

Madagascar Diary 2005

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1. Marojejy National Park is home to some of Madagascar's most exciting palms.



Madagascar is one of the world's most exotic places. A renowned hot spot of biodiversity, the island is home to more than 160 species of palms, most of which are endemic to the island. In April, 2005, we joined Bill Beattie (North Queensland, Australia) to visit some of the premier palm destinations on the island.

There are many areas of palm importance scattered over the island, but travel is time consuming and difficult. So we chose to visit areas that have a reputation for a good

selection of palm species. One of the areas that was most inviting was Marojejy National Park situated in the northeast part of the island. Marojejy has large areas of undisturbed forest

and has not been very thoroughly explored by palm researchers.

It was in the first week of April that we visited Marojejy National Park (Fig. 1). Marojejy National Park contains 60,000 hectares and was only opened to the general public in 1998. It contains a large range of elevations starting at 75 m with lowland rainforest and extends to montane heath thicket at the 2132 m summit of Mt. Marojejy (Fig. 2). The terrain is steep and irregular, approaching 45° on the northern slope of the massif. Because of the rapid rise in elevation, there are extreme changes in the climate in a very short distance. This gives rise to an extraordinary number of microclimates and has resulted in evolution of large numbers of species of both flora and fauna. For example, there are over 300 species of ferns identified on Mt. Marojejy. In addition, there are 150 species of amphibians and reptiles, 125 species of birds, 12 species of lemurs, and more than 30 species of palms. Many of these palm species that we saw in habitat were simply extraordinary. The culture of this region has been unchanged for centuries. Many local traditions, as well as superstitions, are still alive today as they were long ago.

From the capital of Antananarivo, we took a short flight to the coastal town of Sambava. From there, we packed ourselves into a very

small taxi. It was fully loaded with gear, then we set out for the Marojejy Mountains. This long drive was an adventure of its own. It starts with buying supplies. The challenge was purchasing rice, beans, sardines, bread, oil, soft drinks, water and chocolate for all of us as well as the porters, guides and the cook for the five days. With the help of our good friend Guy Rafamantanantsoa, who is an experienced botanist and who has accompanied Dr. John Dransfield and Henk Beentje, we purchased the supplies and were off to the park. The park office provided the five porters, the guide and the cook, and away we went through perhaps the most spectacular area of Madagascar.

The first segment of the hike was through degraded lowland forest, bamboo thickets and areas of cultivation. Palms were not numerous but we observed *Dypsis catatiana*, *D. spicata*, *D. mirabilis*, *D. pinnatifrons*, *D. fasciculata* and the non-endemic *Raphia farinifera*. During the hike it is likely we passed other species, but our vision was severely limited by the density of the vegetation. The hike to the park boundary takes about two hours and then another three hours to Camp I (Mantella Camp, named after the local forest tree frog).

Camp I provided large tents, a jungle shower, comfortable cots and hungry bed bugs. The cook prepared large bowls of rice and beans for every meal. This was sometimes supplemented



2. The Marojejy mountains, home to some of Madagascar's most beautiful palms.

3. *Dypsis thiryana* was found with bright red fruits.



4. The attractive crownshaft of *Dypsis baronii*.





5. *Dyspsis marojejyi*.

with fried meat, or we opened our tuna or sardines and added it to the rice. We left on the first morning for Camp II with serious palm hunting in mind. The trail is moderately steep but slippery from the frequent rain. We encountered populations of *Dypsis pinnatifrons* (pink form), *D. heterophylla*, *D. thiryana* (Fig. 3), *D. baronii* (Fig. 4), *D. perrieri* and the Madagascar foxtail, *D. marojejyi* (Fig. 5). *Ravenia* species were *R. robustior* and *R. sambiranensis*. *Marojejya insignis* was a wonderful find (Fig. 6). There were also a few unidentified species.

Lunch was eaten at Camp II: bread, sardines, fruit and chocolate. Camp II is a very picturesque place, and a photo appears in *The Palms of Madagascar* with *Dypsis baronii* on page 199. The pause in the spectacular area of Camp II gave us time to ponder why more people do not make the effort to visit this part of the world. For anyone interested in botany

this is Nirvana. There are untold species of orchids and more than 30 species of palms on this one trail. At the conclusion of day two, we returned to Camp I to spend the night.

The hike on day three was from Camp I all the way to Camp III (Simpona – named after a species of lemur). It is a five hour hike that is steep, slippery and full of botanical surprises. This section of the trail was steeper than any other part. To stay on the trail, we had to grab roots, branches, anything we could to make the climb. As we hiked higher, the canopy height diminished. In the lowland rainforest, the canopy is around 35 m in height. Here at 800–1400 m elevation, the canopy height is 15–25 m. The views are spectacular. The orchids, mosses and ferns change rapidly as the elevation increases. *Dypsis cookei* with its metallic sheen is in scattered groups in a rather narrow elevation range. *Dypsis andrianatonga* (Fig. 7) is much more common and occupies



6 (top). Jeff Searle at the base of *Marojejya insignis*. 7 (bottom). *Dypsis andrianatonga*.

a broader elevation range than *D. cookei*. *Dypsis oreophila* is scattered, and as usual, there are some palms that escape our identification. One of the palms that was in full fruit appeared to

be *D. oreophila* or something similar. We found it difficult to stop and spend time at unidentifiable palms because of the pressure to reach Camp III before darkness. The urge to

discover the next surprise had to wait until morning.

The next morning, the beginning of day four, we began the next stage of the hike. For this section of the trail, we traveled halfway to the summit. The climate was montane, and consisted of heavy thicket mostly less than 2m tall. There were fewer palms the higher we went. We came across the ultra-rare *Dypsis coursii*. Afterwards, we walked back to Camp III to enjoy the remainder of the day. On a previous day of the hike, Bill decided to remain behind at Camp I. To our surprise, Bill had made the huge climb from Camp I to Camp III during that day. He found the determination and energy to make the incredible climb that few others had achieved. The one palm we hoped to find at the summit, *Dypsis pumila*, eluded us.

The final stage of the hike took us through montane thicket mostly less than 2 m tall. There were fewer palms, and they were mostly unfamiliar. We came across *Dypsis coursii* and *D. pumilia*.

After four days of exhilarating hiking up the mountain, we headed back down to Camp I. The trail down is physically easier but more

dangerous because of the risk of a fall. This fact makes it difficult to watch for things we missed on the way up. In spite of our slow progress, we made some wonderful sightings and took time to enjoy the spectacular vistas.

Marojejy is one of the ultimate destinations for palm or nature lovers. The challenges of the hike make the adventure more rewarding. Here is a place visited by only a handful of the world's palm lovers, and that, in itself, makes it a special place. Observing the palms on Marojejy and elsewhere in Madagascar increases our understanding of why some palms just will not grow in the environments that we provide in our gardens. Species that evolved high up in the Marojejy Mountains, or in lower, mid-level elevations, may be a challenge to grow in South Florida. Certain species may not tolerate the higher temperatures, and the sea-level conditions of this region.

We rested for one day in a nice cottage on the Indian Ocean beach and got ready for the next segment of our Madagascar adventure. Our next destination is the Masoala – the “motherlode” for palms. But that is another story that we hope we can share in the future.

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