

GAMBEL'S TALES

HELMET VANGA BY JERRY THEIS

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When my good friend John and I planned our October 2019 trip to Madagascar with Rockjumper Birding Tours, I added a day to the end of the scheduled trip in an attempt to see the iconic Helmet Vanga (a bird in its own genus (*Euryceros*) whose species name *prevostii* commemorates the French artist Florent Prevost). The Helmet Vanga is restricted to lowland and lower montane rain forests of north-east Madagascar and our tour did not include that upper region of the island. This vanga is rather scarce and is absent from easily accessed degraded areas and plantations. Antananarivo is the capitol city where we were based, and I had hired a local guide to take us as far north of the capitol city as possible in one day. I had hoped to get to the famous Ankarafantsika N.P. but was told, due to road conditions and time constraints, that we could only get as far north as Ambohitantely S.R. (don't you just love the names of their locales).

There are 15 genera and 21 vanga species, all restricted to Madagascar and (one sp.) Comoros. Their closest relatives are six shrike-like genera found in Africa (mainly helmet shrikes and shrike-flycatchers). These largely arboreal birds are primarily insectivorous but several also take small vertebrates and fruit. Considering they are descended from a single ancestor, the vangas are an unbelievably diverse group. Most are shrike-like robust birds with a stout hooked bill, but other bill shapes include thin and warbler-like, broad, and flycatcher-like, sickle-shaped, and the colorful, swollen casque of the Helmet Vanga (its outrageous bill sets it apart from all

other birds). The Helmet Vanga is a large blue-black bird with rufous on the wings, back and tail, whose bill is long, very deep, and laterally compressed, bright blue with a black tip. It is a sit and wait predator, sallying or sally-gleaning from a perch, pursuing large insects as well as snails, lizards, spiders, frogs, and crabs. The Helmet Vanga is usually found as a solitary individual or in family groups, but sometimes occurs in mixed company of other large vangas and may be seen following large terrestrial birds such as Couas.

As luck would have it, a local resident (whom we gladly welcomed aboard our 4-wheel drive jeep) had found a Helmet Vanga nest within range of our tour itinerary. We drove for hours over exceedingly rough roads, then hiked for several hours up and down a steep muddy trail to the nest site. Unfortunately, the bird was not at the nest but, fortunately, it was spotted along the trail by our excited guide. We also saw a second individual (the sexes are alike), necessitating a second round of drinks at dinner that night! Because the Helmet Vanga is restricted to undisturbed humid rain forest and this habitat is increasingly being cleared for agriculture and forestry, this species is considered threatened, and its population is largely becoming fragmented.

Now that John and I had that extra day at the end of the tour, we concentrated our efforts on the Madagascar Harrier, more reliably seen at Ambohitantely S.R. than anywhere else on the island. After an adventurous ride, we laid our eyes on a harrier floating over the hilly palm tree-laden landscape, a fitting end to the tour.

The word “vanga” has many meanings worldwide, including a ship, a type of axe, a spade with crossbars, and, most importantly, a group of passerine birds of Madagascar. The only person with that moniker was Baba Vanga, known as the “Nostradamus of the Balkans,” a blind mystic from Macedonia who died in

1996. It was reported that she had predicted prior to her death that 2021 would be the year that a cure for cancer is found and that corona virus would be “all over us!” Let us all hope that she is also correct on her first prediction.

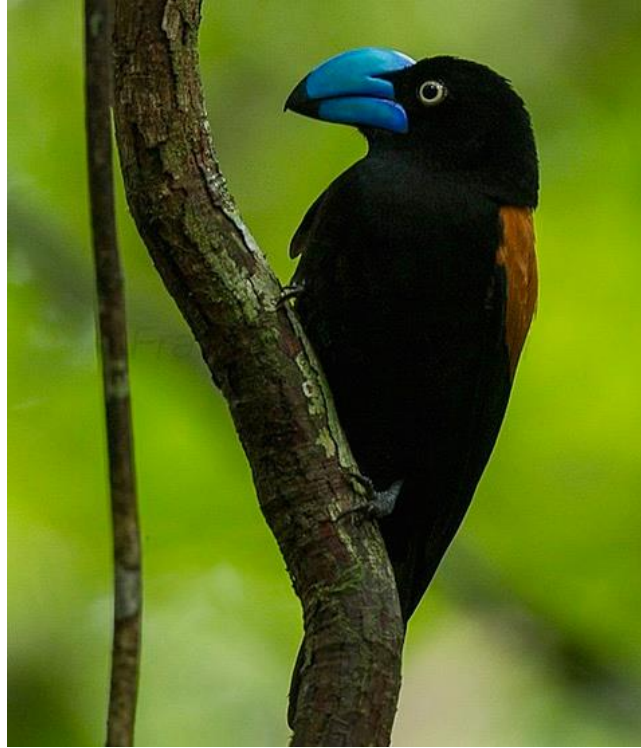
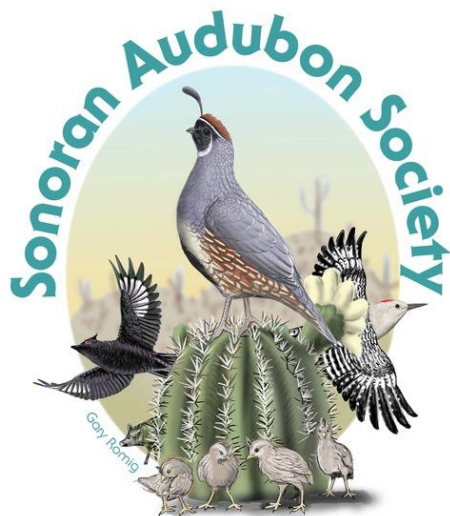


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