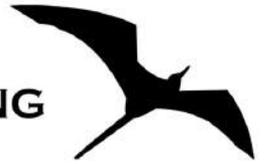




**TROPICAL
BIRDING**



**COMOROS:
ENDEMIC TREASURES
OF THE INDIAN OCEAN**
A Tropical Birding Custom Trip

**December 2—8, 2015
Guide: Ken Behrens**

All photos taken during this trip
by Ken Behrens.

TOUR SUMMARY

The Comoros comprise four islands in the Indian Ocean, situated between northern Madagascar and the coast of East Africa. Three of the islands form an independent country, while the eastern island of Mayotte is part of France. There is no denying that the Comoros are way off the beaten path for birders, naturalists, and really any foreigners! Indeed, this is part of their appeal to the intrepid traveller. Part of the reason for the paucity of visitors is the Comoros' reputation for inaccessibility and lack of infrastructure. But with decent hotels, and increasingly reliable domestic airlines, the Comoros are quickly becoming accessible. Tropical Birding's northern Madagascar office, just a short flight from the Comoros, also positions us well to coordinate logistics in this tricky part of the world.

There are strong reasons for a birder to consider visiting the Comoros. There are 22 endemic species according to the 2015 update of the Clements list. Every one of these was seen during this trip. Twenty-two endemics is already respectable for a small island chain, but this isn't the whole story. There are an additional 22 taxa that are strong candidates for future splitting. We

found all of these “potential splits”, save one (the subspecies of Madagascar Brush-Warbler found on Mohéli). This means that in a week-long trip you can potentially find over 40 endemic birds... pretty impressive for a part of the world that doesn't receive much attention from world birders! These endemics include four fantastic scops-owls, one on each island, all of which are distinctive and exquisite. Another of the top endemics is the distinctive Comoro or Humblot's Flycatcher, found only on Grande Comore. Of an array of white-eyes and sunbirds, the Mayotte White-eye and Mayotte Sunbird are certainly the best-looking of the lot, and thankfully both are common. Mayotte also holds the best drongo, yup you guessed it, the Mayotte Drongo, with a fabulously huge fork to the tail. Aside from the “marquee birds”, one of the things that makes the Comoros fascinating for a travelling naturalist is the subtle differences between the islands, and the major difference between the Comoros and nearby Madagascar. Like the much better-known Galapagos, the Comoros are a true laboratory of evolution.



The “Comoro” Blue Vanga is a stunning bird, and a strong candidate for splitting.

Birders who are already visiting Madagascar can easily add a week in the Comoros for a hefty extra dose of endemics. The Comoros can also make a quick but productive stand-alone trip,

particularly for people with limited vacation time. The islands now receive flights from several good international airlines, including Kenya Airways and Air Austral, making a quick trip quite feasible, especially for birders based or travelling in the eastern hemisphere.

This trip began with a short flight from Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar. The landing afforded good views of the hulking volcanic mass of Mount Karthala, which is where we headed soon after arrival. One night camping on the mountain was sufficient to find all of the endemic birds of Grande Comore, plus most of the widespread Comorian endemics. These included two great-looking pigeons: the Comoro or Olive Pigeon and the beautiful Comoro Blue Pigeon. The understory held skulking Grand Comoro Brush-Warbler, while patches of flowers attracted Humblot's and Madagascar Sunbirds, both of which are likely splits that will become Grande Comore endemics. A male Ashy Cuckooshrike was a good find, as this species is uncommon in the Comoros, and the local subspecies represents a likely split. Greater and Lesser Vasa-Parrots were common and conspicuous, with the local subspecies looking very different from the Malagasy birds, and again seeming a good candidate for splitting.

Dense and mossy patches of mid-elevation cloud forest are the haunt of the little Comoro or Humblot's Flycatcher, a bird so distinctive that it forms its own genus! The lush forest at lower elevations held large numbers of Kirk's White-eyes, while the heath above treeline held smaller numbers of the duller, though surprisingly similar Comoro (Mount Karthala) White-eye. Reunion (Madagascar) Harriers and Madagascar (Mount Karthala if split) Spinetails patrolled the sky at higher elevations.

