

FPS Tours to Madagascar and the Mascarenes

RING-TAILED LEMUR
Lemur cotta at Berenty,
Madagascar,
photographed by
Heather Angel on the
first FPS Tour



Last year for the first time two FPS tours with an identical itinerary were successfully achieved within one year. A party of seventeen went to Madagascar and the Mascarenes (Mauritius, Réunion and Rodrigues) in April, and another of thirteen in November. Both parties, the first led by Dr James Juvik and the second by Sir Hugh Elliott, succeeded in landing on Round Island (not by any means a certainty), the special interest of which for conservationists is described in the article in this *Oryx* by David Bullock, and both succeeded in seeing a splendid range of Madagascar's lemurs and the rare birds on Mauritius, as well as bats, many bird species, reptiles (including some of the endemics on Round Island), orchids, and strange and interesting plants such as the cactiform *Didiera*. Lemurs seen by both parties included the ring-tailed, Verreaux's sifaka and, largest and most impressive of all, the indri; some persistent observers in the second party went after nocturnal species which brought their number of species seen to nine or ten out of the 20 or so that survive in Madagascar. Tamest of all were the black lemurs of Nossi Kamba, which, writes Sir Hugh Elliott 'were topped up by an epicurean picnic on the sandy coral-fringed beach of that blissful isle'. They also saw about a quarter of Madagascar's 250 bird species of which, says Sir Hugh, 'the most exciting was perhaps the white-browed owl *Ninox supercilians*, since it lived outside our bungalows and was tolerant of torch-powered searchlights'.

On Réunion, writes Sir Hugh, 'we were fortunate to break new ground,

under the auspices of the forest department, by a pre-dawn swoop straight up the mountain behind the city of St Denis, the first 3000 feet by car, the next 2500, to the summit plateau, on foot. Not knowing in the least what to expect, we had provided for only half the party, but in fact the path was so well marked and the steeper sections so intermittent and well-engineered that anyone taking his time could manage it; given good weather the trip should be a 'must' for all future FPS tours. In the attractive sample of indigenous vegetation traversed by the path, we saw all the endemic bird species except the harrier and the 'tuit-tuit', *alias* euisenier or cuckoo-shrike (though we may have heard it).

The first party talked to M. Gruchet, Director of the Natural History Museum in St Denis, who is an ardent champion of conservation in the island, and heard of their many problems.

In Mauritius the Black River Gorges, an incipient national park, provided exciting bird watching, although not everybody saw the highly endangered Mauritius kestrel and pink pigeon – the first party was more successful here. For both parties the trip to Round Island was a highlight of the tour, although for the second it provided first-hand experience of wanton destruction by poachers: Sir Hugh writes, 'Exploitation of seabird colonies, if limited by terrain and tradition or, alternatively, properly controlled and monitored, may have little adverse effect on populations, but the heap of severed heads, the single surviving chick, and paucity of adults of the red-tailed tropic bird certainly shook our confidence that Round Island can and will remain one of the unique attractions of Mauritius'.*

The last island visited was Rodrigues, only 15 km long, and geographically the oldest of the Mascarenes. 'From the air the first views of the island, surrounded by a fringing reef system, are spectacular', writes Dr Juvik. 'But appreciation is tempered by the knowledge that centuries of human misuse have virtually destroyed the island's entire endemic wildlife . . . We were unfortunately about 200 years too late!' The giant land tortoises, the flightless solitaire and many others are all extinct; three endemics survive: two small birds – a yellow fody *Foudia flavicans* and a brush-warbler *Bebrornis rodericana*, and a fruit bat *Pteropus rodericensis*, all seen by both parties. The second party on its last day, at the start of the journey to London, was fortunate in that 'wind and tide were right for getting to the first of the seabird reef reserves under sail with the aid of an outboard motor, and then back to the little airport. The clamour and beauty of fairy terns were a good send-off for our homecoming'.

The FPS is immensely grateful to all those who helped to make these tours so successful, not least Mrs Hedda Lyons of Twickenham Travel who organised them. Among those we wish to thank are Messrs Michel Rakotonarina and de Heulme in Madagascar, Soulage in Réunion, Owadally and McKelvey in Mauritius, Bosquet and Marie in Rodrigues. We were no less indebted to the responsible authorities who so kindly arranged things – M. Georges Randrianasolo, head of the Zoological Research centre in Tananarive, M. J.-M. Miguet, Regional Director of the Forest Department at St Denis, and his deputy M. Dupuy, Mr Owadally again, in his capacity as Conservator of Forests of Mauritius, and Mr N. Heseltine, the Resident Commissioner at Port Mathurin, mini-capital of Rodrigues.

* Plans are now being discussed for protecting Round Island from poachers.—*Editor*