkor 17-35 f/2.8. COQUEREL'S: Nikon D200, Nikon 600 f/5.6. MILNE: Nikon D200, Nikkor 80-200 f/2.8.



red-fronted brown lemur (which was imported from other parts of the country back in 1975) and the two species of nocturnal lemur, the grey mouse lemur and the white-footed sportive lemur.

About half of all lemurs in Madagascar are nocturnal. On average they tend to be smaller than their daytime relatives. The smallest, the pygmy mouse lemur, which lives in the dry forests of Madagascar's west coast, can fit comfortably in the palm of your hand. The largest of the nocturnal lemurs is the aye-aye, one of the strangest creatures on the planet. It can grow to

about one and a half feet long (three feet including the tail) and weigh about six pounds. It took scientist more than a hundred years to even classify the aye-aye as a primate, thinking at first that it must be a rodent with its squirrel like tail and raccoon-shaped face. The most distinguishing characteristic of the aye-aye, however, is its bony, elongated middle finger, which is used to dig grubs from beneath the bark of trees. The aye-aye's spooky appearance has led to its status as an ill omen among many of Madagascar's superstitious villagers.

A half-day drive east of Mada-

gascar's capital, Antananarivo, is the country's most visited national park, Andasibe-Mantadia. The main attraction here is the largest of all lemurs, the indri indri, which can grow to 4 feet tall and weigh in at 29 pounds. Picture a large black and white teddy bear swinging effortlessly through the forest and you'll have a good idea of what it's like to witness an indri. But it's not the size of the indri's body that defines its character, but rather the enormity of its voice. Every day groups of indri partake in a wailing chorus of song — eerie cries that can be heard for great distances and are believed to communicate everything from ter-

ritorial declaration to reproductive worthiness. It's this unique howl that quite simply makes an indri an indri — much like the sun bathing that makes a ring-tail a ring-tail; and the ballet that defines the Verreaux's sifaka; the striking iris that characterizes the blue-eyed black lemur; the middle finger that is unique to only the aye-aye; and all the other strangely wonderful adaptations that make each lemur distinctly different from the next — and make Madagascar one of the world's most truly fascinating destinations.

*For more of Sean Crane's wildlife photography, go to [www.seancrane.com](http://www.seancrane.com).*