The reason to camp on the mountain is to search for the



Comoro or Humblot's Sunbird, found in mossy forest on the slopes of Mount Karthala.

Comoro (Mount Karthala) Scops-Owl, just one of the four wonderful scops-owls that are endemic to the Comoros. Thankfully, the owl cooperated nicely, and began calling near camp soon after dusk. Within a few minutes, we had the owl spotlighted on a mossy branch overhead.

After hiking down from the mountain, we visited a scrubby patch of degraded forest to see the island's rarest endemic, the endangered Comoro Drongo. This site also held a fabulous (Grande Comore) Cuckoo-Roller. Whether a full species or just a subspecies, this bird is quite different from the Cuckoo-Rollers found on Madagascar and other islands in the Comoros. A final bonus sighting was a Frances's Goshawk of the endemic local subspecies.



The endangered Comoro Drongo is only distantly related to other drongos in the region.

After a relaxing night in a comfortable hotel in the capital of Moroni, we took a remarkably short flight on a comfortable plane to the next island in the chain: Mohéli. This is the least populated and developed of the four islands. Despite the fairly small population, there is very little forest left on this island, or on its neighbor Anjouan. So the focus of birding on these islands is reaching the remnant patches of forest, where all the endemic birds are found! The rarest endemic is the Madagascar (Comoro) Green-Pigeon, which was found after a long search on the first afternoon. This species may well go extinct before it is even recognized as a full species by most authorities.

Other highlights of Mohéli included the fabulous (Comoro) Blue Vanga, a bird so blue that it seems to glow even in the shade! It took a bit of searching, but we eventually located the Mohéli or Benson's Brush-Warbler, an odd plain-faced, mid-story dwelling warbler that is very different from its relatives in the region. The Mohéli Bulbul is darker, larger, and heavier-billed than Madagascar Bulbul, but is most easily separated by its distinctive vocalizations. Even before dusk fell, we had reeled in the Mohéli Scops-Owl, one of my favorite Comorian birds due to its bizarre Barn Owl-like screeching call, which is totally different from that of any other scops-owl in the region.



**Mohéli Scops-Owl:
looks like a scops-owl; sounds like a Barn Owl!**



**The Mohéli subspecies of Humblot's Sunbird,
which is probably a full species.**

Though most of the endemics had already been rounded up, a final morning on Mohéli turned up great views of the distinctive local subspecies (or perhaps full species) of Comoro Thrush, plus the endemic races of Humblot's and Madagascar Sunbirds. A quick stop at a tranquil crater lake turned up Little Grebe, Common Greenshank, and a fine pair of Malagasy Kingfishers.



The island of Mohéli looks tiny against the immensity of the Indian Ocean.

After returning to Fomboni, a visit to the office of Inter Îles Air prompted panic when the people working there claimed that there was no flight to Anjouan. This seemed to confirm my worst fears about the local airlines! But after a few phone calls, all was sorted. The flight was still running as scheduled, though seemingly without the knowledge of the people working in the office of

the airline! The trip moved on to Anjouan with another short and scenically spectacular flight. From the air, these islands truly look like tiny pieces of land floating in the blue immensity of the Indian Ocean.

The deforestation on Anjouan is terrible, and the “forest” site where we spend a full day birding was mainly vegetated with exotic clove trees. Despite this, the endemics hang on to existence. The highlight of the island was daytime views of the sometimes-tricky Anjouan Scops-Owl. The dark morph of this species is a real beauty: a puffy little soot-colored owl. It took a fair bit of hiking, but Anjouan White-eye, Anjouan Sunbird, and Anjouan Brush-Warbler were all eventually located. The most elusive bird on this visit was actually the local subspecies of Comoro Thrush, which took until the afternoon to find. Despite the deforestation, the precipitous mountains and endless surf-pounded beaches of Anjouan are scenically stunning, and the drives around the island were most enjoyable. In common with the other islands, the people are also quite friendly and welcoming, despite (or



Anjouan White-eye was just recently split from Madagascar White-eye.

perhaps because of?) encountering few foreign visitors.

