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The Days I Found Lakatra, and Trouble

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In an earlier article (The days I didn't find Lakatra, in *Principes* January 1993) I promised to tell the story of how I was arrested in the course of duty. It is a rather complicated story, but that is how things sometimes happen in Madagascar.

In November 1991 I visited the Réserve Spéciale de Manombo, in SW Madagascar; I had read about this rarely visited site in the excellent 'Revue de conservation et des aires protégées' (Nicoll and Langrand 1989), which I had been combing for references to palms; under Manombo it said that the place was teeming with *Chrysalidocarpus*. This sounded promising, so I embarked on a field-trip to the area. Lucienne, the wife of Olivier Langrand (one of the authors of the book), warned me that the people of this area were a bit weird, and I said I'd be on my guard. A few days after leaving Antananarivo, my driver parked the car in the parking lot of a rather grotty hotel in Farafangana, and we booked a double room for several days in anticipation of a successful palm hunt: as far as I knew, nobody had ever collected a palm in Manombo.

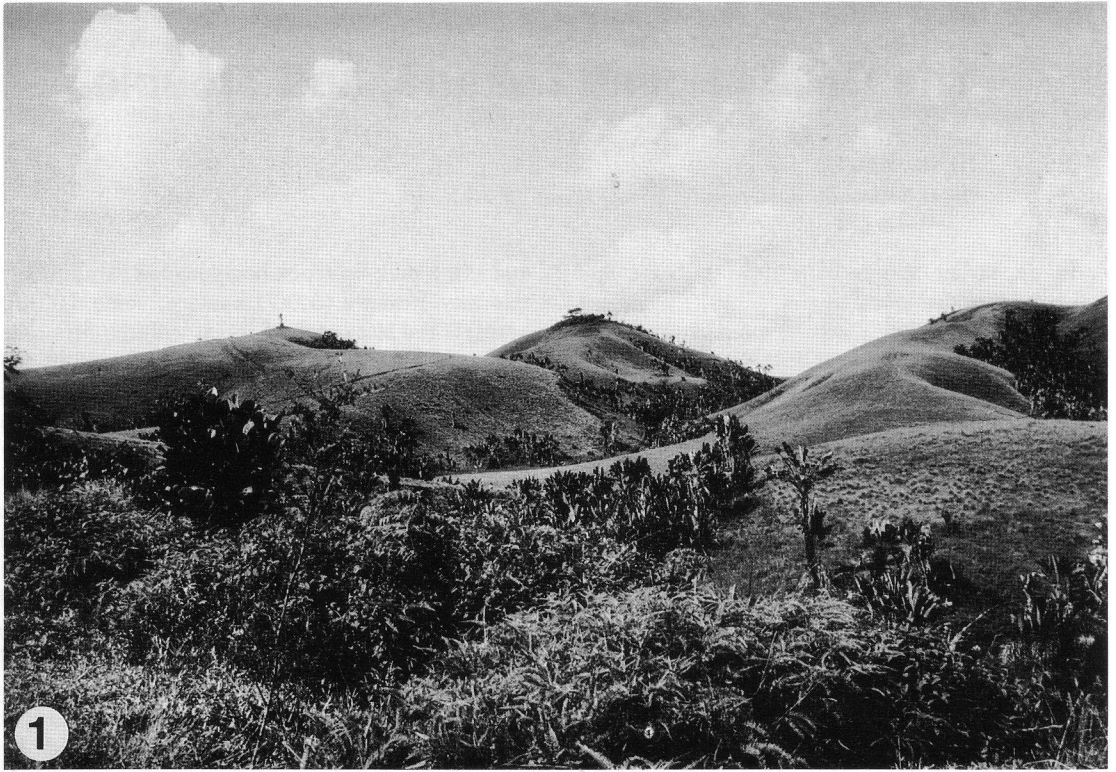
The journey to Farafangana had not been promising: for the last 200 kilometers the road runs parallel to the sea, some 10–20 km inland, and the views from the car had been quite desolate. This is the landscape of the Savoka, as the Malagasy call it, a sea of grassland, with scattered stands of *Ravenala*, the Travellers Palm (but of course not a real palm), caused by endless burning and chopping. This is a somber landscape, despite the brilliant light and vistas (Fig. 1), if you realize that this used to be good forest full of life and products used by man, and man-lit fires have turned it into a virtual desert, unproductive except for some sparse and nearly unpalatable shoots of grass for the few zebu cattle one sees. Erosion cuts red wounds in the hills, and few people manage to scrape a living in this semi-sterile area.

