

RANOMAFANA NATIONAL PARK

# IN THE LAND OF LEMURS

Easily reached and explored, one of Madagascar's most spectacular National Parks features spectacular panoramas and a staggering variety of endemic prosimians, reptiles and amphibians

*A virgin rainforest  
crisscrossed by streams, waterfalls  
and a main roaring river*



Namorona river waterfalls and rapids, Ranomafana National Park, Madagascar. On the opening spread, Milne-Edwards Sifaka *Propithecus edwardsi*.

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As we have already written in the past (see *Anima Mundi - Adventures in Wildlife Photography* issues 13, 14, 15 and 16), the island of Madagascar is one of those literally stupefying destinations which the passionate naturalist and wildlife photographer cannot afford to miss visiting at the very least once in life. Its stunning biodiversity, the unique percentage of fascinating endemisms,

the beauty of its landscapes and - last but not least - the dazzling numbers and variety of wildlife one can easily observe inside its protected areas and National Parks (and even outside of them, very often) make Madagascar one of those places the lovers of nature dream about. Sadly, much of

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Comet Moth  
*Argema mittrei*,  
adult male.



Red-fronted  
Brown Lemur  
*Eulemur rufus*.



the original wilderness of the Red Island and its inhabitants are already gone, and what is left is seriously threatened by unchecked logging, subsistence poaching and criminal wildlife trafficking (especially of endemic geckoes, tortoises and chameleons), so the future of the natural heritage of Madagascar - already much reduced - is seriously in doubt at the moment. In any case, so varied are its habitats and consequently the species inhabiting them, that attempting to soak them in during a single visit is a simply hopeless endeavour - the best one can

do is first to get a general taste of it during a cross-country expedition, and then come back to concentrate on some specific locations of particular interest. One of these certainly is Ranomafana National Park, which we had the opportunity to explore at leisure thanks to our friends of **TanalaHorizon**, a highly specialized, very experienced German tour agency which offers custom-tailored trips to Madagascar. Ranomafana (which means "hot water" in Malagasy) is without a doubt one of the most spectacular National Parks of Madagascar. Due to its good access

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■ Blue-legged Chameleon *Calumma crypticum*.

*A living jewel encrusted in precious gems*





■ *Satanic Leaf-Tailed Gecko*  
*Uroplatus phantasticus*,  
adult male.  
*Ranomafana* is  
one of the best  
locations in  
Madagascar to  
observe this  
unique and very  
striking species.

and suitable location near the RN7, its great biodiversity (an amazing total of 12 lemur species are found here) and its developed infrastructures, it has become one of the most visited places of the island. Established in 1991, it expands over a rugged, steep, mountainous terrain of 415 km<sup>2</sup>, totally covered by dense wet primary and secondary forest, at altitudes varying between 800m and 1.200m. In 1986 the critically endangered Golden bamboo lemur was discovered here by Dr. Patricia Wright, and this luckily pushed the government to create a National Park. Aside from the Golden bamboo lemur, visitors can also encounter the Eastern woolly lemur, the Red bellied lemur, the Eastern grey bamboo lemur, the Greater bamboo lemur, the Red-fronted brown lemur, the Black-and-white ruffed lemur, plus the Milne-Edward's sifaka, the Small-toothed sportive lemur, the Greater dwarf lemur, the Brown mouse lemur and - with much luck - the very rare Aye-aye. It can be very confusing, and one certainly needs a specialist guide to successfully differentiate among several of these species! Other mammals inhabiting the area include 7 species of tenrecs, 8 of bats and 6 carnivores, such as the Malagasy striped civet and some mongooses. Birds are also quite numerous in Ranomafana. There are at least 115 species catalogued (30 are

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Yellow-spotted Tree Frog  
Heterixalus alboguttatus.



Left, Red-bellied Lemur *Eulemur rubriventer*; top right, Greater Bamboo Lemur *Hapalemur simus*; bottom right, Red-bellied Lemur *Eulemur rubriventer*.







