

**SEYCHELLES & MADAGASCAR  
WITH ALDABRA ATOLL  
ABOARD THE *SILVER DISCOVERER*  
OCTOBER 20–NOVEMBER 6, 2018**



Pitta-like Ground Roller was found near a freshly dug nest in Amber Mountain NP (Photo M. Valkenburg)

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**By Machiel Valkenburg**

When I learned about the option of leading this fascinating Zegrahm cruise for VENT, I jumped right on it, as I knew it would deliver some spectacular birds, mammals, and landscapes. Oooh man I was right! The trip started in paradisiacal surroundings on the island of Mahe, the largest of all islands that together form the Seychelles. Before embarking the *Silver Discoverer*, we planned some pre-tour birding. In the afternoon we made an outing to find the rare Seychelles White-eye, Seychelles Blue-Pigeon, and Seychelles Sunbird. Rapidly they were found, and good looks were enjoyed by all. In the evening after dinner we went out for probably the rarest and most difficult bird of the entire tour, the Seychelles Scops-Owl. For a long time we heard no response, but just before we decided to leave the designated spot we heard one quick rasping call. Soon after, we found the bird in full delight—just amazing!



The enchanting Seychelles Sunbird has a very restricted range (photo M.Valkenburg)

Our journey would take us from several Seychellois islands to Madagascar, visiting the world-famous Aldabra Atoll on the way, ending the trip with visits to Reunion and Mauritius. This adventure was one-of-a-kind, with our program visiting so many difficult to reach places where we had the chance of finding many of the world's most hard-to-get endangered species. We cruised the Seychelles for about a week visiting Mahe as well as La Digue, Praslin, the Poivre Atoll in the Amirantes, Assumption Island and, finally, the major highlight—the Aldabra Atoll. Every island had its own specialties where remarkably almost all had their own species of Sunbird or White-eye. On Praslin we found the Seychelles Black Parrots; this proved challenging under the closed canopy of the primeval palm forest of Vallée de Mai National Park, a very impressive UNESCO World Heritage Site with the endemic Coco de Mer. On La Digue the Seychelles Paradise-Flycatcher was the big catch; they are rather common in the right habitat, and we found them easily. This brilliant flycatcher has an all-black plumage and stands out very much from all other Asian Paradise-Flycatchers.

On the Poivre Atoll we birded the beach while the majority of those on the ship snorkeled the waters nearby. On a sandy stretch we found a good selection of shorebirds where the large Crab Plovers stood out from the other smaller and grayer typical northern hemisphere birds that now had reached a dull non-breeding plumage. Here we found, for example, Common Greenshank, Curlew Sandpiper, Sanderling, Whimbrel, and Greater Sand-Plover. The first of many White Terns, Lesser Noddy, and Brown Noddy were recorded.



The tropical scenery of Mahe island, our starting point of the tour! (photo M. Valkenburg)



An elegant Red-tailed Tropicbird hovering above its nest at Aldabra Atoll (photo M.Valkenburg)

After Poivre we headed straight for the Aldabra Atoll; this was a rather wild crossing with several glasses being shattered and not surviving the crossing until the calmer waters at Aldabra. Aldabra is the second

largest coral atoll in the world and also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We learned that a constant population of around 30 persons inhabits the sanctuary. They are responsible for research and planning but also guiding the few visitors the atoll receives every year. All our bags were cleaned on the ship from possible invasive seeds. The sky was filled with Red-footed Boobies, splendid White-tailed and Red-tailed tropicbirds, Lesser and Greater frigatebirds, a couple of Sooty Terns, and the occasional Brown Noddy.



abbotti race of Malagasy Sacred Ibis is a possible split. (photo M. Valkenburg)



One of the cute Aldabra White-eyes that we found on Aldabra and Assumption Island (photo M. Valkenburg)

Birding on the atoll was superb with all species not being afraid of humans as they no longer pose a threat. The famous Aldabra race of the White-throated Rail was running around more or less everywhere. They literally walk right under you and come have a look in your lens when you try to photograph them. The other targets were also quickly found with the Aldabra Drongo, Aldabra White-eye, and Aldabra Fody all being endemic to the atoll. The abbotti race of Malagasy Sacred Ibis strutted by in search of a next meal. The final target here was the Comoro Blue-Pigeon which, unfortunately, only gave some fly-by views.