On the way to Manombo, south of Farafangana, it wasn't much better. A few *Ravena sambiranensis* poked through the secondary growth, but it was poor palm country. We came to Manombo

and saw a pick-up truck being loaded with timber; this tiny Reserve (5,000 hectare, some 10,000 acres) is the last patch of forest within a fifty-mile radius of Farafangana. I had a brief tour of the tree nursery with a forest guard. When the herders burnt the land earlier that year, to promote the growth of young grass for their zebu, the nursery had gone up in flames too. It was all rather depressing, but in the meantime, there was work to do for a palm collector. With a few guides, I entered the Reserve, and from that time on I was kept quite busy. *Vonitra fibrosa* was everywhere, and when we came to the real forest, I began to see more species. On the first day there I collected *Neodypsis nauseosus*, eighty years to the month after the type had been collected by Perrier; it had not been seen since then, at least not by botanists! This was an imposing solitary palm of some forty feet high, with almost pendulous leaflets. Its local name is 'Mangidibe', which means 'very bitter' and that conforms nicely to Perrier's report that the palm heart is thought to be poisonous. This does not protect the tree, though; it is still cut down for planks and its leaves used in thatching. I saw about a dozen, and I consider it endangered.

There were several smaller and clustering palms, one of which is to be described as new. I also collected *Dypsis littoralis*, an eighteen foot solitary palm with a thin stem, and the charming *Neophloga integra*, less than a foot high, with entire leaves with only a tiny notch at the very apex (Fig. 2). It was an excellent haul for the day and, after a long processing service in the hotel parking lot (clipping, annotating, measuring, putting flowers in alcohol, laying in between newspapers, tying in bundles—and all the time observed in amazement by the hotel staff), we enjoyed a huge meal of the inevitable rice, but Farafangana being a seaside town, made special with locally harvested crab! A well-deserved beer rounded off a good day.

Next morning I was a bit surprised to have soup for breakfast, instead of the usual rice, and I



thought I saw what Lucienne had meant about the 'weird'. Little did I know what was in store.

When I reached Manombo and had found my guides again, we set off on a different track into the forest. This passed through a wide area of cultivation obviously cut from the forest and, when we reached the forest itself, the track proved to be well-used. It turned out that a company from Farafangana extracted timber from here, and the state of the forest made clear that they did not use half measures. I collected good material from a *Vonitra fibrosa* which had been dragged down by the fall of a larger tree, the *Vonitra* being the commonest palm in this Reserve. The place looked like a battlefield, and only after crossing a stream did we enter more reasonable-looking forest. I soon bagged a *Neophloga simianensis*, a nice, small, clustering palm with entire leaves and a long, unbranched inflorescence (Fig. 3). For a moment I was sidetracked by an unearthly little saprophyte: *Geosiris aphylla* (family Iridaceae, or Geosiridaceae). This is all of three inches high, and has ghostly purple stems and pale mauve flowers.

