

Recent records of Brown-tailed Vontsira *Salanoia concolor* (Eupleridae) in Masoala National Park, Madagascar

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Abstract

The presence of Brown-tailed Vontsira *Salanoia concolor* in Masoala National Park, Madagascar, is confirmed from sightings and trapping evidence. It seems rare and has been recorded only in areas remote from human habitation. On present evidence it is only found, across its range, in lowland forest (below 600–700 m).

Keywords: altitudinal use, distribution range, endemic, lowland forest, Malagasy carnivores

Fahitana vao aingana ny Salano *Salanoia concolor* (Eupleridae) ao amin'ny valan-javaboary ny Masoala, Madagascar

Famintinana

Ny fahitana imaso sy ny fandrika nampetraka dia manamafy ny fisian'ny Salano *Salanoia concolor* ao amin'ny valan-javaboary ny Masoala. Vitsy ity karazam-biby ity ary tsy hita raha tsy amin'ny toerana lavitrin'ny faritra misy mipetraka. Atramin'ny izao dia ala lemaka (ambany noho ny 600–700 metatra) no nahitana azy.

Introduction

Over the last 20 years Brown-tailed Vontsira *Salanoia concolor* (Eupleridae), a small mongoose-like carnivore endemic to eastern Madagascar, has been found in several lowland rain-forest areas in northeastern Madagascar: Makira forest (Farris *et al.* 2012, Goodman 2012), Betampona (Britt 1999, Britt & Virkaitis 2003), Mananara Nord (Schreiber *et al.* 1989) and Zahamena (N. Rakotoson *in litt.* 1995). Older records are known from the area between Betampona, Mananara, Zahamena and Masoala (Grandidier & Petit 1932, Albignac 1973). Animals reported around Lake Alaotra (e.g. Garbutt 2007) have turned out to be a hitherto undescribed species, Durrell's Vontsira *S. durrelli* Durbin *et al.*, 2010. *Salanoia concolor* is currently considered Vulnerable B1ab(ii,iii) on *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* (IUCN 2012), and has so far only been recorded from lowland forests (at the sites noted above) at less than 750 m elevation.

The presence of *S. concolor* on the Masoala peninsula of northeastern Madagascar has long been reported (Albignac 1973, Nicoll & Langrand 1989, Schreiber *et al.* 1989) but no details of its presence in, or specific records from, Masoala seem to have been published. Its presence in Masoala is very important from a conservation point of view, because there are few other large areas of lowland forest remaining in Madagascar, this being one habitat type that has suffered very badly over the last 50 years (Harper *et al.* 2007). The ecology and conservation importance of Masoala are described in Kremen *et al.* (2001) and Kremen (2003).

There are no recent records of *S. concolor* from elsewhere, despite greatly increased survey effort in eastern Madagascar. Most of this survey effort has been focused on mid- and high-elevation forests (above 800 m), perhaps accounting for the lack of *S. concolor*. However, recent surveys in forests below 800 m in Marojejy National Park, Anjanaharibe-Sud Special Reserve and the corridor between them have not produced any

observations of *Salanoia* (Safford & Duckworth 1990, Goodman 1998, 2000, Goodman & Wilmé 2003).

This note confirms the species's presence at Masoala and give some indication of its status there. I sought information from people that had spent significant time in Masoala, or that I knew had seen *S. concolor* there. There may be many other people who have seen *S. concolor* in Masoala or elsewhere, and their sightings warrant publication.

Records in chronological order

R. J. Safford (*in litt.* August 2012) has spent many months working in Madagascar on birds and mammals and has experience with most Malagasy carnivores. He visited Andranobe field station (15°41'S, 49°57'E, about 8 km south of the village of Ambanizana on the west coast of the Masoala Peninsula) for 10 days in April 1992. Around midday on 24 April, while in primary forest about 500 m above sea level, two *S. concolor* "trotted past me... exactly as *Galidia* [Ring-tailed Vontsira *Galidia elegans*] had been doing almost daily, and not behaving any differently". The diagnostic dark brown coloration and unmarked tail were seen clearly.