Cryptic ground █  
Mantella frog  
*Gephyromantis*  
*sculpturatus*.

local endemics, exclusively restricted to this part of Madagascar), among them the Henst's goshawk, Rufous-headed ground-roller, Velvet asity, and the threatened Crested ibis. The enormous amount of wildlife one can hope to observe in Ranomafana is more or less completed by 62 species of reptiles (several chameleons, a few snakes and the fascinating Satanic leaf-tailed geckos are rather easily observed here, especially at night), 98 frogs, 90 butterflies, 350 spiders and several fishes and crayfishes. As in another spectacular National Park of Madagascar, the legendary Andasibe-Mantadia, most reptiles and frogs are best seen during night walks, when chameleons in particular initially reflect white in the beam of a torch. Among the plants which grow in these rain forests, many are used by the Tanala and the Betsileo for medical purposes. There are precious wood and palm trees, many orchids and carnivorous plants. In addition to its densely forested hills, the protected area is characterised by numerous small streams, which plummet down to the beautiful Namorona River, which bisects the park and produces electricity for the surrounding areas at the hydroelectric power station of Ranomafana.

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Red Giant Spider  
 Megaloremnius leo,  
 family Sparassidae,  
 preying on cricket.



Left, Golden Bamboo Lemur *Hapalemur aureus*, one of the world's most endangered mammals with less than 1,000 individuals surviving in the wild. Right, Red-fronted Brown Lemur *Eulemur rufus*.



*Murmuring brooks  
and enchanted waterfalls*

An enchanting  corner of the Ranomafana rainforest.



Far left, Four-spotted Day Gecko *Phelsuma quadriocellata*. Left, Yellow-spotted Tree Frog *Heterixalus alboguttatus*.

However, beware! The climate is warm and very humid all year long, and even if the best months to visit Ranomafana go from May to November, and although the dry season extends from April to December, the North East and Central East regions of Madagascar have in fact no months (or even weeks) that go completely without rain. This basically means that 1) the thick, lush, pristine and quite impenetrable rainforest of Ranomafana will make wildlife photography a very tricky business indeed, as light levels beneath the canopy can be abysmally low, and 2) the more or less daily torrential downpours will make hiking often uncomfortable, as most trails can be steep and can rapidly turn slippery and muddy. Ranomafana National Park is basically a very deep valley - some would even call it a gorge - with steep walls cloaked in rainforest and thick bamboo groves, falling precipitously to the roaring, boulder-strewn river below. Waterfalls large and small - some quite scenic and truly exquisite in beauty - are everywhere. The humidity of this primeval environment is spectacularly high, rich in rainfall and water spray, and much of the terrain never gets in the sun long enough to dry up. We were incredibly lucky during our stay - we had just a couple of downpours in ten days - but according to our local guide we were the first ever to experience that, as in Ranomafana it usually rains every single day of the year.

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*Yellow-striped Tree frog Heterixalus betsileo.*



Will's Chameleon or    
Canopy Chameleon *Furcifer*  
*willsii*, adult male.



The fast-running Namorona river is rich in waterfalls and rapids.



