



the weekly anthropocene



dispatches from the wild, weird world of humanity and its biosphere

By Sam Matey, September 1 2019

Sam's Madagascar Volunteer Blog #6: Land of Living Legends

Greetings all! Here follows a chronicle of my last week as the volunteer research assistant for the *Prolemur simus* team. It's also, not coincidentally, about the halfway point of my time in Madagascar-I arrived July 22nd, and I'll be leaving October 16th. Until then, I'll be learning a whole about a whole new aspect of MBP's incredible work as a volunteer research assistant for the Reforestation team!

alatsinainy, aogositra enina amby roapolo (Monday, August twenty-sixth)

On Monday, we tracked Max, dominant male of the East Two group. He conducted the usual morning round of rest/eat bamboo/drink from ravenala flowers/chase around a few of his groupmates/rest again/awake and repeat, like the majority of lemurs I've followed have done. *Prolemur simus* are cathemeral, meaning they're not nocturnal, diurnal or crepuscular (active around dawn and dusk) but active and resting in briefer, alternating spurts during both the day and the night. It was a pleasure to share a little of their peaceful, meditative-seeming rhythm, and imagine what it must be like to live among the pothos vines, ravenala trees and bamboo shoots, eating leaves and sipping nectar. I can't quite recall, but I believe it was Clara Barton who said that one reason she worked as a nurse on the battlefield was that an entire worldview and mental landscape died with every fallen soldier. Losing this critically endangered species, or any such, would be far worse: an entire interlocking piece of the universe would have fallen out, a species' life-perspective, a modus vivendi as a key part of a unique ecosystem.

Near the end of the follow, I was further privileged to get an excellent view of Hopper grooming herself while sitting in a tree. The varibolomavo matriarch was as flexible as a lemuriform yogi, stretching her legs beside her head like a cat and holding her tail in her very human-like hands. The greater bamboo lemurs of Sangasanga are eternally fascinating, enchanting creatures, and I will always be honored to have been able to witness a portion of their lives.





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Another particularly interesting event that day occurred a little earlier than Hopper's grooming session, while Hery, Mamy, and I stood under interlacing stalks of bamboo watching the lemurs feed. We were having a great time exchanging English and Malagasy vocabulary and chatting, when Hery pointed out to me a near-invisible tanalaha, or chameleon, on the stalk of an understory plant. It was the first chameleon I had seen in Madagascar (in addition to lemurs, tenrecs, euplerids, and everything else, this country is home to most of the world's chameleon species!) and I was greatly excited. I took a boatload of pictures, and even held it in my hand for a little while when it scampered off the branch. Later, with the aid of iNaturalist and a KAFS guide to Malagasy reptiles, I determined that it was *Calumma nasutum*, the aptly named nose-horned chameleon. The guide mentioned that although it was listed as one species for now, it was probably actually a "species complex" of several similar chameleons. That set me thinking about Linnaean taxonomy, that amazingly useful system of assigning all life-forms a Latin binomial name indicating their genus and species, in order to enable scientists speaking different vernacular languages to have a common referent. It was a little foreshadowing of the taxonomical wunderkind I was to encounter that Wednesday.



talata, aogositra fito amby roapolo (Tuesday, August twenty-seventh)

On Tuesday, I joined Mamy and Marolahy in the field to follow Ruface, dominant male of the Northwest Two group, consort of Phoenix, and father of Ghost. He spent a good deal of time in a beautiful little hillside area, where pothos vines made the tree trunks look like massive green flamboyant Corinthian columns in some immense temple. We also got a great view of the endlessly photogenic Ghost eating bamboo! (pictured). This day was different from all of my previous varibolomavo field days, as the fourth member of





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the follow team was Claire Burdick, my fellow volunteer and my imminent successor as the *Prolemur simus* volunteer. Claire easily picked up the simple essentials of pack preparation, data collection, and so on, and I was soon entirely confident that she would prove a superb volunteer research assistant for the team. We discussed our ambitions, life experiences, and how incredible it was that we were really watching wild lemurs in a rainforest right now. With her intelligence and drive, she will be a spectacular primatologist (as is her goal) in five or ten years, and I am honored to know her now.