A close-up of Aldabra Giant Tortoise (photo M. Valkenburg)



Picard research station at Aldabra Atoll (photo M. Valkenburg)

Another major highlight was the Aldabra Giant Tortoise that luckily is now very common again; they were almost extinct as western sailors caught them for food on their passage to India. These colossal tortoises are very friendly and love it when they are scratched on those difficult to reach places. It was a great experience to be eye-to-eye with such an ancient creature. Our next stop was the island of Assumption where we spent the morning birding and snorkeling. On the beach we quickly found some gorgeous Aldabra White-eyes together with the Abbott's Sunbird, a race of Souimanga Sunbird quickly found as well, the latter being very attractive as shown in the picture below.



Abbott's Sunbird was found on the beach at Assumption, a race of Souimanga Sunbird! (photo M. Valkenburg)

We left the Seychelles and went straight for the north of Madagascar where a couple of days of very good birding awaited us. When you step off the ship into Madagascar, you transfer yourself into a whole different world. At first it seems very hectic, but slowly you discover some routine and order in this busy African nation. The two most significant places we visited during our time in Madagascar were Amber Mountain NP and Masoala NP. We enjoyed birding the rainforests here and encountered many good birds. Some highlights here were the cracking views of several Pitta-like Ground Rollers that had just dug out some fresh nesting burrows; a wonderful Blue Vanga followed by a very attractive Blue Coua, not long after we were delighted to find a sneaky Red-breasted Coua moving through the thicket; the range-restricted endemic Amber Mountain Rock-Thrush; and finally, the bird of the trip for many of us, the Helmet Vanga!

Naturally we did not only encounter birds; the Red Island is also home to a fine selection of endemic mammals where, obviously, the lemurs are the most attractive. Over the course of several days we encountered these enigmatic animals on several occasions. These cuddly creatures are pretty vocal and were found foraging on nectar most of the time. White-fronted Brown Lemur was very attractive but rather shy compared to the other species. We experienced some large groups with Red-ruffed Lemurs who were for me personally the most attractive and interesting of all encountered lemurs.



Helmet Vanga; bird of the trip for many of us! (photo M. Valkenburg)

Madagascar is a wonderful bird island, but unfortunately you have to be fast to witness their beauty. Slash and burn is seen everywhere; we drove for around 2 hours from Amber Mountain to the ship, and most of the habitat outside of the national park was destroyed and turned into agricultural fields.



Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur is quite dashing (photo B. Stephenson)

We left Madagascar with a full day at sea where, unfortunately, we did not see any birds. Just before Reunion we scheduled a little chumming session with rotten fish that had been fermenting since the start of the tour, about two weeks ago! We knew it would be a long shot, but you never know; the endemic Mascarene Petrel occurs in these waters. We slowed down to 2 knots and started to make a trail. Seabirds are so amazing that they can smell the fish from a distance of many, many miles. As we had no bird sightings throughout the entire day, we were surprised by how quickly the first Wedge-tailed Shearwater appeared at the horizon. Quickly after, Brent noticed a small blackish bird flying to the west, a storm-petrel. We had some excitement and quick views before the bird left as fast as it had appeared. A possible Wilson's Storm-Petrel!