But soon I was brought back to the palm world by bigger game: *Chrysalidocarpus piluliferus* started appearing, a solitary palm reaching to the canopy, and an extremely beautiful species. At the time I was convinced I had refound *Neodypsis tanalensis*, not seen since 1911, but sadly that still remains unfound. Several of the *Chrysalidocarpus* had been cut for their palmheart, so it was easy to collect good flowering material. But then we approached another stream, and we noticed several giant palm trunks disappearing into the forest canopy. It was not easy to get a good view of the crowns, but at last I found one standing in a gap: it had a distichous crown, with the leaves arranged in a single plane, 'fan-like' like the Travellers Palm (Fig. 4): it proved to be *Halmoorea trispatha*, the rare relative of *Orania*, known previously only from the Masoala Peninsula! There was green fruit on the tree, but obtaining material for a collection posed some problem, since the trunk was some eighty feet high and too smooth for my guides to climb. Cutting down a tree like this was out of the question, it being a very rare species, and my guides knew of fewer than ten trees in the whole forest. There was nothing for



3. *Neophloga simianensis* is an elegant undergrowth palm. 4. *Halmoorea trispatha*, waving its fan above the forest canopy.

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1. Typical "savoka" landscape near Farafangana. 2. *Neophloga integra*: difficult to photograph in the dense forest.

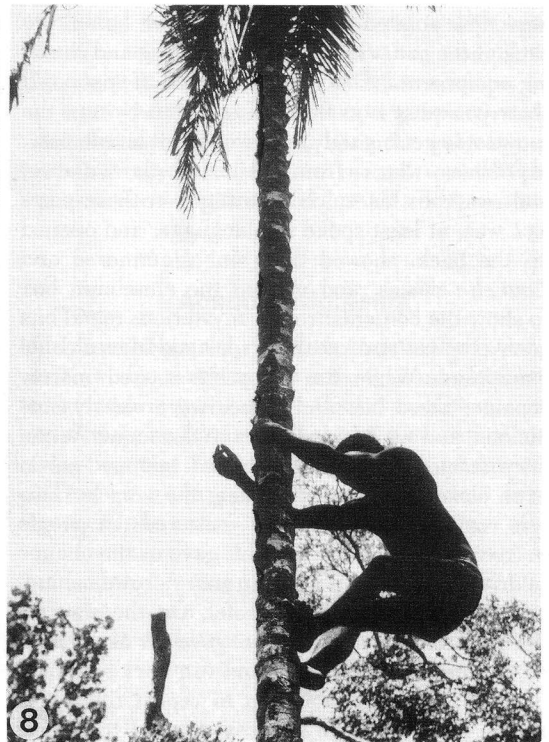
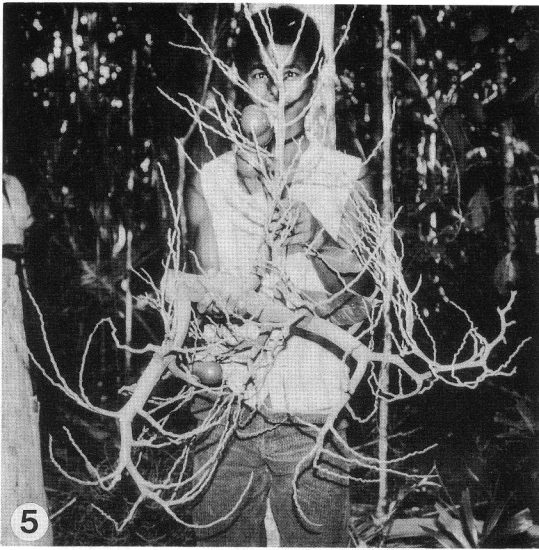
it—I would have to climb this giant myself. I must admit that my heart beat faster than normal when I donned my climbing harness and spikes, as well as a cricket 'box', just in case. I slung my rope belt around the trunk which was a foot in diameter, hooked the running loop into a karabiner on my belt, and started upwards by driving the spike on my left foot into the bark. The wood was hard, which was both good and bad: good because it felt nice and safe once your spike was in, but bad because getting the spike in was not easy, and you had to drive your foot down good and hard. I remember looking upwards soon after starting, and thinking that this was not a good idea: the trunk seemed to go up forever. So I just kept looking straight ahead (view filled by the trunk) and down, to check on my spikes. There is no time to be scared when you are climbing; you have to concentrate, and get on with the job, but there was a moment of pure fear (about halfway up, I think) when my concentration must have flagged slightly and I drove my foot in at the wrong angle. The spike glanced off the bark and I half-lost my balance, and certainly my rhythm. I managed to put the spike back in the previous hole and took a little breather. The ground, by now, looked a long way off. I leaned back on my rope belt and looked up. The crown looked a long way off, as well. I reckoned it was better to act, at this stage, than to think, and therefore continued climbing. There must have been a fabulous view, once I got above the canopy, but I cannot remember it. I do remember reaching the crown, at last, and finding that my line had got snarled; it took minutes to get it free, and to let it down to where my driver attached the 150-foot long climbing rope to it. I started hauling up the climbing rope, passed one end through both end loops of the rope ring I had thrown over one of the *Halmoorea* petioles, attached that end to my climbing harness and knotted the very end of it in a "Prussik" knot to the standing part of the rope. At last I was secure, roped into the crown and could start collecting. I cut some of the fat branches of the inflorescence, full of green fruits the size of tennis balls, growing singly or connate into twos or threes. I threw them down with admonitions to the folk below to catch them, and then started on the leaves. There were eleven leaves in the crown, each about four yards long and *exceedingly* heavy. I am sure of this, because when the second one tumbled towards the earth the whole crown swayed alarmingly—I had cut both from the left side of the crown. I rapidly cut a dead leaf from the right, to restore some