Once we left the forest, Claire and I waited for about thirty minutes in the streets of Kianjavato for the other team to return. At that point, we could collect their gear and call the MBP van to pick us up. During that time, we had some rather interesting cultural experiences. First, I said hello to two Malagasy police officers, Rija and Njaka. They were very polite and friendly gentlemen, practiced their English with us, and kindly brought out a bench from their station for us to sit on. I showed them some lemur pictures on my phone (my customary practice when chatting with local citizens, in the spirit of drumming up interest in conservation), and they expressed a wish to go into the forest to see them. I said I'd have to consult my superiors. After conversation flagged a bit, we got a reminder of some of the darker aspects of the milieu in which we were living and working. I hadn't seen that much of it yet, most of my time being spent either at KAFS or in the forest, but I knew this was an area of grinding poverty, even by Malagasy standards. A study by a Harvard public health scientist on Kianjavato Commune had found that nearly everyone was primarily a subsistence farmer, the average household income was 50,000 ariary a year, or about US \$22, and 20% of children were malnourished to the point of stunted growth. That day, as we sat on the bench, a small child, perhaps five or six, came up to us. He (I think) was barefoot, and naked except for a single pair of ripped and tattered red synthetic workout shorts. He had a thin frame, but a swollen belly, which I seem to recall is an indicator of the presence of intestinal parasites. He couldn't speak any English, and didn't even say much in Malagasy, but his outstretched hand conveyed a message in a universal language: give me something, anything. We didn't. What seemed most incredible to my mind, in a way, was how little taking no action bothered me. Had I been presented with a barefoot, near-naked, hungry preschool-aged child begging for money a few months ago, in America, I would have taken them by the hand and called the police, or Social Services, and would not have rested until I had done something to remediate their position. But here, the police were ten feet away and unconcerned, and it was entirely possible, even likely, that this child was by local standards perfectly well cared for, fed as much as a subsistence rice paddy and vegetable garden could provide and given as much healthcare as an income of \$22 a year could afford. I said "Miala tsiny," (I'm sorry), and we left the child to wander away.

Not fifteen minutes after that little heartstring-tugging moral contretemps, we saw another unexpected event. A taxibrousse (van serving the function of a bus) pulled up. In response, the police left their station, this time in full uniform



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with big rifles on their hips, and dragged out from the back a totally unexpected third person: a prisoner. The man's head was hung low, and his hands were tied behind his back. Not handcuffed, tied, with big thick knotted white rope. One of the officers led him into the taxi-brousse (yes, the public transportation vehicle, which was already full of people), and we asked the other one what the man had done. "Il a essayer le fall of children," he replied, in a hybrid French-English sentence. This meant roughly "He had attempted/tried the fall of children." Claire and I weren't certain, but we thought that this meant that the prisoner was a child molester. Ugh.

Strange though it was to see this shoestring-budget prisoner transport, it was rather reassuring. Poor the village of Kianjavato might be, but it was not medieval: there were the odd satellite dishes, solar panels, and cell phones, a clinic, a strong community conservation program (MBP's), and now, apparently, a justice system of some sort, or at least a law enforcement presence. Nevertheless, it was a distinct relief to return to KAFS and to the environment where we could focus on science, and the long-term positive effects of the work we were doing.

After lunch, I read "Rewilding Complex Ecosystems," from *Science* magazine's *Tomorrow's Earth* series, on my phone. It was a fascinating paper, describing instances of rewilding from Switzerland, Germany, Brazil, and the famous Chernobyl Exclusion Area of Ukraine. The writers described rewilding as characterized by "active non-management," i.e. allowing ecological processes to reestablish themselves on their own, aided only by reintroduction of preexisting factors, such as animal species and unregulated river flow. The writers also posited the idea of quantifying rewilding in terms of three factors vital to ecosystem health: stochastic disturbance (sporadic events like storms, wildfires, floods, and droughts being "permitted" to change ecological dynamics), dispersal (wildlife subpopulations maintaining gene flow and avoiding genetic drift and inbreeding by being able to move between subpopulation), and trophic complexity (a full complement of species at all major trophic levels, from primary producers like clover to tertiary consumers like wolves). When the random permutations of cellular data coverage smile upon us, there is often quite decent Internet access at KAFS, though it seems to take ages to send e-mails or download videos. I was extremely grateful that I was favored with access to this paper, as it was highly interesting and relevant to MBP's work in Madagascar, and to land management around the world. It's available at science.sciencemag.org/content/364/6438/eaav5570, for those who are interested.