Yours truly cutting up the rotting fish for a little chumming session ☺ (photo B. Stephenson)

Our last days of the tour were spent on the islands of Reunion and Mauritius, two islands very closely located to each other but very different in feel and habitat. Reunion is still part of France and has a south France atmosphere with excellent roads and small little bars. Here also, conservancy of their natural habitat is high on the priority list whereas Mauritius is closely related to India, bringing along a large workforce, busy and hectic roads, and a lot of agricultural habitat. On Reunion we met Erik, a French national who moved to Reunion around 20 years ago. He was a great guide, and we had a great day with him exploring Reunion. In the beautiful Parc National de Reunion we searched and found again many endemics, starting with the pleasing Reunion Stonechat and fair Reunion Gray White-eye. Both proved common and very easily approached. The Reunion White-eye was found as well but was much less common. A few sightings of Reunion Bulbul and Mascarene Paradise-Flycatcher pleased all of us, the latter being very appealing. Leaving Reunion in the evening, we came together hoping for some seabirds around the island. We were lucky and had a great time with close views of hundreds of Tropical Shearwaters and tens of Barau's Petrel, which is an endemic breeder on the island.

We reached Mauritius and disembarked while heading out for some final birding in Black River Gorges National Park. In the pine forest, the once almost extinct Pink Pigeon was the first bird we found, together with the Mauritius Bulbul. A short stroll delivered the Mauritius Fody, a cute Echo Parakeet, and also both white-eyes. The Mascarene Swiftlet flew overhead and was another regional endemic. We finished the tour with a tasty Indian lunch buffet, after which we headed to the airport.

I'd like to give a big thank you to all the Zegrahm staff, especially Michael 'Mimo' Moore, Lynne Greig, and my birding mate Brent Stephensen. We had some good laughs and great support throughout the tour. Thanks guys, for the great service. Finally, another big thank you to our group who enjoyed all aspects of nature and culture throughout this wonderful and very special journey. We encountered some truly great bird, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and plenty of orchids or other special plants. I am already looking forward to my next visit to the region.



The group waiting to be successful for a Seychelles Black-Parrot (photo B. Stephenson)



Reunion White-eye, a gray-headed brown morph (photo B. Stephenson)



Zodiac excursion at the Aldabra Atoll alongside a Red-footed Booby (photo B. Stephenson)



The flightless Aldabra Rail is a race from the White-throated Rail but definitely a possible split....  
(photo B. Stephenson)



The alluring Pink Pigeon is not just your common neighborhood pigeon! (photo B. Stephenson)



One of many Barau's Petrel near Reunion (photo B. Stephenson)



The very alluring Mascarene Paradise-Flycatcher (photo B. Stephenson)



The gorgeous Folohy Golden Frog *Mantella laevigata* is threatened and has also a declining habitat range in northern Madagascar (photo B. Stephenson)



Here we had just found the all-black plumage Seychelles Paradise-Flycatcher (photo B. Stephenson)

**BIRDS:** This Checklist order, and common and scientific names are those given by James F. Clements in *The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, Cornell University Press, with all current updates. Possible or debated species splits and alternative Common and Scientific names (particularly those of the Oriental Bird Club) are given in ( ) or included in heavily bordered boxes. (I) = introduced species. (E) = Endemic. (RE) = Regional Endemic.

COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	COMMENTS
<b>Ducks, Geese &amp; Waterfowl</b>	<b>Anatidae</b>	
White-faced Whistling-Duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>	
<b>Pheasants, Grouse &amp; Allies</b>	<b>Phasianidae</b>	
Blue-breasted (King) Quail	<i>Synoicus chinensis</i>	Heard only
Gray Francolin	<i>Francolinus pondicerianus</i>	
<b>Grebes</b>	<b>Podicipedidae</b>	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	
<b>Shearwaters &amp; Petrels</b>	<b>Procellariidae</b>	
Barau's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma barau</i>	
Wedge-tailed Shearwater	<i>Ardenna pacifica</i>	
Tropical Shearwater	<i>Puffinus bailloni</i>	
Storm-petrel spec.	?	
<b>Tropicbirds</b>	<b>Phaethontidae</b>	
White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>	
Red-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon rubricauda</i>	
<b>Frigatebirds</b>	<b>Fregatidae</b>	
Lesser Frigatebird	<i>Fregata ariel</i>	
Great Frigatebird	<i>Fregata minor</i>	
<b>Boobies &amp; Gannets</b>	<b>Sulidae</b>	
Masked Booby	<i>Sula dactylatra</i>	
Red-footed Booby	<i>Sula sula</i>	
<b>Cormorants &amp; Shags</b>	<b>Phalacrocoracidae</b>	
Long-tailed Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo africanus</i>	
<b>Hérons, Egrets &amp; Bitterns</b>	<b>Ardeidae</b>	
Yellow Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus sinensis</i>	
Gray Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	
Little (Dimorphic) Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta dimorpha</i>	
Black Heron	<i>Egretta ardesiaca</i>	
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	
Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	
Madagascar Pond-Heron (RE)	<i>Ardeola idae</i>	
Striated (Little) Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>	

Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

**Ibises & Spoonbills**

**Threskiornithidae**

Madagascar Ibis (E) (Madagascar Crested Ibis)	<i>Lophotibis cristata</i>	
Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>	
Malagasy Sacred Ibis (E)	<i>T. aethiopicus abbotti</i>	in Aldabra
Malagasy Sacred Ibis (E)	<i>(T. aethiopicus bernieri)</i>	in Madagascar

**Hawks, Eagles & Kites**

**Accipitridae**

Reunion Harrier (RE) *Circus maillardi*  
Madagascar Buzzard (E) *Buteo brachypterus*

**Rails, Gallinules & Coots**

**Rallidae**

White-throated Rail (RE) *Dryolimnas cuvieri*  
Eurasian (Common) Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

**Flufftails**

**Sarothruridae**

Madagascar Wood-Rail (E) *Canirallus kioloides*

**Plovers & Lapwings**

**Charadriidae**

Black-bellied (Gray) Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*  
Lesser Sand-Plover *Charadrius mongolus*  
Greater Sand-Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*  
Madagascar Plover *Charadrius thoracicus*  
Kittlitz's Plover *Charadrius pecuarius*  
Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

**Sandpipers & Allies**

**Scolopacidae**

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*  
Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*  
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*  
Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*  
Sanderling *Calidris alba*  
Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*  
Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

**Crab-Plover**

**Dromadidae**

Crab-Plover *Dromas ardeola*

**Pratincoles & Coursers**

**Glareolidae**

Madagascar Pratincole (RE) *Glareola ocularis*

**Gulls, Terns & Skimmers**

**Laridae**

Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*  
Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris*  
White Tern *Gygis alba*  
Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus*  
Saunders's Tern *Sternula saundersi*

Black-naped Tern  
 Bridled Tern  
 Common Tern  
 Great Crested Tern

*Sterna sumatrana*  
*Onychoprion anaethetus*  
*Sterna hirundo*  
*Thalasseus bergii*

**Pigeons & Doves**

Rock (Feral) Pigeon (I)  
 Pink Pigeon  
 Madagascar Turtle-Dove (RE)  
 Namaqua Dove  
 Zebra Dove  
 Madagascar Blue-Pigeon (E)  
 Comoro Blue-Pigeon  
 Seychelles Blue-Pigeon

**Columbidae**

*Columba livia*  
*Nesoenas mayeri*  
*Streptopelia picturata*  
*Oena capensis*  
*Geopelia striata*  
*Alectroenas madagascariensis*  
*Alectroenas sganzini*  
*Alectroenas pulcherrimus*

**Cuckoos**

Blue Coua (E)  
 Red-breasted Coua (E)  
 Madagascar Coucal (RE)  
 Madagascar Cuckoo (RE)

**Cuculidae**

*Coua caerulea*  
*Coua serriana*  
*Centropus toulou*  
*Cuculus rochii* *Heard only*

**Owls**

Seychelles Scops-Owl

**Strigidae**

*Otus insularis*

**Nightjars & Allies**

Madagascar Nightjar (RE)

**Caprimulgidae**

*Caprimulgus madagascariensis*

**Swifts**

Seychelles Swiftlet  
 Mascarene Swiftlet  
 Madagascar Swift (RE)  
 African Palm-Swift  
 Mascarene Martin