Lily-Arison René de Roland (*in litt.* September 2012) worked an average of six months per year between September 1992 and December 2003 in Masoala, conducting research on raptors while based at Andranobe field station but visiting the whole of the peninsula during this period. He saw *S. concolor* twice only: in February 1993 around 500 m from the Andranobe Field Station; and in July 1995 around 25 km from the field station, in the east of the peninsula.

During May 1996, Vonjy Andrianjarkarivelo (*in litt.* September 2012) of the Wildlife Conservation Society conducted a small mammal survey around Andranobe field station using Sherman and National/Havahart traps. Only the latter traps were capable of catching *Salanoia*, and were baited with dried fish. Three sites around Andranobe were sampled with 20 National/Havahart traps for eight days at each site, giving a

total of 480 trap-days. Only one *S. concolor* was trapped during this exercise. Two other sites, Ambohitsitondroina (15°34'S, 50°00'E) and Bedinta (15°40'S, 49°59'E), both around 5 km from Andranobe, were sampled in a similar way (20 traps at each of three sub-sites for eight days). No *Salanoia* was captured at these sites, although three other carnivore species, including the diurnal *G. elegans*, were trapped across the three sites sampled. The capture of *G. elegans* suggests that the trapping methods were appropriate for *S. concolor*. Details of other captures will be published separately.

In October 1999, Robert Dowsett and Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire visited the eastern side of Masoala, Antsahamananara (15°18'38"S, 50°14'04"E), for four days, visiting forest at an altitude ranging from 50 to 500 m. During this time, their guide reported that he had seen *S. concolor* twice (although they themselves did not); he apparently reliably distinguished this species from the much commoner *G. elegans*. They also spent four days at Sarahandrano (15°17'32"S, 50°17'11"E) without noting *Salanoia* (F. Dowsett-Lemaire *in litt.* August 2012).

BirdQuest Limited are a U.K.-based bird tour company that since 1999 have arranged tours to Masoala (usually staying at the Arol Lodge, on the western side of the peninsula, 5 km south of Andranobe and close to the forest edge). Over ten tours, totalling about 35–40 days in the field, they have never recorded *S. concolor*, despite recording *G. elegans* many times. P. Morris (*in litt.* August 2012), the leader on many of these tours and with 15 years' experience of birds and mammals in Madagascar, considers it unlikely that *Salanoia* would have been overlooked by the tour groups.

At 08h50 on 3 January 2007, about 2 km north-northeast of the Masoala Forest Lodge hotel near Andranobe, at an altitude of about 100 m a.s.l., the author, accompanied by H. Jacoby, J. Durbin and B. Bidani saw two *S. concolor* moving up a shallow valley at about 30 m range (Fig. 1). The animals showed little sign of fear or even awareness of us, and foraged by moving fairly rapidly over the leaf litter with heads down. On one occasion they scampered around, appearing to play with each other. One stood on its hind legs to investigate a trunk, with its paws against the tree. When the author approached closer to



Fig. 1. Brown-tailed Vontsira *Salanoia concolor* near Andranobe, Masoala, Madagascar, 3 January 2007 (Photo: A. F. A. Hawkins).

take photographs, it stood on its hind legs and peered at him for a few seconds (see picture on front cover) before disappearing over a shallow ridge into a deep valley.

This was the only sighting of *Salanoia* during three days spent in the vicinity of the hotel. A *G. elegans* was seen about half an hour after the *Salanoia* sighting, on the edge of primary forest, near a clump of *Aframomum* (Zingiberaceae). Compared with *G. elegans*, these *S. concolor* seemed more slightly built with a longer, thinner snout and a slightly shorter tail that lacked the dark rings characteristic of *G. elegans*.

Conclusions

These observations demonstrate the existence of *S. concolor* in at least two parts of Masoala National Park. Andranobe is the only area where there have been repeated sightings; even there they are irregular, and this is amongst the closest to intact and least disturbed areas of the park. It seems to be absent or much scarcer in some of the more disturbed areas. Its diurnal behaviour and lack of fear of people (at least in two of the observations presented here) would surely mean that if the species were more common, encounters would be more frequent.

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Note added in press. Armand Marozafy, an ecotourist guide for Arol Lodge, has seen single *Salanoia concolor* about once per year for the last fourteen years; once, two together (per Olivier Fournajoux *in litt.* October 2012).