Shortly thereafter, the *Prolemur simus* team was favored by an unexpected gift that met a long-felt need. Two critical classes of our team's gear—the Automated Tracking Systems (ATS) which monitor the lemurs' radio collars and the GPS units that allow us to log the locations at which we find them—run only on batteries. Batteries are scarce in Madagascar, as they must be imported from other nations. Even those tend to be unreliable: in one memorable experience, I personally bought a two-pack of an unfamiliar brand of Chinese batteries for a battery-less team GPS, only to find that they were as nonfunctional as cylindrical stones. But that afternoon, as University of Calgary graduate student Pamela



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Narvaez-Torres was preparing to leave, she gave us a plastic bag full of no less than sixty batteries left over from her camera trap research project, proper Western-bought fully functional Duracells. To my mind, used to scrounging and reusing two or three batteries at a time and getting eight new batteries a week or so, this was a positive treasure chest, a bonanza, manna from heaven. Thank you, Pamela!

The day culminated in an extraordinarily enjoyable four-way language lesson. It began as fellow volunteer Soumaya Belghali's regularly scheduled Tuesday French lesson. After that finished, Dakota began answering the gathered Malagasy speakers' questions about English. That naturally led into "Sly" (a Malagasy college student from Fianarantsoa in Kianjavato on vacation, highly fluent in English, who we had met in the market on Sunday) offering to teach us some Malagasy. After that, with the atmosphere positively festive, we all clamored for Dr. Dana Thiele to teach us some of her native German. All of these micro-lessons focused on slang and "street talk," the sort of terms not found in language textbooks. As a result of this language party, I am now in a position to state with authority that "épicerie" in French has changed from its literal meaning from "spice shop" to include any small store selling varied merchandise, such as our local Joseph's. I know that a raindrop is a "goutte d'eau," a drop of water, but a teardrop does not use the word "goutte," being simply a "larme." We also learned the conservation-relevant terms of "braconner/braconnage/braconneur" (to poach/poaching/poacher). In Malagasy, I learned terms suitable for speaking with friends, such as "De aona" (What's up?), and "lesy" (bro) a male-bonding ingroup term. The German micro-lesson was my favorite, as I knew nothing whatsoever of the language of Goethe beforehand. I prevailed upon Dana to teach me such splendid, ringing sentences as "Ich bin Wissenschaftler" (I am a scientist), "Schon dich kennenzulernen" (Nice to meet you), "Ich bin sehr gludelig" (I am very happy) and "Ich spreche ein bisschen deutsch" (I speak a little German). I feel all of these might come in handy for me some day.

alarobia, aogositra valo amby roapolo (Wednesday, August twenty-eighth)

Wednesday, though I did not know it at the time, was my last day in the field as a volunteer. I accompanied Berthin and Hery on a follow of Phoenix, mother of Ghost and matriarch of Northwest Two. I say follow, but, unusually, it involved no actual following, being in point of fact more of a "locate and wait." Phoenix did not move from her resting position in a tree for the entire four-hour





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period, except for one brief moment when she shared a grooming session with her daughter, Ghost. Her immobility was so absolute as to be positively majestic. I managed to get a clear picture of her distant form through my binoculars, and was struck by the resemblance to a giant Tribble from Star Trek, a single apparently featureless undulating ball of brown fur (pictured, above).

On the way there, we had seen in the forest a river redgum: a tree species in the genus *Eucalyptus*, introduced from Australia. Hery said that the people of Kianjavato made a tea of the sweet-smelling leaves as a tonic against certain illnesses, another example of an introduced species doing good. The encounter set me thinking about the landscape of Sangasanga Mountain. It's a quintessentially Anthropocene landscape, every aspect of it shaped by humans. Sangasanga

is a forest fragment surrounded by villages and farms, much of it—indeed, most of it—consisting not of old-growth rainforest but of savoka, second-growth forest sprung up over former farmland. The entrance was on land owned by FOFIFA, an old state-owned coffee plantation, and there were still a few abandoned agricultural buildings and pipes scattered in the forest among the lemurs' feeding sites. Humans are in and out all the time: bamboo gatherers, medicinal plant prospectors, lemur researchers.