balance, and then it was time to start on my way down. The whole tree was swaying slightly in the wind, and I with it. But once you are roped into a crown like this, descending is a joy: you just let go and hang against the trunk, then you squeeze the prussik knot and slide down the climbing rope. All the same, it was good to reach solid ground again.

Then it was time to measure and annotate. A collection like this takes hours; the writing is not the most glamorous part, but is just as essential as the rest. All the data that cannot be seen from the dried material have to be noted: dimensions, colors, textures, peculiarities of trunk, leaf and inflorescence. Count sixty to sixty-five leaflets on each side of the rachis, take a photo, record eight first-order branches on the inflorescence, take a photo (Fig. 5), ask the guides for the local name, and whether it is used for anything? Yes, they said, the wood is used for house construction. My heart sank. Another one for the endangered list. Then we cut the leaves and inflorescence into manageable pieces, put these in sacks, and staggered back to the car, laden with booty. On the way back I enjoyed the forest views and saw helmeted guineafowl in a tree, as well as two small brown lemurs leaping about. I also saw a lemur trap, so I hung back at the end of the column, and broke it. I had no wish to fall out with my guides, who had been helpful, but on the other hand I do not think people should kill lemurs either. Maybe this is cultural imperialism, but I call it a good deed (for the lemurs, that is).

Back at the car, we ate French bread and tinned sardines, and drank lots of water; we were almost ready to drive off when I spotted a middle-sized *Orania*-like palm which was not an *Orania*. It was, I thought, a *Ravenea*, in full fruit, and a new one to boot. All parts were rock-hard; not just the trunk, but the petioles, the leaf rachis and the inflorescence axes. This last was some eight feet long, one of the longer *Ravenea* inflorescences known (Fig. 6); I opened a fruit, and found two seeds inside; I opened some more, and found that they contained between one and three seeds, and had terminal stigmatic remains. So it was a *Louvelia*, and clearly distinct from all others; *Louvelia manombae*, a new species! We drove back to the main road, I paid the guides and gave them a fat bonus for the excellent finds, and sat back luxuriously as my driver drove me back to Farafangana, the rear of the car filled with sacks full of palm pieces.