The final island of Mayotte is actually a part of France, and has a very different feel from the other islands. For one thing, you can stop in a corner store and buy good cheese and baguettes! The birding is very easy on Mayotte once you arrive in a patch of forest. The Mayotte Scops-Owl is easily found even during the day. Likewise the Mayotte Drongo, with its impressively forked tail, is not uncommon. Finding nests of both Mayotte Drongo and the endemic subspecies of Frances's Goshawk, was a nice bonus. A stop at a coastal park produced great views of Mayotte Sunbird, Mayotte White-eye, and the local race (and potential split) of Comoro Fody. Seeing a Tambourine Dove there in coastal scrub was a strange sight, as it uses very different habitat in the Comoros than on the African mainland. Although this short trip focused on the endemic land birds, and largely neglected waterbirds, some White-tailed Tropicbirds flying around the lagoon were a nice bonus. A small flock of African (Black) Swifts, of the Comorian endemic subspecies also flew by.

Although I had started this trip expecting the worst of logistics, particularly the inter-island plane flights, I was pleasantly surprised by how smoothly things ran. It had been a highly enjoyable and productive week in a unique and largely forgotten corner of the world, and I'm already looking forward to returning.



Another day, another island, another awesome scops-owl... the story of a birding trip to the Comoros! This was the final owl on this trip, the Mayotte Scops-Owl.

ITINERARY

December 2	Flight to Moroni, Grande Comore. Hike up Mount Karthala. Camping.
December 3	Mount Karthala to Moroni.
December 4	Flight from Moroni to Mohéli. Night in Fomboni.
December 5	Flight from Fomboni to Anjouan.
December 6	Full day birding Anjouan.
December 7	Flight from Anjouan to Dzaoudzi, Mayotte. Night in forest lodge.
December 8	Departure from Mayotte.



The Grande Comore subspecies of Madagascar Paradise-Flycatcher is a very likely split. It features a velvet black rather than glossy blue-black cap.

PHOTO GALLERY

Follows tour's chronology



The Lesser Vasa-Parrots in the Comoros have an oddly attenuated bill, and are quite different from those on Madagascar.



Ashy (Comoro) Cuckooshrike (left) is quite uncommon. The quick pace of this short trip didn't allow a lot of butterfly observation, but we did see Ngaziya Dotted Border on Mount Karthala.



Female Humblot's Sunbird (left) and Kirk's White-eye, common species on Grande Comore.



The end of a nice view of Grand Comoro Bulbul!



There is some beautiful scenery above treeline on Mount Karthala.



Higher elevations are the domain of African Stonechat (left) and Madagascar Spinetail (right), both of which have endemic subspecies on Grande Comore that may be split in the future.



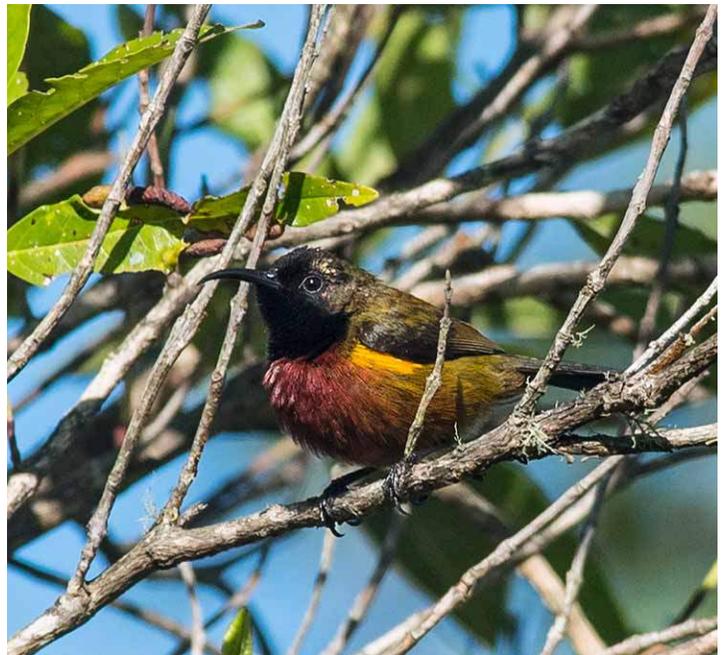
A couple views on the fabulous Comoro (Humblot's) Flycatcher, proud owner of its own genus.