Occasionally, depending on the location of the group and the time of day, you can hear the noise of cars in the village street below while gazing at wild critically endangered lemurs. A cognitive dissonance if ever there was one. And, of course, in addition to the endemic ravenala, sandramy, and vohampika trees (and many more local species), there are introduced plants everywhere: soapbush, jackfruit, golden bamboo, and river redgum in the forest, and cosmopolitan flowers like blue porterweed (some of that grows near my house in Maine!) in open spaces. Classic descriptors of environmentally valuable land like “pristine,” “untouched,” or even “natural,” do not apply to Sangasanga. But it's as precious and worth protecting as any piece of land in the world: home to two critically endangered lemur species (*Prolemur simus* and *Varecia variegata*), the endangered aye-aye, several other lemurs, birds from the crested drongo to the vasa parrot, reptiles from leaf-tailed geckos to nose-horned chameleons, and a plethora of other uniquely Malagasy treasures. This isn't even a protected





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area under the IUCN definition—it's town land, owned by the Kianjavato Commune (and some by FOFIFA). It's being managed by these entities, with the guidance of MBP, in a wise and far-seeing manner: not to reach some idealized state, some human-decided archetype of what a Malagasy rainforest should be, but to protect what is there, the complex mixed-use species-rich landscape of Sangasanga (a portion of which is pictured, above). The fact that these critically endangered lemurs I have come to love can survive and thrive here, not under armed guard but by consent of their human neighbors, is less a spark than a lighthouse of hope for the besieged biota of Madagascar, and a model of human-wildlife coexistence in the Anthropocene.

I also got the chance that day in Sangasanga Forest saw to see a new one of Madagascar's endemic living legends. At about 11 AM or so, Berthin and Hery told me that they saw a bird, and after a long sequence of their pointing it out and my failing to see it (I apologized for my "maso vazaha," or "foreigner eyes"), I discerned the outline they were pointing to at last. I focused my binoculars on it, and found that it was a large, rather stout-looking light gray bird, with a fine wide breast and



head, perched on a branch. For some indescribable reason, possibly in the gravity of its attitude as it sat perched there, it put me in mind of a small, gray penguin. "Vanga?" I asked, referencing the endemic Malagasy family of vanga birds. "No," Hery said, shaking his head. "Cuckoo-roller." My heart leapt within me, a burst of pure excitement. A cuckoo-roller! I had read of this unique creature, endemic to Madagascar and the nearby Comoros Islands, before I came to the country, and I was entranced at the thought that I was seeing it in the flesh. Cuckoo-rollers (*Leptosomus discolor*, not closely related to rollers or cuckoos), are an ancient and unique lineage, a life-form with no very close living relatives, a long, slender, unbranching twig on the tree of life. They are the only species in the genus *Leptosomus* (although some think that local forms of the cuckoo-roller on some of the nearby Comoros Islands deserve species status). This is not so



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unusual, but what is unusual is that *Leptosomus* is the only genus in the family Leptosomidae. For comparison, humans share the family Hominidae with seven other species of great apes (bonobos, chimpanzees, two gorilla species, and three orangutan species), and some families, such as the passerine birds (including all small “songbirds”), have hundreds of species. Beyond even this, in a recent taxonomic reorganization of birds, the scientific consensus placed the cuckoo-roller in its own taxonomic order (previously it had shared one with kingfishers and others), the other Leptosomiformes. A species alone in its order, by all the gods! Other taxonomic orders of vertebrates include such unique lineages as the Primates (all humans, apes, monkeys, and lemurs), the Sphenisciformes (penguins), and the Carnivora (lions, tigers, bears, weasels, raccoons, and nearly every other mammalian predator). The cuckoo-roller is as if there was only one species of penguin, one mammalian carnivore, and one monkey, lemur, or ape alive in the world. It is sui generis, a bird unique unto itself.

Besides its taxonomy, cuckoo-rollers are known to be highly sexually dimorphic (my cuckoo-roller was gray, and so a male: the females are brown speckled with white spots). They are carnivorous, eating large invertebrates, especially from the orders Orthoptera (grasshoppers, crickets, and katydids), Hemiptera (“true bugs” like cicadas) and Coleoptera (beetles) as well as small vertebrates like chameleons and leaf-tailed geckos. While fairly common in Malagasy forests, they still retain a certain air of mystery, having been the object of little scientific study. Helm Field Guides’ *Birds of Madagascar* (from the KAFS library, at my elbow as I write) states of the cuckoo-roller, “Biological knowledge remarkably scant for a species of such exceptional interest.” I contributed my little bit to that knowledge by uploading my cuckoo-roller pictures and geotag (obtained by pressing my phone’s camera to my binocular lenses, and holding the lot steady) to iNaturalist, where they will be available to all for decades to come.