In Farafangana we decided to celebrate with a



5. *Halmooea trispatha* inflorescence with young fruit, held by a guide. 6. *Louvelia lakatra* "steps". 7. *Louvelia* inflorescence, the longest ever, held by a guide. 8. The guide who wouldn't believe me—going up.

large beer, before going back to the hotel for a shower and dinner. Riry, the driver, parked the car on the main street. We bought two ice cold bottles of beer from a Chinese merchant, put the car chairs in a reclining position, and started enjoy-

ing the beer thoroughly. As usual, several people gathered around the car, chatting; I did not pay any attention, because this always happened. But more people came, and within a quarter of an hour, the car was surrounded by quite a crowd.

This was fairly unusual. I do not feel at ease when I'm the focus of a lot of attention from strangers, so I decided to return the beer bottles and glasses to the merchant, and to return to the hotel. When I opened the door of the car, people dived away, as if in fear, and formed a chattering wall a good distance away from my path to the store's door. This was most unusual! I cracked a joke in my feeble Malagasy, to lighten the atmosphere, but nobody smiled. Neither did the merchant inside the shop who told me that it would be better if I left town. "But why? Whatever is the matter?" I asked. His answer nearly bowled me over. "The people are angry that you have stolen young girls for their blood. It is better that you leave now." Back at the car Riry had by now gathered more or less the same story that the crowd thought we had kidnapped two young girls and had put them in sacks in the back of the car, taken their hearts and kidneys, and stored them in our freezer—here they pointed to my big aluminum box in the back of the car, where I store collecting and climbing equipment. "Okay, give me a bit of space, I'll show you what is in there" I said, but by now the crowd was getting ugly, and would not let me pass. My driver, who is from the inland plateau area, and so almost as much a stranger in these parts as I was, at least spoke the language, and opened up the back, showed them our *Halmoorea* and *Louvelia* pieces, and opened the aluminum box to show the contents: ropes, mysterious metal bits such as spikes and karabiners, plastic bags, alcohol containers. While the palm bits looked merely strange, these bits and pieces were clearly suspicious, and we decided to leave the scene. When Riry started the car, the crowd hemmed us in even closer and started rocking the vehicle. This was really scary. The horn scattered the people in front for a moment, and this gave us the chance to drive off jerkily. We left an angry crowd behind, and doubled back to our hotel. On the way we decided that this town was not good for our health, so we collected our gear and (on Riry's advice) drove to the Police Station to report the whole thing. The policeman on duty thought the whole thing was a bit of a joke, which put everything back into perspective—until the sergeant came in. Yes, he said, this had happened before, and the fact that our LandCruiser was red had made it worse! Though the logic of this escaped me, our statements were taken, our collecting permits checked, my passport data copied, and then we were escorted out of town by the commissioner

himself—by back roads, not through the high street.

It was hours later that we reached the nearest large town with a reasonable hotel, and we were both very tired. We slept late, and it took until noon to process our plants. Riry was jittery, saying this place was too close to Farafangana for comfort, and he suggested leaving this part of the coast altogether. As the landscape was pretty barren, I decided to do some collecting at a forest over a hundred miles away, where I still wanted to look for Lakatra. After lunch we set off, driving through endless "Savoka", with not a palm in sight. "Stop! Palms!" I suddenly cried. The car braked to a halt and in a tiny bit of forest on a hillside there were lots of palms. There was *Vonitra fibrosa* and *Ravenea madagascariensis*, *Phloga nodifera* and *Orania longisquama*, and incredibly, my new *Louvelia manombae*! This was the moment of truth, because I could see what I thought was a multiple inflorescence in a tree quite close to the road. This could be the "missing link" between *Louvelia* and *Ravenea*, and I had to have those flowers. Full of excitement I put on my climbing harness, and in the hot midday sun slogged up a steep slope to the foot of the palm, climbing spikes in one hand, secateurs in the other. I reached the tree and bent down to look for flowers on the ground, when I jumped as if stung. In fact I had been stung, not once but five times in less than a second, around my mouth, and it hurt like blazes. "Wasp! Get out" cried the driver, and that is exactly what I did. I treated the stings with some cream, while Riry told me this menace was called a Takolampanenitra, and was feared by any sensible person. Luckily I could see another *Louvelia* which looked male, so we went up to it, and I found some old, dead bits on the ground. Then I spotted a third once, definitely male, higher up the hill; we started climbing the slope—and then, much quicker, unclimbed it, because Riry had heard and seen another of those dreaded (and dratted) wasps. This was very frustrating, to be scared off by an insect less than an inch long, but my throbbing lip made me decide that I would come back when these wretched sentinels were less common, that is in the rainy season. And so we drove to our target area, where we checked into a hotel and had a good night's sleep.

