

2023 Expedition to Mangabe

This year, 15 lucky Chester Zoo staff members ventured out to Madagascar as part of the annual staff expedition. Could this be you in 2024?

Each year, Chester Zoo (CZ) staff have the chance to travel to some of our field projects overseen by the Field Programmes team. This is part of the annual staff expedition, funded by the 'Keeper for a day' (KFAD) scheme, where a proportion of the money raised from visitor experiences contributes towards the expedition.

Each department and role here at CZ is intertwined in a joint mission to prevent extinction. However, amongst the minutiae of our everyday jobs, it might not be obvious to see what links us.

This expedition helps to embed conservation into every aspect of the zoo, from the café to the keepers and beyond. It directly connects people from all backgrounds of the zoo and provides an opportunity to get stuck in with fieldwork. Skills gained from the field and the expert knowledge shared by the Field Programmes team give you the confidence and enthusiasm to share your experiences with zoo visitors during your role.





Photo from expedition. Credit, Jess Neale

Mangabe

Mangabe is an area of protected land which spans 27,346 hectares and is home to a diverse hub of endemic species, many of which are threatened with extinction.

Through a raffle, five CZ staff were randomly selected as part of the KFAD scheme for this year's expedition. They were joined by 10 members of the CORE CZ team. On 7 January, everyone embarked on a journey to Mangabe and spent the next two weeks immersed in a new world and routine.

Before your mind drifts and paints a picture of a relaxing holiday where you're soaking up the sun, enjoying a cocktail or two and taking in the breath-taking wildlife, this is no holiday. These expeditions offer the chance to get stuck in with field projects and work alongside partner NGOs.

In Mangabe, CZ partners with Madagascar Voakajy (MV). The KFAD raffle winners received basic training to assist MV with these four projects: freshwater surveys, aiding the development of eco-tourism, helping in plant nurseries and, community awareness and education. The CORE team provided technical support and advice for these projects.

"This expedition reminds us that we learn a lot from our international partners and highlights this invaluable relationship"

Claire Raisin (Regional Field Programme manager for Madagascar and the Mascarenes)



Freshwater surveys

Whilst working in small freshwater streams, the objective of the surveys was to confirm the presence of two endemic species. The CZ and MV team worked together to exchange information and skills as they tested the water quality, collected water samples, and recorded the number of target and invasive species found. The teams had great success in finding 23 individuals of the target species, Ratsirakia legendre pictured on the left.

Eco-tourism

Workshops were created for the wildlife tour guides in Mangabe which provided training on effective storytelling and utilising body language to be engaging. The sessions had immediate positive impacts on the guides as they took time to practice their new skills and lead their own tours in the following sessions. The CORE team also assisted with strategic development for ecotourism in Mangabe. The KFAD scheme provided funding for water wells, solar panels and a water tower to be built in the Mangabe camp. This provided fresh drinking water, a shower and a toilet block (a real luxury compared to a hole in the ground!).



Plant nurseries

The CORE CZ team shared their knowledge and skills with the MV nursery team by providing training on propagation, soil management and workshops on plant phenology. They built an exciting new specialised composting unit at the nursery. A whopping 3,150 trees were planted in a deforested area to help with habitat restoration, which was only possible through the collaboration of the local community, MV and CZ team! On one day, a few members from CZ ventured on a trail to find orchids that could be used to build an orchid demonstration pod. This would help teach tourists about the unique plants to look out for, which could help open the niche industry of Botanic Tourism.

Community and Education

Training sessions were held with members from a youth for lemurs group and local women's group to explore the use of resources in their communities. Jess Neale and Nicola Buckley created various community resources, including storybooks and interactive games, to support the sessions. Sewing classes were available to the women's group to help expand their skill set. They learnt how to sew some of their own clothes and other items that could be sold to tourists to generate income.



Meet this years winners

Lauren Roberts



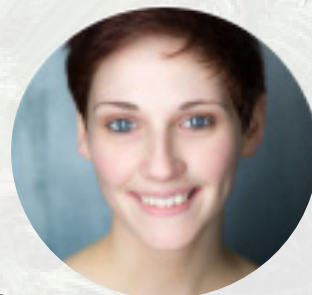
Working with the Operations team, Lauren's role varies from operating the boat ride to setting up the zoo for exciting annual events like lanterns!