Mossy cloud forest on Mount Karthala (left). The endemic subspecies of Red-headed Fody (right), which often creeps along branches in nuthatch fashion.



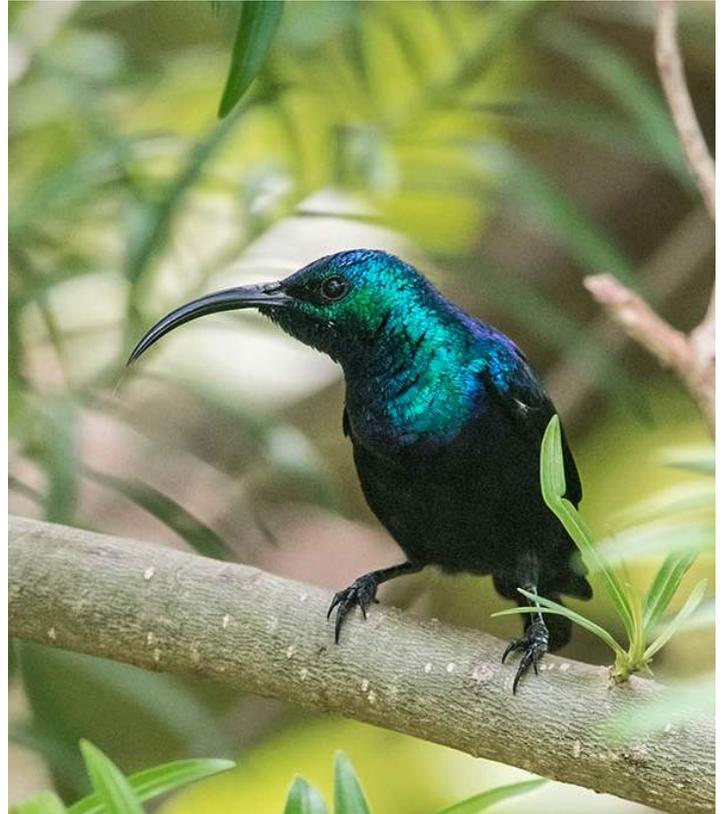
Grand Comoro Brush-Warbler is a skulker that can sometimes be lured into the open.



A couple of Karthala beauties: Comoro Blue Pigeon (left) and Humblot's Sunbird (right).



Frances's Goshawk (left) and Cuckoo-Roller (right) of the subspecies, or perhaps full species, endemic to Grande Comore.



The Grande Comore (left) and Mohéli (right) "subspecies" of Madagascar Sunbird are quite different from the Malagasy Madagascar Sunbirds, and from each other, and are probably full species.



Mohéli White-eye (left). Seeing Reunion Harriers (right) in a lush valley on Mohéli is an odd sight. On Madagascar and Reunion, this species is found mainly in dry and open habitats like grassland.



Mohéli supports an endemic subspecies (and probable split) of Blue Vanga, the only vanga found outside of Madagascar.



Mohéli's central ridge (left) holds remnant forest, where species like Mohéli Bulbul (right) are found.



A pair of Malagasy Kingfishers on a picturesque crater lake.



The "subspecies" of Madagascars Green-Pigeon on Mohéli should actually be considered an endangered endemic, though it was probably formerly found on other islands of the Comoros.



Another view of the Mohéli Green-Pigeon (left) and a Comoro Thrush (right).



The two subspecies of Madagascar Paradise-Flycatcher on Mohéli and Anjouan form a complex that seems distinct enough to merit specific status as “Pale Paradise-Flycatcher”.



Comoro or Olive Pigeon (left) is a hulking monster of a pigeon. Mohéli Scops-Owl (right) has a rufous morph in addition to the brown morph shown earlier in the report.



The oddly plain-faced, arboreal Mohéli or Benson's Brush-Warbler.



The short plane flights afford spectacular views of all the islands. This is the north coast of Anjouan.



Anjouan Brush-Warbler (left) is a typical brush-warbler. Crested Drongo (right) has only recently colonized Anouan, and the birds there belong to the same subspecies as those on Madagascar.