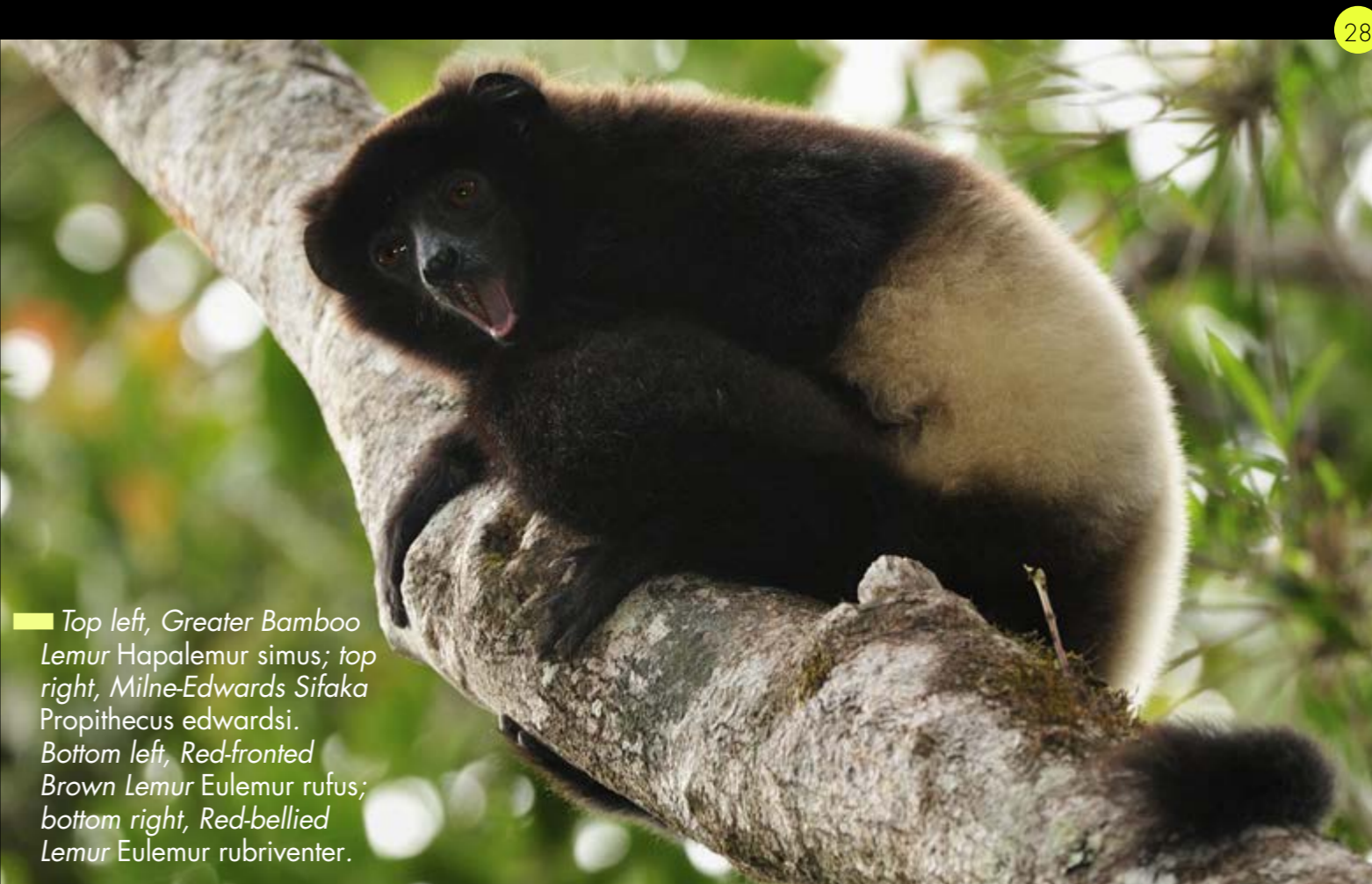
## EXPLORING RANOMAFANA

As in most National Parks of Madagascar, it is always highly advisable to make good use of a local naturalist guide - they usually are extremely experienced and quite enthusiastic naturalists, offering their services for very reasonable fees, and it is a wonderful thing to be able to support them and the local economy. Never forget that most of Madagascar is desperately poor, and that every penny or cent is important here - especially to those working in conservation. It takes a lot of guts and sincere passion to follow this way of life here, where many factors - from social to political or even criminal - conspire in the shadows against nature conservation and the protection of nature, and the bare minimum overseas visitors can and should do is according to the local naturalist guides the respect they deserve. According to available literature, there are at least five different circuits in order to explore the Park. Keep in mind that the shortest treks are also the most popular ones and trails can get quite crowded, especially during the high season. Some lemur species survive here in the smallest of numbers, occupying grotesquely small patches of bamboo groves or forest, and that is where most visitors will congregate. The longer treks are much quieter and arguably more rewarding from a wildlife watching point of view - what follows is a small selection of the trails which most visitors will do, from

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■ Parson's chameleon  
*Calumma parsonii*,  
found in an orchard near  
Ranomafana village.