Having studied wildlife conservation at university, Lauren was excited to see the Field Programmes team in action during this expedition. One item Lauren couldn't travel without on this trip was a journal and pen, which she wrote in each night to preserve the memories of her daily activities.

Lauren spent a lot of her time on the trip helping with the freshwater surveys. She said *"It was amazing to learn of the plans for the data we were collecting, especially with the DNA sampling that we were doing to record species into a worldwide database."*

If anyone got a bad bug bite, it was straight over to Lauren's tent for the first aid kit!

Tess Neale



Jess is the Conservation Education Officer who works as part of the school's team within the CE&E. A lot of the teaching she is involved with explores human and wildlife relationships and the chance to see this first-hand on the expedition was *"invaluable"*.

Before the trip, Jess was a little nervous. Understandably, *"that's to be expected when you're travelling to the other side of the globe to camp in the middle of the rainforest!"*. This expedition gave Jess a *"better understanding of the work that our field partners Madagascar Voakajy do and how the zoo supports this. But more importantly, I now have such a strong appreciation of why they do it"*.

Jess also expressed that she would miss her daily chocolate and on return, that was the one little luxury she wished she had packed! Jess can't travel without her camera and took some great photos of the Malagasy wildlife!

Adam Trimmings



Adam works with lower vertebrates and invertebrates as a keeper. He cares for a wide range of species within the tropical realm and off-show. He also manages the live food room which contains many species of invertebrates to feed their animals.

Adam works with many Malagasy species at the zoo which include the golden mantella and Parsons' chameleons. During the expedition, he had the opportunity to see some of these species thrive in their natural habitat.

Going into this trip one of his main goals was to *"gain insight into the habitats of the species we keep and breed at the zoo. Getting a better understanding of how we can keep them here at the zoo is priceless"*.

Paul Round



Paul is the lead keeper for Giraffes. Paul's highlight from this expedition consisted of a mixture of things which included *"meeting the local people working to conserve their wildlife (Madagascar Voakajy), seeing the endemic wildlife of the island and actively getting involved in in-situ conservation work."*

On this trip, he met new people from other departments in the zoo and said it was a *"privilege to be involved in active conservation in the field."*

Karen Grant



Karen is the Information Governance Manager at Chester Zoo. She loves the outdoors and tending to her garden at home.

Having not been camping since she was a teenager, Karen was recently pushed out of her comfort zone when she had to live in a tent for 2 weeks in Mangabe! In preparation for this trip, Karen only took the essentials. *"The minimum amount of clothing and a maximum amount of bug spray and Imodium!"*

"In an administrative role, it's a bit abstract as to how I support our Mission. Volunteering on this expedition gave me a chance not only to do something on a practical level, but also to see how our brilliant conservation team are helping to prevent extinction."

So, what was it like?

Q What was it like waking up in camp?

A Picture this. You slowly start to drift awake to the distant sounds of movement emerging from each tent or the occasional indri call from the forest. It's 5:30am which might be earlier than you're used to but in Mangabe, waking up at this time gives you a crucial cool start to the day before the sun's heat intensifies. Although cosy, the confinements of the tent might require some acrobatics as you get dressed. As Jess Neale puts it, you'll then "burst free like some undignified adult baby" from the tent "blinking in the grey morning light". You all gather around the massive table at the heart of camp and "shovel down some food" to fuel your day which starts at 6:30am.



Q What was the most challenging thing?

A When it came down to finding out what was the biggest challenge, there was one common answer. The rain. Unsurprisingly, it rained a lot during the rainy season in Mangabe, and the team found this challenging whilst trekking through thick jungle and difficult terrain. Nevertheless, the team continued to power through in these conditions.



Fun Fact!

How long does a jar of Nutella last in your house? Well, if it lasts over 24 hours, that's longer than it did in the Mangabe camp! When asked if there was anything the team wished they took with them, would you expect that some form of condiment would be the most popular answer? No, neither did I. Love it or hate it, a jar of marmite and some Nutella wouldn't go amiss according to Lauren, Jess and Adam.