Once home, I entered Phoenix’s data and enjoyed a lunch of rice and voanjobory, a delicious Malagasy groundnut rather like giant chickpeas with a hint of peanut flavor. In the afternoon, I had a rather interesting hour or so when a few of the many threads running through life at KAFS became a bit tangled. At about 2:50, I was preparing for my English class at 3, and ran over to the dining hall to retrieve my whiteboard and marker. Just then, Theoluc, leader of the *Prolemur simus* team and my incredibly awesome and hardworking boss, arrived at KAFS. He needed to send an email report filling in some details about darting Snow, in Vatovavy, to change the batteries in his radio collar (an operation which had occurred earlier that week, and at which foreigners were not permitted). He also needed an extra GPS for monitoring in a different site, Ambodibonary, for tomorrow. This was all perfectly reasonable and in the best interests of the project, and it was my job as a volunteer research assistant to assist. Yet I had an English class waiting for me that I had committed to teach, and I didn’t want to let them down-sending emails took ages. As I pondered this, I fumbled my marker and dropped it into a pile of duck poop, left there by some of KAFS’ wandering waterfowl. As I cleaned it off at



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the bucket/sink of the dining hall, Pamela (she of the battery munificence) dropped by with an interesting comment. “Oh, you’ll need to move your English class. There’s an aye-aye in a cage over there, I think they brought it in last night and they’re waiting to change the batteries in its radio collar.” (They had indeed, and the aye-aye was released back into the wild by the aye-aye team that night, ready to transmit more data for its species). Devin, another graduate student and Pamela’s partner on camera trap research, chimed in. “Don’t tell anyone, I think it’s a bit of a secret for now, by the way.” My mind boggled. Immediate and urgent lemur team needs, an English class awaiting, markers in duck poop, and now a totally unexpected clandestine aye-aye...if this was spread out over an afternoon, I could handle it easily, but arriving in the same ten minutes it was a bit much. I took prompt action. I resolved that my primary priority was assisting

Theoluc: that was my job, after all.

I walked past the English class on my way to the KAFS building, and ascertained with Dominic, manager of the KAFS station proper, that the aye-aye was to be left alone but was not in fact a secret: the class could be conducted as long as we kept our voices down so as not to wake the nocturnal lemur. (Pictured: KAFS at dawn). This still left the problem of how to conduct the class. Time was a-wasting, Devin was nearby,



and I’m afraid I rather put her on the spot a bit. “Are you ready to be a substitute teacher?” I asked. She looked surprised. “Um...I’m not prepared, and I don’t speak Malagasy...” “No worries. We’ve done numbers and colors in English. Just write out the numerals or show the colors and ask “Inona ity?” (What is this)

“Inona ity,” she repeated, rising to the challenge with her customary pluck and enterprise. “Okay.” I turned to the class. “Uh, mila miasa aho. Roapolo minutra. Vaovao mpampianatra ankehitriny.” (I need to work. Twenty minutes. New teacher for right now.” I ran upstairs, borrowed a GPS from the reforestation team volunteers (facing a bit of sales-resistance, as it was the second time I had needed to do so that week), and set up the simus team computer and wrote the necessary email with Theoluc. At that point, once we had written the email, Pamela popped up again, saying “Sam,



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your English class needs you!” and unable to repress a hint of a smile at my rather comic situation. The email was taking an eternity to send, as it often did, and Theoluc needed to go assemble the team for tomorrow, so I was free to go back down. I found that Devin had exhausted the numbers and colors, and, in an effort to fill the time, was now drawing remarkably skilled freehand images of Malagasy animals and appending the English names. I relieved her from her noble duties, and in the rest of the class reviewed conversational commonalities (such as “How are you?”) and introduced my pupils to the basic English words for family members and clothing, learning their Malagasy counterparts from my dictionary in the process. All in all, another full, rich day at KAFS.

alakamisy: aogositra sivy amby roapolo (Thursday, August twenty-ninth)

On Thursday, I was training for my next five week’s work: as a Reforestation volunteer research assistant. I haven’t delved into the matter too deeply yet, my thoughts being primarily occupied this week with the needs of the simus team, but I can see that it will be an edifying and rewarding experience working with this community-rooted program. That day was a day of nursery checks, going



around to MBP’s array of tree seedling nurseries in the region and checking in on their progress. It was a simple process, repeated sixteen times at MBP’s sixteen nurseries in the immediate area. (Pictured: the Morarano, or “Slow Water,” Nursery, one of the sixteen). We (Dakota, Soumaya, Claire, myself, and Romuald, an awesome Malagasy reforestation staff member) arrived, and some of us took inventory: of the nursery’s supplies of compost, sand, and red earth (the three ingredients in the soil they used to nurture the young seedlings), any requests for equipment they had, and the