■ Top left, Greater Bamboo Lemur *Hapalemur simus*; top right, Milne-Edwards Sifaka *Propithecus edwardsi*.  
 Bottom left, Red-fronted Brown Lemur *Eulemur rufus*; bottom right, Red-bellied Lemur *Eulemur rubriventer*.



Yellow-spotted Tree Frog ■  
Heterixalus alboguttatus.  
This is an extremely variable  
and equally common species  
in Ranomafana.



the shortest to the longest.

Varibolomena circuit: easy trek of 4 hours, a good chance to spot bamboo lemurs in the secondary forest passing by a very scenic waterfall.

Sahamalaotra circuit: a 10 km trek through the forest looking for lemurs and birds.

Vohiparara circuit: 2 days trek across the National Park (20 km up and down) spotting lemurs, birds and other animals and visiting a sacred lake.

Varijatsy circuit: 1 or 2 days trek (15 km of rough path) across the primary forest looking for lemurs and birds and passing by a waterfall and a natural pool where one can take a bath.

Soarano circuit: 2 or 3 days hard trek (at least 20 km) through the primary forest discovering plants while looking for lemurs and other animals.

However, there are plenty of other possibilities, and the good thing is that all itineraries can be easily tailored according to one's specific needs and interests by the private guide - so no need to worry about that. Tell him or her what you want to see and how long you are willing to walk, and you'll start from there - they can be very accomodating, and know the forest well. Most of our day treks started very early in the morning - occasionally taking a light packed lunch with us -

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*Parson's chameleon Calumma parsonii, near Ranomafana village.*




■ Left, Leaf or Dwarf Chameleon *Brookesia superciliaris*; center, Short-horned Chameleon *Calumma brevicorne*, juvenile asleep on branch; right, Satanic Leaf-Tailed Gecko *Uroplatus phantasticus*, adult female, diurnal livery.





■ Green-eared  
Chameleon  
*Calumma malthe*,  
adult female.



Left,  a typically cloudy sky over the Namorona river rapids; right, Antonella is astonished by the enchanted glamour of the Ranomafana rainforest.



and ended, after a lot of walking up and down the valley slopes, in early or mid-afternoon, when light levels usually get too low for wildlife photography and the risk of rain increases. One word of advice about night walks, which are an absolute must and which can be exceptionally productive in Ranomafana (particularly for chameleons and Satanic leaf-tailed geckoes): in agreement with our guide, we opted to stick to the sides of the Route National - which crosses the Park and Ranomafana village itself - to maximize chances of sightings and to make photography easier. One can leisurely walk on tarmac and look at the steep banks thickly covered in vegetation without risking to twist an ankle or miss a good subject in the impenetrable vegetation of the Park itself. The only downside of this is that once in a while a huge, noisy, loaded truck will drive by at full speed, and that there have been armed robberies in the deep of night, with foreign visitors being robbed of their expensive cameras at gunpoint - so it is better always to be with a local guide and above all to go back after a couple of hours.