The Anjouan Sunbird is endemic to its namesake island.



The Comoro subspecies of Madagascar Turtle-Dove is distinctive, and probably a full species.



Comoro Blue-Pigeon is a great-looking bird that is common in most forests on the Comoros.

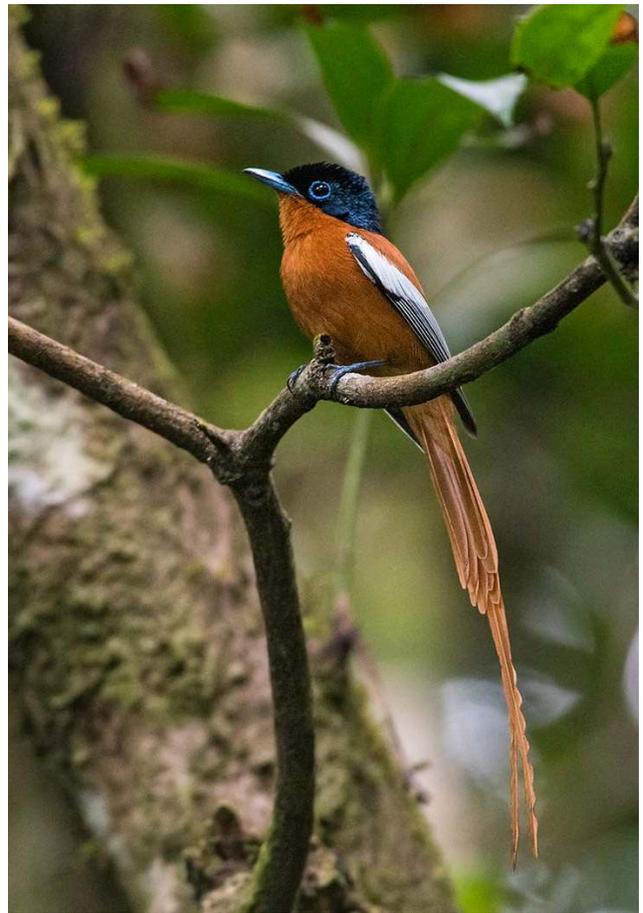


There is no lack of beautiful scenery in Anjouan.



The spectacular Seychelles Flying Fox is the Comoros' most conspicuous flying creatures!





The brown morph of Anjouan Scops-Owl (left) and a "Pale" Madagascar Paradise-Flycatcher (right).



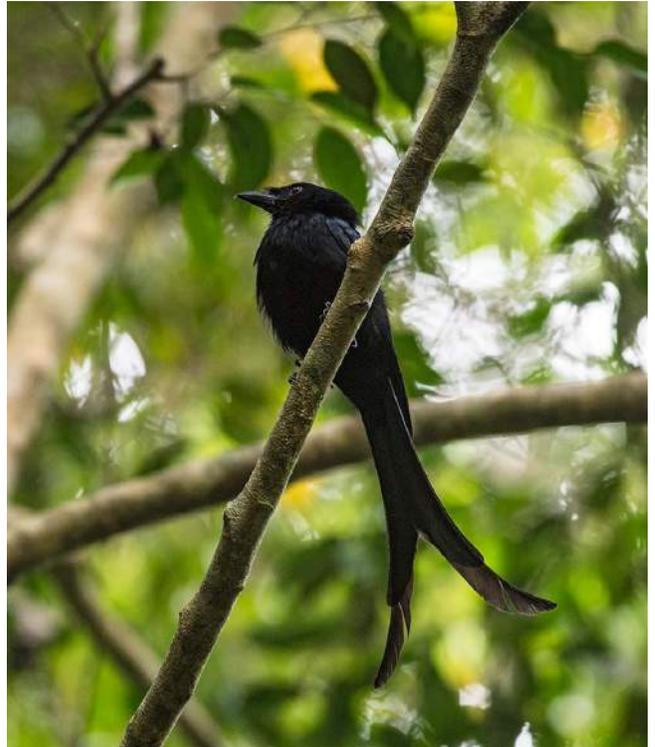
A couple of lemurs, like this Common Brown Lemur, have been introduced to the Comoros.