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number of seedlings ready to be planted. Another paid the Single Mothers' Club (single moms employed for half-day shifts at the nurseries, and allowed to bring their kids), and still another paid the weekly contract money to the full-time nursery employees. At every stop, I made a point of saying "Misaotra betsaka ianareo noho ny miasa," (Thank you all for your work), which always met with approving nods and, more often than not, pleased cries of "Mahai, teny gasy!" (roughly: Clever, you speak Malagasy!).

We were done by lunchtime, and had a great time in the car between nursery stops singing along to various Malagasy and Western songs. I contributed a solo rendition of Gilbert and Sullivan's classic "A British Tar," which had Romuald roaring with laughter and Dakota and Claire politely but firmly putting in earbuds.

That afternoon (or possibly the next day, I can't quite recall), a new GPS unit for the simus team arrived from Antananarivo, meaning that I could return the reforestation group's GPS and that we were finally back up to our full required gear complement. That day, I also had a long conversation with Dominic, the groundskeeper and manager of KAFS station proper (Fredo Tana manages all of MBP's Kianjavato operations, including KAFS and the lemur and reforestation teams: individual team or station managers like Theoluc and Dominic are the next level in the chain of command). We discussed how French and English shared a lot of words, and I mentioned how that was due to the Norman Conquest in 1066. This led to a long discussion of European, world, American, and Malagasy history, Napoleon and Radama I, the American Civil War and French colonization, the Cold War and how Madagascar's ex-dictator Didier Ratsiraka had courted the favor of the Soviet Union, culminating with Obama, who I praised, and Trump, who I execrated. All of this dialogue was conducted in French, which Dominic speaks like a Parisian, and I enjoyed the opportunity to practice the language and discuss such a wide range of topics of interest.

zoma aogositra telopolo ary sabotsy aogositra iraika amby telopolo (Friday August thirtieth and Saturday August thirty-first).

Friday and Saturday were both quite low-key days. On Friday, I didn't go into the field with the simus team, as they were monitoring in a few sites further afield than Sangasanga that could only be accessed by fording bilharzia-infested rivers. If it was entirely up to me, I might not have minded risking it for the sake of working with the team in the field, but it was strict MBP policy not to allow their volunteers to touch, let alone wade through, the parasite-ridden local waterways. So, I spent the day doing data entry and running over the biweekly report and end-of-month budget reckoning with Theoluc. Then, with a surprisingly strong feeling of being bereft, I ceremoniously handed over the keys to the simus



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team gear box, the Keys of Research Assistantship, to Claire. I was proud to note that I had left the simus team with a budgetary surplus (as I had not taken my weekly lunch money, feeling that it would be better saved for team emergencies), a battery bonanza, all data entered, and a full complement of gear. Later that day, I was called over to see a glorious great Madagascar day gecko, *Phelsuma madagascariensis* (pictured), the cladistic sibling of the little *P. lineata* that run around the camp and the cousin of the *Hemipterus mercatorius* that haunt the night. Gecko diversity here is very impressive: likely an example of habitat partitioning, related species dividing resource use in a given area.



Both Friday and Saturday were days rich in “balcony time.” The concrete balcony of the KAFS building is the leisure spot of choice for the five volunteers in my cohort, equipped with two tables, a multitude of chairs, and three hammocks: mine, Soumaya’s, and Dakota’s. Many afternoons and weekend days, once all the work has been done, we are all to be found there, about our various activities. We all have hobbies to pass our spare time: Claire is in the course of knitting a sweater, Soumaya sketching local bird life, Dana and Dakota reading, and I reading and writing. Most of this blog has been written during “balcony time,” including these words as this very moment. Friday evening, we watched *Mamma Mia* on Claire’s smartphone on that balcony, and I wrote most of this entry on Saturday. (We also saw a truly immense huntsman spider, probably in the genus *Damastes*, pictured with my hand for scale. Thanks, iNaturalist!) Thus, like an ouroboros, my tale of this week’s experiences, leads back to itself, and so concludes.