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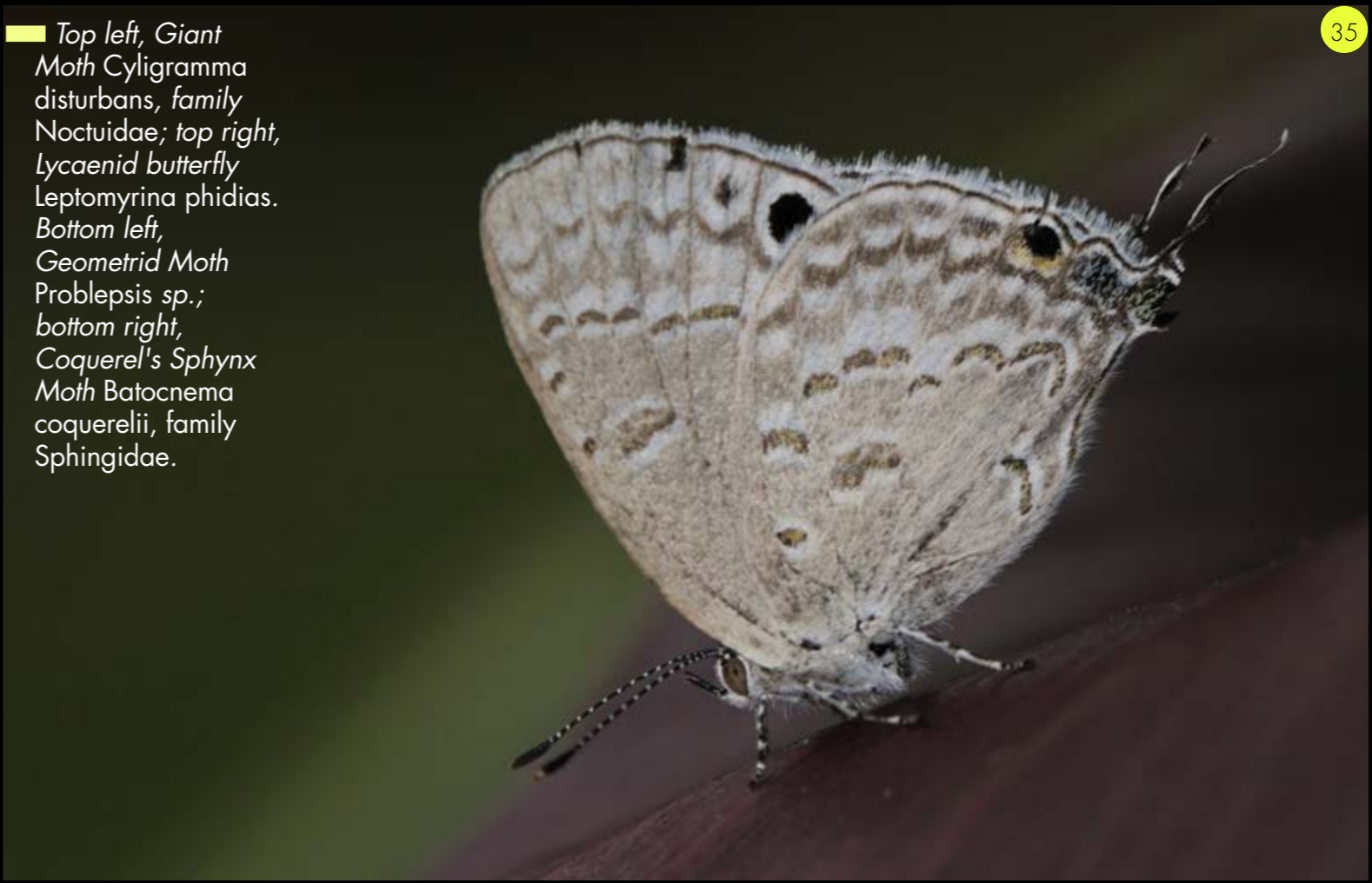


*Tree frog* ■  
*Plethodontohyla*  
*inguinalis*, one of the  
 world's largest  
 microhylids.





Top left, Giant Moth *Cyligramma disturbans*, family Noctuidae; top right, Lycaenid butterfly *Leptomyrina phidias*. Bottom left, Geometrid Moth *Problepsis* sp.; bottom right, Coquerel's Sphinx Moth *Batocnema coquerelii*, family Sphingidae.



