

A Land Like No Other MADAGASCAR!

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JULIE LARSEN MAHER

WE SET OUT on a hike at dusk, but night in the tropics descends quickly, like a dropped curtain. It is soon dark. I hear things, but cannot see what creatures are making the noises. Slick rocks and twisting roots cover the steep trail. Trenches rutted out by feral African hogs in their quest for tubers—their favorite food—make the footing even more treacherous.

We are hiking on Nosy Mangabe, a 1,200-acre island in Antongil Bay along the northeast coast of Madagascar. The island is part of Masoala National Park, Madagascar's largest protected area. WCS helped establish this park in 1997 and has managed it since 1999. As a photographer, my role on this trip is to document the efforts to help preserve the island's fascinating landscape and unusual flora and fauna.

As we crawl over the wet ground, WCS biologists Herilala Randriamahazo (below) and David Meyers call to me every few minutes, "Julie, over here, I have something for you to photograph!" Herilala uses a powerful flashlight to check every leaf and branch for small animals. He points out a leaf-tailed gecko camouflaged against a tree trunk (left), which keeps one eye swiveled on us at all times. Small frogs hide in the leaf litter. Insects, such as the green lynx spider (opposite, top), resemble the shapes and colors of their chosen perches.

We're hoping to find lemurs, signature animals of Madagascar, and soon we do: a female white-fronted brown lemur who stares back at us from a branch (far right). It is thought that lemurs play an important role in seed dispersal, and that where they have disappeared, the forest is not long able to regenerate.



Lemurs are primitive members of the primate order, close relatives of monkeys, apes . . . and us.

Madagascar began drifting away from the African continent between 100 and 200 million years ago; it now lies 250 miles off Africa's east coast. Life evolved here in relative isolation, and now, from lichens to lemurs, practically everything that inhabits the island—the world's fourth largest—can be found no where else on Earth. It's a priceless legacy. The island represents 0.4 percent of the world's land area, but contains more than 2 percent of its terrestrial species. It is a hotspot of biodiversity. But since the island was settled 1,500 or so years ago, the environment has deteriorated. Eighty percent of its forests are gone, slashed and burned to plant crops and to obtain firewood and charcoal for cooking, and many of its wild inhabitants have vanished.

In 2003, Madagascar President Marc Ravalomanana pledged to triple the size of the country's protected areas. WCS enthusiastically supports this bold vision, and is working with the Forestry Department to set up a protected area in the Makira plateau, connecting Masoala to the remnant forests of eastern Madagascar.

Masoala National Park also includes three marine areas designed to protect the peninsula's coral reefs. In addition, the Bay of





Antongil, formed by the peninsula, is the largest sheltered bay in Madagascar and the most significant breeding and calving grounds for humpback whales in the entire Indian Ocean.

Our adventure continues as our group boards small boats (below) and motors out into the bay with WCS researcher Howard Rosenbaum, who heads the Cetacean Research and Conservation Program (CRCP), a joint project of WCS and the American Museum of Natural History. The CRCP team is censusing humpback whales and studying their breeding behavior. Rosenbaum also helps train local marine biologists, such as Norbert Andrianarivelo (left, top, recording data at the WCS whale research station at Antongil Bay).

It's July, breeding season, and the waters are literally churning with whales. The humpback group we follow doesn't breach often, but we see lots of tail flukes (middle) and flipper slaps as they spin and spout close to our boats. I have a new appreciation for our whale scientists; taking pictures from a rocking boat while wearing a bulky life vest is an acquired skill.

The next day, we board boats to reach the rain forest of Masoala Peninsula (right, top). In terms of wildlife diversity, Masoala is one of the most important places in Madagascar, if not the world. James MacKinnon and other WCS biologists are monitoring the treasures here, including 10 of the 28 living species of lemurs.

We are hoping to see the rare red-ruffed lemur. The search requires climbing a steep hill and fording small streams. Along the way, we see a Parson's chameleon (right); half the world's chameleon species call Madagascar home. It begins to rain and Helen Crowley, WCS program director for Madagascar, frees a natural umbrella—a six-foot-long leaf from a nearby banana plant (right)—and pulls it over us for shelter. Suddenly, we hear loud calls reverberating in the lemurs' treetop home. We spot some movement three stories above us. I point my camera straight up into the canopy and get a shot of a red-ruffed (opposite, far right).

By the end of the 10-day trip, I have taken more than 2,000 photos. WCS graphic designers will use them as they craft wildlife habitats in the *Madagascar!* exhibit at the Bronx Zoo, scheduled to open in 2006. The exhibit and its marvelous animals will bring the island of Madagascar alive to millions of zoo visitors, promote WCS work in Madagascar, and stimulate awareness of the struggles the Malagasy people face to save their wild treasures.

Julie Larsen Maher is creative director for Wildlife Conservation.

