

A close-up photograph of a striped gecko, possibly a species of *Strophodactylus*, resting on a large, vibrant green leaf. The gecko's body is covered in intricate, wavy vertical stripes of brown, tan, and white. Its head is pointed towards the bottom left, and its long, thin tail extends towards the top right. The background is dark and out of focus, showing some brown, textured elements that could be tree bark or other foliage.

Niche constructions
THOMAS BESLEY

The book. Photos by Thomas Besley

Listening to the rainforest is like observing the stars: you are witnessing the movements of ages, hearing echoes of a world that existed before consciousness startled modern man into existence. The natural world links our industrial future to the evolutionary past and the awesome creatures that occupy wild places quietly steward the secrets of our own existence. Without them, we have lost our place in time. This composition is made of Madagascar. The landscape there is unimaginably beautiful and the rainforests support some of the most endangered species on the planet. Guided by gentle and devoted park wardens I was fortunate to have encounters with some of the great island's iconic animals. There was the *Uroplatus* family, leaf-tailed geckos whose markings and body shape are such perfect mimics of fallen leaves that they are undetectable when sitting on a branch less than a metre away; the majestic Helmet Vanga (*Euryceros prevostii*), prize of bird watchers, who would appear just after rain, deftly manoeuvring through dense thickets, flashing his iridescent beak; *Brookesia minima*, a chameleon not longer than your little finger and her cousin *Furcifer pardalis*, cloaked in a pastel rainbow; and of course, the many lemurs and sifakas who also populate the dense patches of jungle I journeyed through. Corralled by an anonymous and saturated crowd of trees, the only landmarks available were distant sounds, of running water or the crack of a bamboo groove wincing under its own weight. Sight receded in the rainforest and sound was the primary sense. Therefore, using the binaural recordings I made gives a unique account of my immersive experience. I can only offer a glimpse into this world. I have tried to give an impression of the different habitats I moved through, allowing the recordings to linger just long enough before moving on, so as not to imply that this is in any way a complete account: compared to the reality it is so impoverished. But some record must be made as the rainforest slowly recedes, taking with it the ecosystems which have taken millennia to evolve. The rainforests of Marojejy which feature in this recording are being decimated by the illegal timber trade, which sends precious woods across the globe for the luxury goods market. In the Masoala peninsula there are still remnants of century old logging tracks, marked by planks of precious hardwood still firm after so much time, reminding passers-by of the naive human fetish for eternity that uprooted these logs. With the fallen trees depart the fauna. Not included here were recordings of the endangered golden-crowned sifaka (*Propithecus tattersalli*), calling out for his lost mate above the sound of artisan miners who uproot trees and clear bushland as they pan for gold in Daraina. They dig because there is a demand, just like the worryingly young women who earn a living as sex workers along the vanilla coast. Although it is demand from outside of Madagascar that creates trade which exploits and destroys the country's human and natural resources, deforestation is also a Madagascan issue. The Malagasy need farmland for crops and wood for fire to support their ever increasing population and have been unrelenting in their destruction of ecosystems. The efforts of the local park wardens is not enough to ward off the destruction of these wild places. It seems our collective duty to supplement their needs with the fruits of industry - solar energy, contraception and efficient agricultural methods - so the Malagasy have choices that were not available in the forging of our developed nations. Maybe this is the way to salvage what is left of our common wild heritage.

I hope you enjoy these recordings and maybe have a chance to witness such places for yourself.

-Thomas Besley

1. Niche constructions

38:13

Areas

0:00 / 7:04. Nosy Mangabe, a small island reserve in the north east. Home to the reclusive aye-aye, leaf tail geckos, sea turtles and various species of lemur.

7:05 / 25:23. Marojejy National Park, a reserve in the prosperous Sava vanilla region in the north east, home to the silky sifaka and subject to some of the most devastating impacts of the illegal logging trade.

25:24 / 31:28. Masoala National Park, just below Marojejy, flanks Antogil bay where humpback whales give birth each year, subject to intensive illegal logging.

31:28 / 38:13. Nosy Mangabe.

Species:

0:00 / 11:32	Mantella Chorus - various species of mantilla frog, many of which are endangered and endemic.
5:14 / 7: 53	Black and White ruffed lemur (<i>Varecia variegata</i>) - Critically endangered, endemic.
7: 53 / 11:33	Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher (<i>Terpsiphone mutata</i>) Least Concern, endemic
11:33 / 12:15	Milne-Edwards' sifaka (<i>Propithecus edwardsi</i>) - Endangered, endemic
16:45 / 25:25	Silky sifaka (<i>Propithecus candidus</i>) - Critically Endangered, endemic
25:25 / 26:27	Blue Coua (<i>Coua caerulea</i>) - Least Concern, endemic
26:27 / 31:10	White-headed lemur (<i>Eulemur albifrons</i>) - Vulnerable, endemic
31:10 / 38:13	Red-ruffed lemur (<i>Varecia rubra</i>) - Endangered, endemic

































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The book behind the release

Photographs: Thomas Besley

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