*A pristine landscape  
arrested in time*

The Namorona  
river rapids seen  
from a vantage point  
from the steep slopes  
of the Ranomafana  
valley.



Left, Lined Day Gecko Phelsuma lineata, Ranomafana village; center, Blue-legged Chameleon Calumma crypticum; right, Four-spotted Day Gecko Phelsuma quadriocellata.





Red-fronted  
Brown Lemur  
*Eulemur rufus*.

Left, Leaf or Dwarf  
Chameleon  
*Brookesia  
superciliaris*; right,  
Red-bellied Lemur  
*Eulemur rubriventer*.



## GETTING THERE AND BACK AGAIN

Ranomafana National Park is very easy to access by car. It lies about 60 km north from Fianarantsoa, and 400 km south from the capital Antananarivo. There are two tarred roads which actually cross the Park: the RN25 from Ambohimaso and the RN45 from Alakamisy. Both of them are practicable all year around, although it can take longer during the rainy season. There is also a good taxi-brousse connection to Ranomafana village from Antananarivo and from Fianarantsoa. The entry costs Ar 25,000 for one day visit and Ar 37,000 for two days. The fees for the circuits depend on the number of participants and the duration of the trek. Average is 50,000 to 80,000 Ar a day for one to five people. There are plenty of comfortable - even relatively luxurious by Malagasy standards - small hotels and little restaurants in - or very close - to Ranomafana village. One word of caution to the traveller, again - the last third of the Route National from Tana to Ranomafana is exceptionally twisting and brimming with hairpin bends, and those prone to car and motion sickness are well advised to tackle this in advance with a couple of tablets! ●





Blue-legged ■  
Chameleon *Calumma*  
*crypticum*.



■ Red Giant Spider  
*Megaloremnius leo*, family Sparassidae, feeding at night on its unlucky cricket prey.