**Apodidae**

*Aerodramus elaphrus*  
*Aerodramus francicus*  
*Apus balstoni*  
*Cypsiurus parvus*  
*Phedina borbonica*

**Kingfishers**

Malagasy Kingfisher (RE) (Malagasy Malachite Kingfisher) (RE)
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**Alcedinidae**

<i>Corythornis vintsioides</i>
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Madagascar Pygmy-Kingfisher (E)

*Corythornis madagascariensis*

**Bee-eaters**

Madagascar (Olive) Bee-eater

**Meropidae**

*Merops superciliosus*

**Ground-Rollers**

Short-legged Ground-Roller (E)  
 Pitta-like Ground-Roller (E)

**Brachypteraciidae**

*Brachypteracias leptosomus*  
*Atelornis pittoides*

**Falcons & Caracaras**

Madagascar Kestrel (RE)  
 Seychelles Kestrel (E)

**Falconidae**

*Falco newtoni*  
*Falco araeus*

Peregrine Falcon

*Falco peregrinus*

**Old World Parrots**

Seychelles Parrot (E)  
Lesser Vasa-Parrot (RE)  
Rose-ringed Parakeet  
Echo Parakeet (E).

**Psittaculidae**

*Mascarinus barklyi*  
*Mascarinus nigra*  
*Psittacula krameri*  
*Psittacula eques*

**Vangas, Helmetshrikes & Allies**

Common Newtonia (E)  
Tylas Vanga (E)  
Red-tailed Vanga (E)  
Blue Vanga (RE)  
Hook-billed Vanga (E)  
Helmet Vanga (E)  
White-headed Vanga (E)

**Vangidae**

*Newtonia brunneicauda*  
*Tylas eduardi*  
*Calicalicus madagascariensis*  
*Cyanolanius madagascarinus*  
*Vanga curvirostris*  
*Euryceros prevostii*  
*Artamella viridis*

**Cuckooshrikes**

Ashy Cuckooshrike (RE)

**Campephagidae**

*Coracina cinerea*

**Drongos**

Aldabra Drongo  
Crested Drongo (RE)

**Dicruridae**

*Dicrurus aldabranus*  
*Dicrurus forficatus*

**Monarch Flycatchers**

Mascarene Paradise-Flycatcher  
Seychelles Paradise-Flycatcher  
Madagascar Paradise-Flycatcher (RE)

**Monarchidae**

*Terpsiphone bourbonnensis*  
*Terpsiphone corvina*  
*Terpsiphone mutata*

**Crows, Jays & Magpies**

House Crow  
Pied Crow

**Corvidae**

*Corvus splendens*  
*Corvus albus*

**Swallows**

Mascarene Martin (RE)

**Hirundinidae**

*Phedina borbonica*

**Bulbuls**

Red-whiskered Bulbul  
Madagascar Bulbul (RE)  
Seychelles Bulbul  
Reunion Bulbul  
Mauritius Bulbul

**Pycnonotidae**

*Pycnonotus jocosus*  
*Hypsipetes madagascariensis*  
*Hypsipetes crassirostris*  
*Hypsipetes borbonicus*  
*Hypsipetes olivaceus*

**Reed Warblers & Allies**

Madagascar Brush-Warbler (E)

**Acrocephalidae**

*Nesillas typica*

**Malagasy Warblers**

White-throated Oxylabes (E)  
Long-billed Bernieria (Greenbul) (E)

**Bernieridae**

*Oxylabes madagascariensis*  
*Bernieria madagascariensis*

Spectacled Tetraka (Greenbul) (E) *Xanthomixis zosterops*

**Cisticolas & Allies**

Common Jery (E)

Madagascar Cisticola (RE)

**Cisticolidae**

*Neomixis tenella*

*Cisticola cherina*

**White-eyes, Yuhinas & Allies**

Reunion White-eye

Mauritius White-eye

Reunion Gray White-eye

Mauritius Gray White-eye

Seychelles White-eye (E)