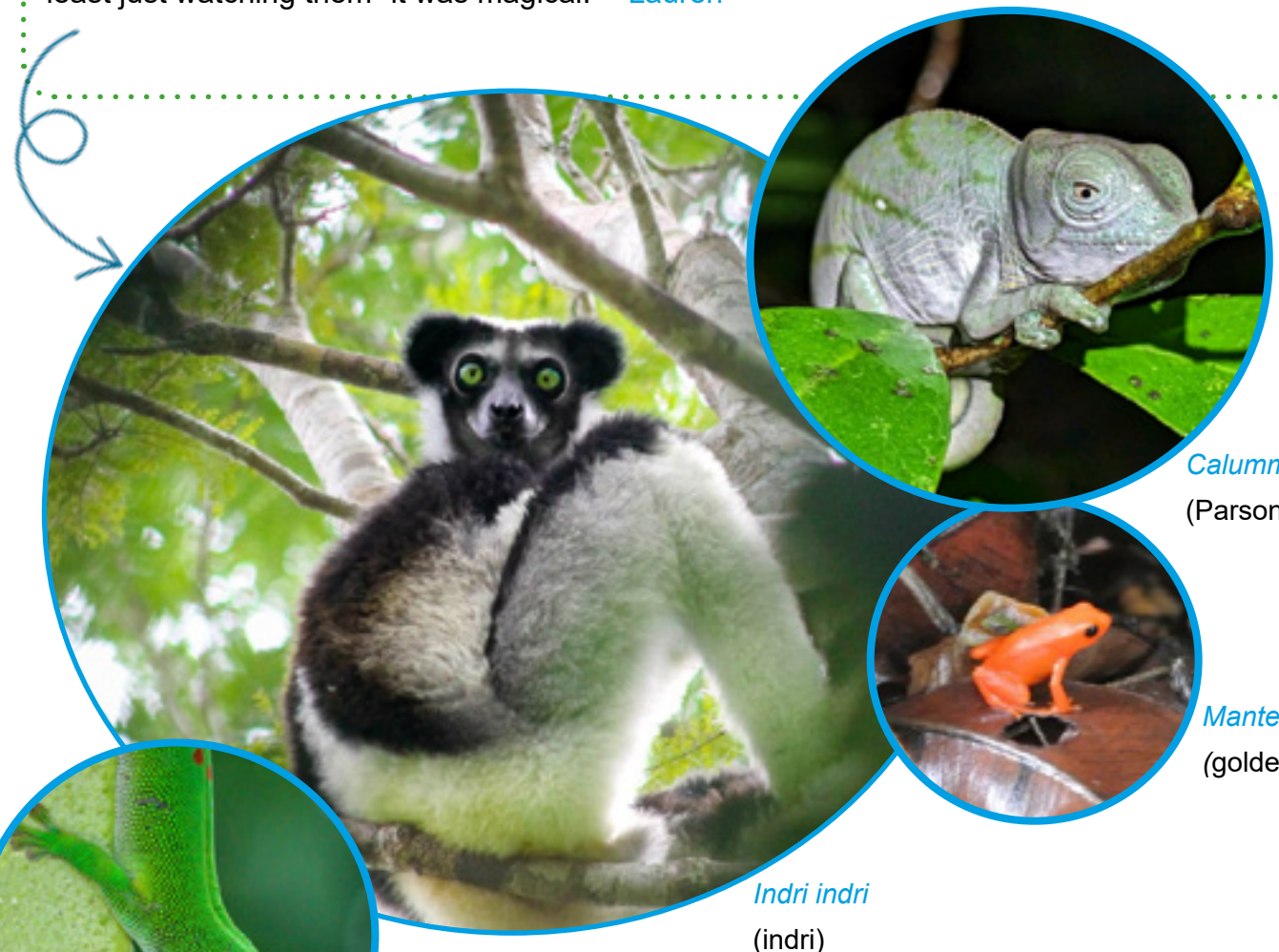
Q What was your wildlife highlight?

A "Seeing wild golden mantella was a dream come true as I look after them on a daily basis in tropical realm. We managed to find a mossy leaf tail gecko as well which was an incredible experience!" - Adam

"Wildlife highlight was all of it! I saw seven different species of lemur, countless numbers of reptiles like snakes and chameleons, and of course hundreds of golden mantella frogs. The wildlife of Madagascar really is so special and unique." - Jess

"If I had to choose it would be seeing a wild indri and golden mantella as this is one of the only places in the world you can see them!" - Paul

"There was a day towards the end of our time at Mangabe Camp where I had the chance to go on two tourist walks through the rainforest. We had done a few throughout the week but this particular day was special. Our guide Cellin was a lemur whisperer and found us a total of five Indri in one day! Hard to do as the sightings can be rare in that part of the forest. There was a pair we came across on our first walk practically above us in a tree and we spent over half an hour at least just watching them- it was magical." - Lauren



Calumma parsonii
(Parson's chameleon)

Mantella aurantiaca
(golden mantella)

Indri indri
(indri)

Phelsuma grandis
(giant day gecko)

Q What was your favourite part of the expedition?