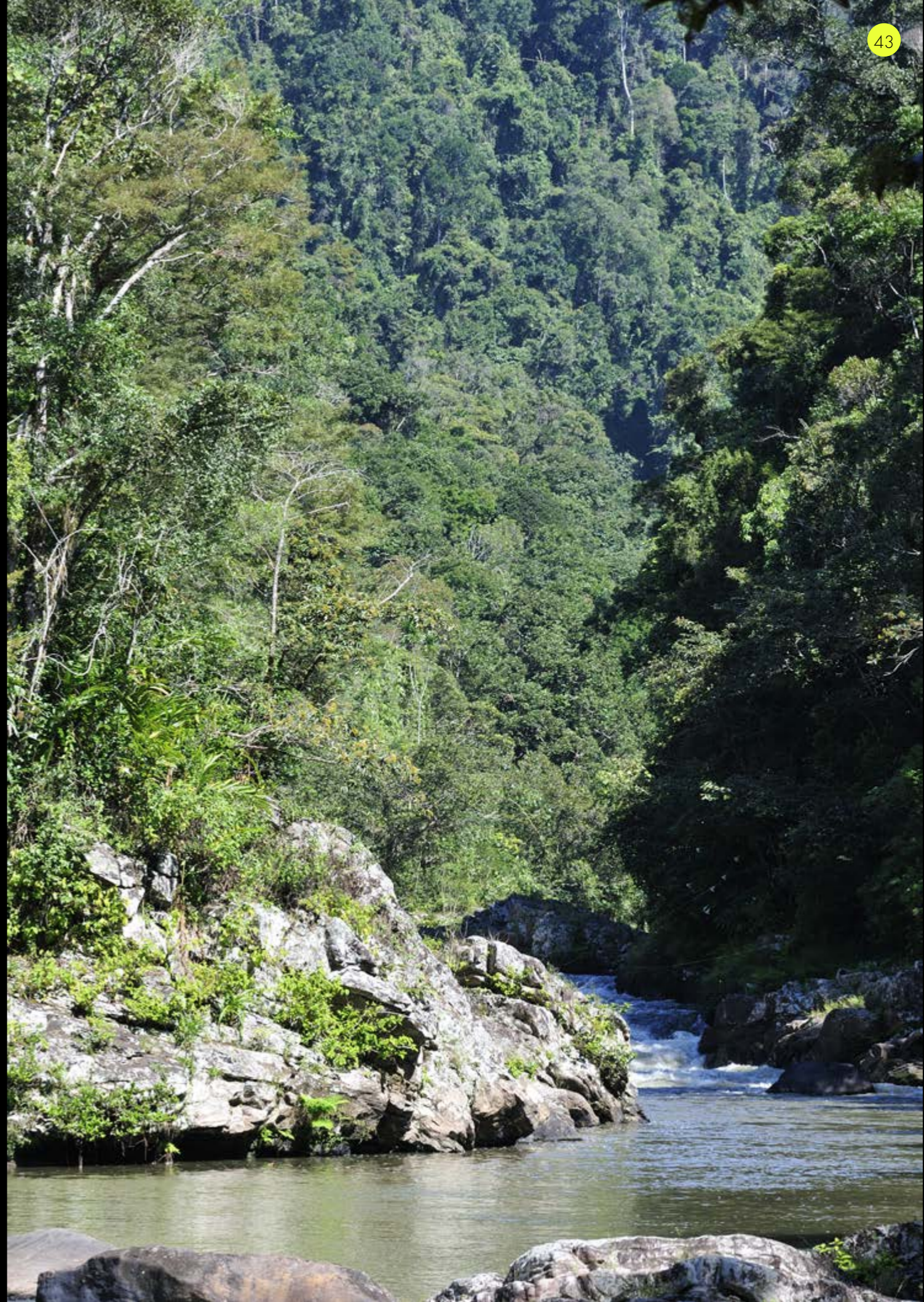
Left, O'Shaughnessy's Chameleon *Calumma oshaughnessyi*, female; right, O'Shaughnessy's Chameleon *Calumma oshaughnessyi*, male.







Left, Red-fronted Brown Lemur *Eulemur rufus*; right, the steep, jungle-clad slopes of the Namorona river gorge.