Aldabra White-eye (E)

Madagascar White-eye (RE)

**Zosteropidae**

*Zosterops olivaceus*

*Zosterops chloronothos*

*Zosterops borbonicus*

*Zosterops mauritianus*

*Zosterops modestus*

*Zosterops aldabrensis*

*Zosterops maderaspatanus*

**Old World Flycatchers**

Madagascar Magpie-Robin (E)

Madagascar Magpie-Robin (White-winged)

Forest Rock-Thrush (E)

Forest Rock-Thrush (Amber Mountain)

Reunion Stonechat

**Muscicapidae**

*Copsychus albospecularis*

*C. albospecularis pica*

*Monticola sharpei*

*M. sharpei erythronotus*

*Saxicola tectes*

**Starlings**

Common Myna

**Sturnidae**

*Acridotheres tristis*

**Sunbirds & Spiderhunters**

Souimanga Sunbird (RE)

Souimanga Sunbird (Sooty-bellied)

Souimanga Sunbird (Abbott's)

Seychelles Sunbird

**Nectariniidae**

*Cinnyris sovimanga*

*C. sovimanga aldabrensis*

*C. sovimanga abbotti*

*Cinnyris dussumieri*

**Finches, Euphonias & Allies**

Yellow-fronted Canary

**Fringillidae**

*Crithagra mozambica*

**Weavers & Allies**

Village Weaver

Nelicourvi Weaver (E)

Sakalava Weaver (E)

Red Fody (RE)

Red-headed Fody (Aldabra)

Mauritius Fody

**Ploceidae**

*Ploceus cucullatus*

*Ploceus nelicourvi*

*Ploceus sakalava*

*Foudia madagascariensis*

*Foudia eminentissima aldabrana*

*Foudia rubra*

**Waxbills & Allies**

Common Waxbill

**Estrildidae**

*Estrilda astrild*

House Sparrow

**MAMMALS**

**Tenrecs**

Lowland Streaked Tenrec

**Tenrecidae***Hemicentetes semispinosus***Large Lemurs**

White-fronted Brown Lemur

Sanford's Brown Lemur

Crowned Lemur

Red-ruffed Lemur

Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur

**Lemuridae***Eulemur albifrons**Eulemur sanfordi**Eulemur coronatus**Varica rubra**Varecia variegata***Flying-foxes****Pteropodidae**

Madagascar Straw-coloured Bat (Madagascan Fruit-Bat)	<i>Eidolon dupreanum</i>
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Madagascar Flying-fox

*Pteropus rufus*

Seychelles Fruit-Bat

*Pteropus seychellensis*

Mauritius Fruit-Bat

*Pteropus niger*

Aldabra Flying-fox

*Pteropus aldabrensis***Malagasy Carnivores**

Ring-tailed Mongoose

Brown-tailed Mongoose (Salano)

**Eupleridae***Galidia elegans**Salanoia concolor***Dolphins**

Long-snouted Spinner Dolphin

**Delphinidae***Stenella longirostris***Rorqual Whales**

Humpback Whale

Beaked Whale spec.

**Balaenopteridae***Megaptera novaengliae*

?

**REPTILES**

Greater Stump-tailed Chameleon

Chameleon spp.

Panther Chameleon

Short-horned Chamealeon

Blue-nosed Chamealeon

Fimbriated Leaf-tailed Gecko

**SCIENTIFIC NAME***Brookesia superciliaris**Brookesia peyeriasi**Furcifer pardalis**Calumma brevicorne**Calumma boettgeri**Uroplatus fimbriatus*

Aldabra Giant Tortoise	<i>Aldabrachelys gigantea</i>
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Seychelles Giant Tortoise	<i>A. gigantea hololissa</i>
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Green Sea Turtle

*Chelonia mydas***AMPHIBIANS**

Folohy Golden Frog

*Mantella laevigata*