A “One night a very competitive dominos game took place with a couple of Chester Zoo staff and then some of our Malagasy guides and MV staff. It was great to watch because even though there was a language barrier there was a mutual understanding of the game.” - [Lauren](#)

“Favourite part of the trip is a hard one... there are 3 really stand out moments for me, the first one was seeing a pair of indri relaxing in a tree less than 30ft away, the second was visiting the village and everything we did with the local community as they were so warm and welcoming, and the third was working and spending time with so many fantastic people from other departments of the zoo who I wouldn't normally get to see.” - [Jess](#)

“It's hard to sum up my best part as there are many! But probably just being in the Mangabe rainforest with the MV team, learning about the plants and wildlife found there.” - [Adam](#)



Calumma brevicorne
(elephant ear chameleon)

Q Do you feel this experience was of value, if so, how?

A “I have come away from this trip with so much. Think we have all said that we arrived in Madagascar as colleagues and left as friends. I truly believe that! It was a once in a lifetime opportunity to visit Madagascar and it was everything I wanted it to be and more.” - [Lauren](#)

“Massively. Meeting new and like-minded people, contributing to field work and meeting the people of Madagascar and their unique and fascinating wildlife.” - [Paul](#)

“Absolutely. Because of this experience I have met passionate people from the other side of the world, learned about other cultures and communities, seen incredible wildlife, learned new skills, gained a huge appreciation and understanding of the importance of field projects and Chester Zoo's partners, and made some life-long friends.” - [Jess](#)

“Oh 100%, I've learned so much about the country, its land and the animals found there. Madagascar is one of the poorest countries in the world, and the need for conservation is huge. I knew this before the trip but just seeing it with my own eyes really hit home.” - [Adam](#)

Q Is there anything from this expedition that you can integrate into your role at the zoo?

A “Working with such a diverse group of people from the zoo meant that we could all share ideas with each other from our departments to theirs and vice versa. So, I think that's definitely something I will come back with is being able to have those kinds of conversations with people from other departments with ways we can work together and help each other.” - [Lauren](#)

“I got to learn new horticultural skills and tap into people's knowledge. I also got the chance to learn new skills when on the fish survey too.” - [Paul](#)

“My role is in education, and we often teach about our conservation work and how important it is, so to be able to speak from a first-hand experience is invaluable. I also feel I understand a lot more about Malagasy plants as well so would love to integrate that into a workshop sometime!” - [Jess](#)

“I work with many Malagasy reptiles and amphibians. So having been in their natural habitat has enabled me to better understand the environments we recreate for them in the zoo.” - [Adam](#)

Can you spot the mossy leaf tail gecko?



Credit, Claire Raisin

Location revealed on page 11...




Top tips from this years expedition

“**Just do it.** It is honestly the most amazing thing you will ever do. Don’t think it is a holiday though! Pack light but pack well. Have waterproof walking boots and be prepared to take plastic bags with you to put inside your boots when they get soaked!”

“Remember everything because it is over before you realise. I would definitely recommend taking a journal.”

Lauren Roberts



“Enjoy every second you are there, even in the rain. Take a pack of UNO playing cards, and have a reasonable level of **fitness**, some days are hard going so prepare for it prior to heading out.”


Adam Trimmings

“Ask questions. **Talk** to as many people as possible because everyone, whether they are from Chester Zoo or Madagascar, are always so happy to share their knowledge and stories and it’s through these that we learn and grow. Also, there will be a LOT of walking.”

Jess Neale

“Take it all in your stride, immerse yourself in the experience and **get involved** in all of it!”

Paul Round




Charles Wheeler is the Project officer of Madagascar and the Mascarenes. He described this expedition as a “once in a lifetime opportunity” and had a great time taking the KFAD team on this trip.



Credit, Jess Neale

Location reveal



Picture *yourself* getting stuck in on a once in a lifetime expedition?

Keep an eye out in zoo comms for next years applications!





Author

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