The next morning we were up nice and early, and had breakfast in a small *hotely* (bar) on the main street: a bowl of rice, of course. When I came out of the door I was surprised to see police-

men standing next to our car; I was even more surprised to be arrested. Under armed escort we were led to the police station, and formally charged with—abducting young girls, and putting them in sacks. It transpired there had been an all points bulletin on the police radio, with all forces searching for a red car with a Malagasy and a vazaha (foreigner) in it. Our statements were taken, and carefully typed out, and I was quite proud of my officialese French, full of 'I proceeded to' and 'when discussing this with the commissar'. The police were very polite, and I think I convinced them quickly that we were palm collectors, and not vampires. They searched the car, checked my paperwork, and then we were told to drive the investigating officers all the way back to Farafangana! I spluttered that it was 150 miles, and kicked up quite a fuss; eventually radio contact was established with Farafangana. It transpired that our statement in Farafangana had been made to the Police, whereas we had been arrested by the Gendarmes; someone had made an accusation to the Gendarmerie on the day we fled town. But now we were cleared of the kidnapping charge and free to go.

I have told of subsequent events in January, 1993 *Principes*, regarding my futile search for Lakatra.

A year after these events I was in England, working on my revision of *Ravenea* and *Louvelia* (to be published later this year). I had borrowed all the types from Paris, and to my amazement I discovered that I had found *Louvelia lakatra*—in Manombo. My '*Louvelia manombae*' was the true Lakatra. What had fooled me was that the Flora (Jumelle and Perrier de la Bathie 1945), but not the original description, describes the tree as being 15–30 m high, and with a diameter of 15–30 cm, while the wood is described as white and soft. I would treat these later additions with suspicion, since I never saw a tree more than 14 m high, and every tree I saw had wood like rock! True Lakatra is very unlike *Ravenea robustior*, and is in fact immediately recognizable—it has woody 'steps' all the way up the trunk, these being the remnants of the leaf sheaths (Fig. 7). I was now more determined than ever to try and obtain those male inflorescences.

Half a year later I was back in Madagascar. My stay in Farafangana was a brief one, and I did not linger on the street; but in Manombo forest, I managed to finish my collecting. Now I knew what the tree looked like, I could ask the right questions, and my guides quickly brought me to a group of true Lakatra. They were as keen as I was, since I had offered substantial rewards for male flowering branches, but we checked several trees in vain. Then one of the guides came running—he had seen one full of flowers. I followed him eagerly, but his 'flowers' were a group of orchids growing in the upper sheath remnants. Of course the guide wouldn't believe me, and he went up the sheath 'steps' to get his just rewards (Fig. 8); but he got more than he bargained for. When he was halfway up, he shouted something incomprehensible, and scrambled down again. "What was that?" I asked; "Wasps!!!" was the answer. We all ran like blazes.

But at the end of the day we hit the jackpot. Finally, we found a male Lakatra, completely waspless. It only had ancient inflorescences, but at last I had enough to draw up a proper description. I was happy, and so were the guides: they got their rewards. My own reward was that my quest was over at last, and I could start on a new one!

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Andy and the Tree Gang, at Kew, for teaching me how to climb, and how to get down again; Dave Cooke at Kew for the loop trick; and Martin Cheek of Kew, for identifying the *Geosiris*. Lucienne Wilmé of Antananarivo gave me good advice, and I shall listen better in the future.

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