Mayotte White-eye is the most attractive of the white-eyes of the Comoros.



A brown morph of Mayotte Scops-Owl (left) and the distinctive Mayotte race of Red-headed Fody (right).



Two of Mayotte, and indeed the Comoros' best birds: Mayotte Sunbird (left) and Drongo (right).



Mayotte's distinctive *brutus* subspecies of Francis's Goshawk.

BIRD LIST

Taxonomy and nomenclature follow *The Clements Checklist of the Birds of the World 6.9* (including updates through November, 2015).

PODICIPEDIFORMES: Podicipedidae				
		Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	
PHAETHONTIFORMES: Phaethontidae				
		White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>	
PELECANIFORMES: Ardeidae				
		Gray Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	
		Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	
		Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	
		Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	
		Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	
		Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>	
ACCIPITRIFORMES: Accipitridae				
RE		Reunion (Madagascar) Harrier	<i>Circus maillardi macroscelus</i>	
Essp LS		Frances's (Grande Comore) Goshawk	<i>Accipiter francesiae griveaudi</i>	
Essp		Frances's (Anjouan) Goshawk	<i>Accipiter francesiae pusillus</i>	H
Essp		Frances's (Mayotte) Goshawk	<i>Accipiter francesiae brutus</i>	
CHARADRIIFORMES: Charadriidae				
		Greater Sand-Plover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>	
CHARADRIIFORMES: Scolopacidae				
		Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	
		Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	
CHARADRIIFORMES: Laridae				
		Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bengalensis</i>	
COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae				
		Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	
E	NT	Comoro (Olive) Pigeon	<i>Columba pollenii</i>	
		Ring-necked Dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>	
Essp LS		Madagascar (Comoro) Turtle-Dove	<i>Streptopelia picturata</i>	
		Tambourine Dove	<i>Turtur tympanistria</i>	
Essp LS	(EN)	Madagascar (Comoro) Green-Pigeon	<i>Treron australis griveaudi</i>	
E		Comoro Blue-Pigeon	<i>Alectroenas sganzini</i>	
STRIGIFORMES: Tytonidae				
		Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	
STRIGIFORMES: Strigidae				
E	CR	Mohéli Scops-Owl	<i>Otus moheliensis</i>	
E	CR	Comoro Scops-Owl	<i>Otus pauliani</i>	
E	CR	Anjouan Scops-Owl	<i>Otus capnodes</i>	

E		Mayotte Scops-Owl	<i>Otus mayottensis</i>	
APODIFORMES: Apodidae				
Essp LS		Malagasy (Mount Karthala) Spinetail	<i>Zoonavena grandidieri mariae</i>	
Essp		Madagascar (Black) Swift	<i>Apus balstoni mayottensis</i>	
Essp		African Palm-Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus griveaudi</i>	
LEPTOSOMIFORMES: Leptosomidae				
Essp LS		(Grande Comore) Cuckoo-Roller	<i>Leptosomus discolor gracilis</i>	
Essp LS		(Anjouan) Cuckoo-Roller	<i>Leptosomus discolor intermedius</i>	H
RE		(Madagascar) Cuckoo-Roller	<i>Leptosomus discolor discolor</i>	
CORACIIFORMES: Alcedinidae				
Essp		Malagasy Kingfisher	<i>Corythornis vintsioides johannae</i>	
CORACIIFORMES: Meropidae				
		Madagascar Bee-eater	<i>Merops superciliosus</i>	
PSITTACIFORMES: Psittaculidae				
Essp LS		Greater Vasa-Parrot	<i>Mascarinus vasa comorensis</i>	
Essp LS		Lesser Vasa-Parrot	<i>Mascarinus niger sibilans</i>	
I		Gray-headed Lovebird	<i>Agapornis canus</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Vangidae				
Essp LS		(Comoro) Blue Vanga	<i>Cyanolanius madagascarinus bensoni</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Campephagidae				
Essp LS		Ashy (Comoro) Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina cinerea cucullata</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Dicruridae				
E	EN	Comoro (Grande Comore) Drongo	<i>Dicrurus fuscipennis</i>	
Essp		Crested Drongo	<i>Dicrurus forficatus potior</i>	
E	V	Mayotte Drongo	<i>Dicrurus waldenii</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Monarchidae				
Essp LS		Madagascar (Grande Comore) Paradise-Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone mutata comoroensis</i>	
Essp LS		Madagascar (Pale) Paradise-Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone mutata vulpina/voeltzkowiana</i>	
Essp		Madagascar Paradise-Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone mutata pretiosa</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae				
		Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Pycnonotidae				
		Madagascar Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes madagascariensis</i>	
E		Grand Comoro Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes parvirostris</i>	
E		Mohéli Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes moheliensis</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Acrocephalidae				
E		Anjouan Brush-Warbler	<i>Nesillas longicaudata</i>	
E		Grand Comoro Brush-Warbler	<i>Nesillas brevicaudata</i>	
E		Mohéli (Benson's) Brush-Warbler	<i>Nesillas mariae</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Zosteropidae				