*The Ranomafana  
night is alive with  
amazing creatures*

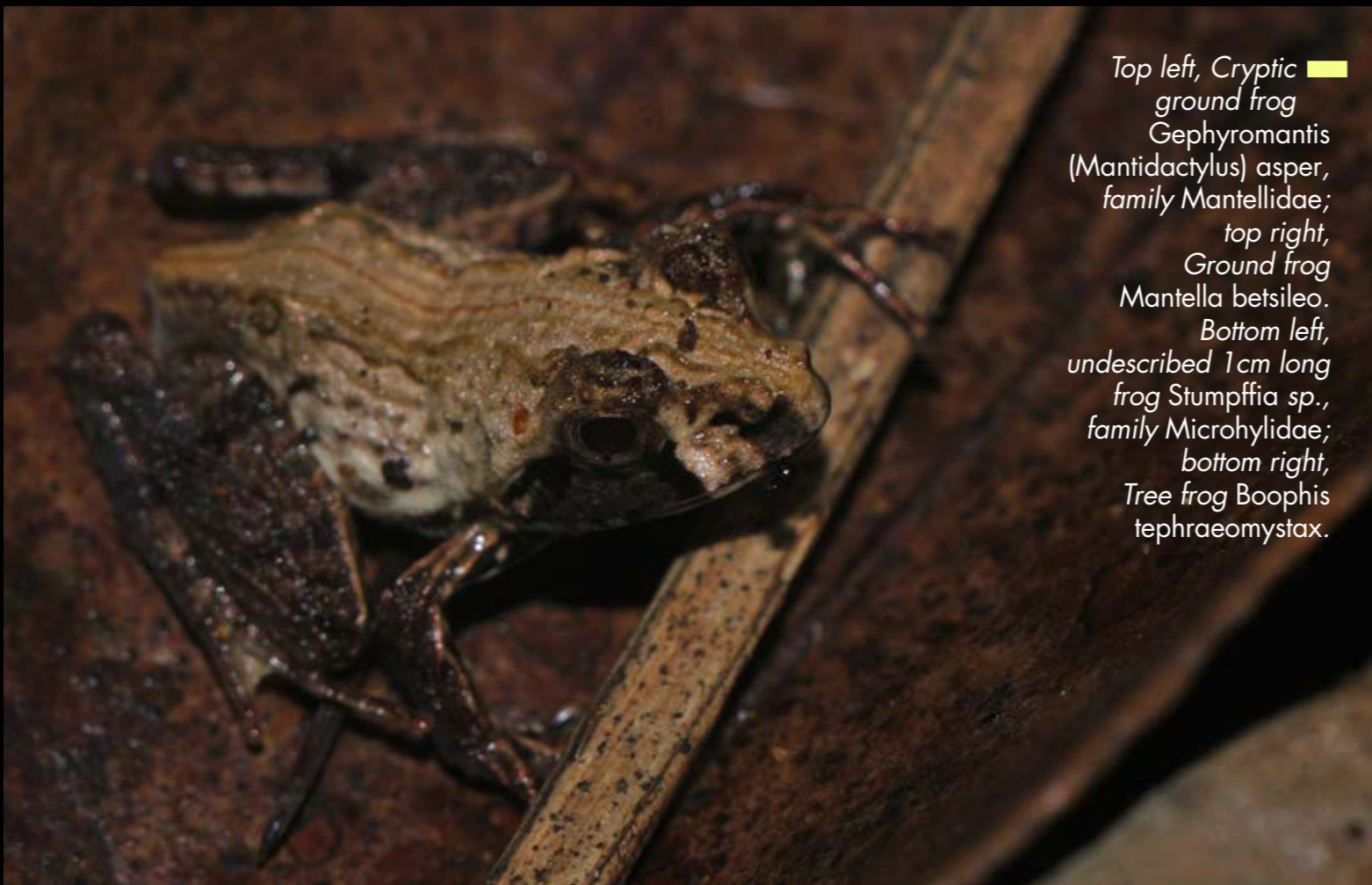


■ Blue-legged  
Chameleon  
*Calumma  
crypticum*,  
head detail.



■ Top left, Big-nosed Chameleon *Calumna nasutum*, male; top right, Will's Chameleon or Canopy Chameleon *Furcifer willsii*, adult male. Bottom left, Leaf or Dwarf Chameleon *Brookesia superciliaris*; bottom right, Short-horned Chameleon *Calumna brevicorne*, juvenile.





Top left, Cryptic ground frog *Gephyromantis (Mantidactylus) asper*, family Mantellidae; top right, Ground frog *Mantella betsileo*. Bottom left, undescribed 1cm long frog *Stumpffia* sp., family Microhylidae; bottom right, Tree frog *Boophis tephraeomystax*.





Many beautiful  waterfalls are found in the rainforest of Ranomafana.



■ Far left, Satanis Leaf-Tailed Gecko *Uroplatus phantasticus*, adult female; center, Four-spotted Day Gecko *Phelsuma quadriocellata*; right, Perinet Chameleon or Side-striped Cameleon *Calumma gastrotaenia*, female.



Left, Milne-Edwards Sifaka *Propithecus edwardsi*; right, Red-bellied Lemur *Eulemur rubriventer*.





■ Left, Bark Spider *Caerostris* sp., pair with large female and smaller male; center, Thorn Spider *Gasteracantha* sp.; right, Golden Silk Orb-Weaver *Nephila madagascariensis*.







■ The rural landscape surrounding Ranomafana shows the amount of deforestation and farming currently threatening all protected areas in Madagascar.