E	V	Comoro (Mount Karthala) White-eye	<i>Zosterops mouroaniensis</i>	
E		Mohéli White-eye	<i>Zosterops comorensis</i>	
E		Anjouan White-eye	<i>Zosterops anjouanensis</i>	
E		Kirk's White-eye	<i>Zosterops kirki</i>	
E		Mayotte White-eye	<i>Zosterops mayottensis</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Muscicapidae				
E	EN	Grand Comoro (Humblot's) Flycatcher	<i>Humblotia flavirostris</i>	
Essp		African Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Turdidae				
E		Comoro (Grande Comore) Thrush	<i>Turdus bewsheri comorensis</i>	
Essp LS		Comoro (Mohéli) Thrush	<i>Turdus bewsheri moheliensis</i>	
Essp LS		Comoro (Anjouan) Thrush	<i>Turdus bewsheri bewsheri</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae				
I		Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Nectariniidae				
Essp LS		Madagascar (Grande Comore Green) Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris notatus moebii</i>	
Essp LS		Madagascar (Mohéli Green) Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris notatus voeltzkowi</i>	
E		(Grande Comore) Humblot's Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris humbloti humbloti</i>	
Essp LS		(Mohéli) Humblot's Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris humbloti mohelicus</i>	
E		Anjouan Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris comorensis</i>	
E		Mayotte Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris coquerellii</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae				
I		House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Ploceidae				
RE		Red (Madagascar) Fody	<i>Foudia madagascariensis</i>	
Essp LS		Red-headed (Grande Comore) Fody	<i>Foudia eminentissima consobrina</i>	
Essp LS		Red-headed (Mohéli) Fody	<i>Foudia eminentissima eminentissima</i>	
Essp LS		Red-headed (Anjouan) Fody	<i>Foudia eminentissima anjuanensis</i>	
Essp LS		Red-headed (Mayotte) Fody	<i>Foudia eminentissima algondae</i>	
PASSERIFORMES: Estrildidae				
		Bronze Mannikin	<i>Spermestes cucullata</i>	

E - Endemic

Essp - Endemic subspecies

Essp LS - Endemic subspecies that
is a strong candidate for splitting

RE - Regional endemic

CR - Critically endangered

EN - Endangered

NT - Near-threatened

VU - Vulnerable

I – Introduced

H – heard-only

MAMMAL LIST

Lemuridae (True Lemurs)		
I	Common Brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur fulvus</i>
I	Mongoose Lemur	<i>Eulemur mongoz</i>
Megachiroptera (Fruit Bats)		
RE	Seychelles Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus seychellensis</i>
Muridae (Old World Rats and Mice)		
I	Black Rat	<i>Rattus rattus</i>

I – Introduced

REPTILE LIST

Iguanidae	
Cuvier's Madagascar Swift	<i>Oplurus cuvieri comorensis</i>
Gekkonidae	
Gray's House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus mercatorius</i>
Dubious Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma dubia</i>
Comoro Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma comorensis</i>
Gold-dust Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma laticauda</i>
Gerrhosauridae	
Madagascar Plated Lizard	<i>Zonosaurus madagascariensis</i>
Scincidae	
Comoro Skink	<i>Trachylepis comorensis</i>



The Comoro Skink has different subspecies on each island, which may deserve status as full species.