Mission Report – Ambalakida Project (November 2024 – April 2025)

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Taxonomy and Abundance Study of Mouse Lemurs: Conservation of Nocturnal Lemurs in the Ambalakida Forest, Northwestern Madagascar

The sacred Ambalakida Forest, located in northwestern Madagascar, is a biodiversity-rich ecosystem and a vital habitat for endemic species, particularly the lemurs. Although not officially protected, the forest is locally managed and faces increasing threats from slash-and-burn agriculture, charcoal production, and habitat fragmentation. Supported by the Rufford Foundation, this project aims to identify the specific *Microcebus* species inhabiting the forest, estimate their abundance, and implement conservation and education strategies in close collaboration with local communities.

Project Activities

1. Preparation Phase (November – January 2025)

This initial phase focused on logistical organization and team training:

- Training sessions for local guides, field assistants, and graduate students, covering lemur species identification, ecological survey methods, and equipment handling (Figure1).
- A thorough literature review to support the development of the field protocol, including morphometric criteria and habitat survey techniques.
- Preliminary reconnaissance missions across the seven forest sectors (Menabe, Ampondrabe, Ankoakala, Ambatomalama, Ampijoroa, Bekalahy, and the Antsahalava River banks) to assess habitat conditions and identify potential mouse lemur hotspots.

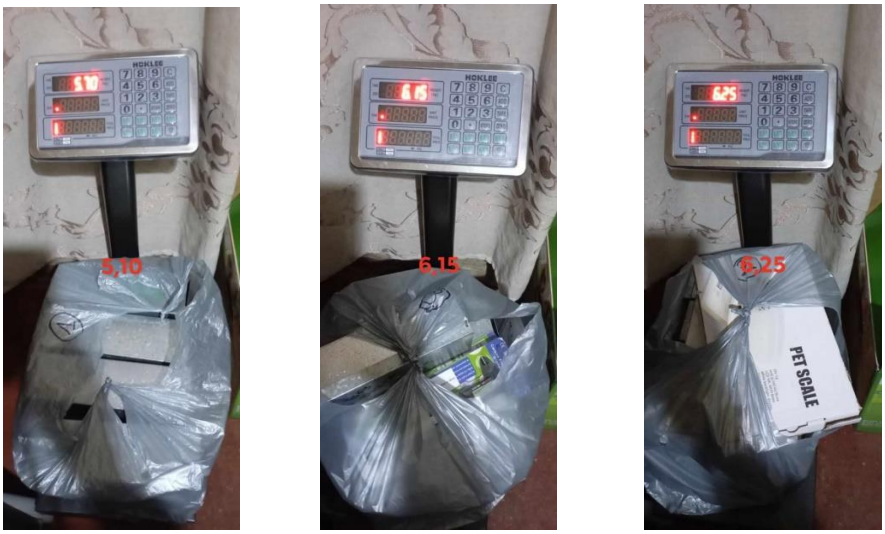
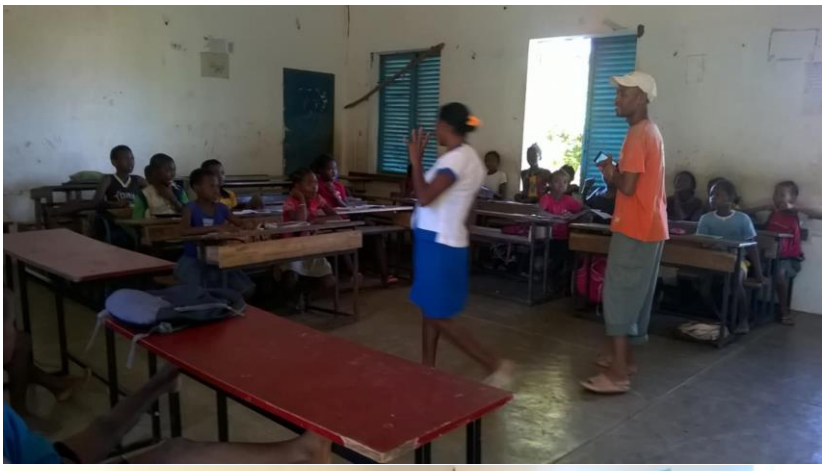


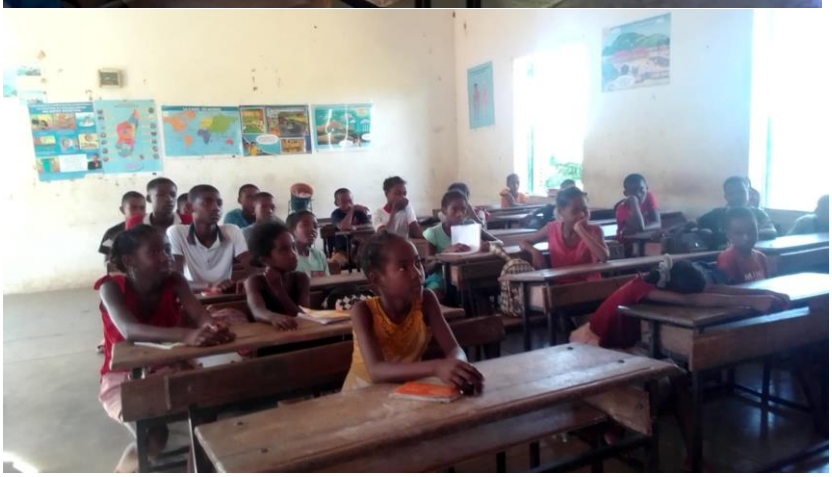
Figure 1 : Logistical preparation

2. Fieldwork and Community Engagement (January – April 2025)

During this phase, the project emphasized both ecological groundwork and community involvement:

- Environmental education sessions were held in collaboration with local schools, local community and leaders. They learned about forest ecosystems, lemur conservation, and sustainable practices through interactive activities, followed by the distribution of small symbolic gifts (pen, handbook) (Figure 2).
- The team also participated in a national reforestation campaign (Marohogo) led by the Ministry of Environment, planting native trees to support habitat restoration and promote ecological awareness.
- Preliminary ecological surveys were conducted to identify traces of *Microcebus* presence (e.g., nests, feces, vocalizations). These initial observations will guide the selection of trap locations and transect paths for the upcoming capture sessions.





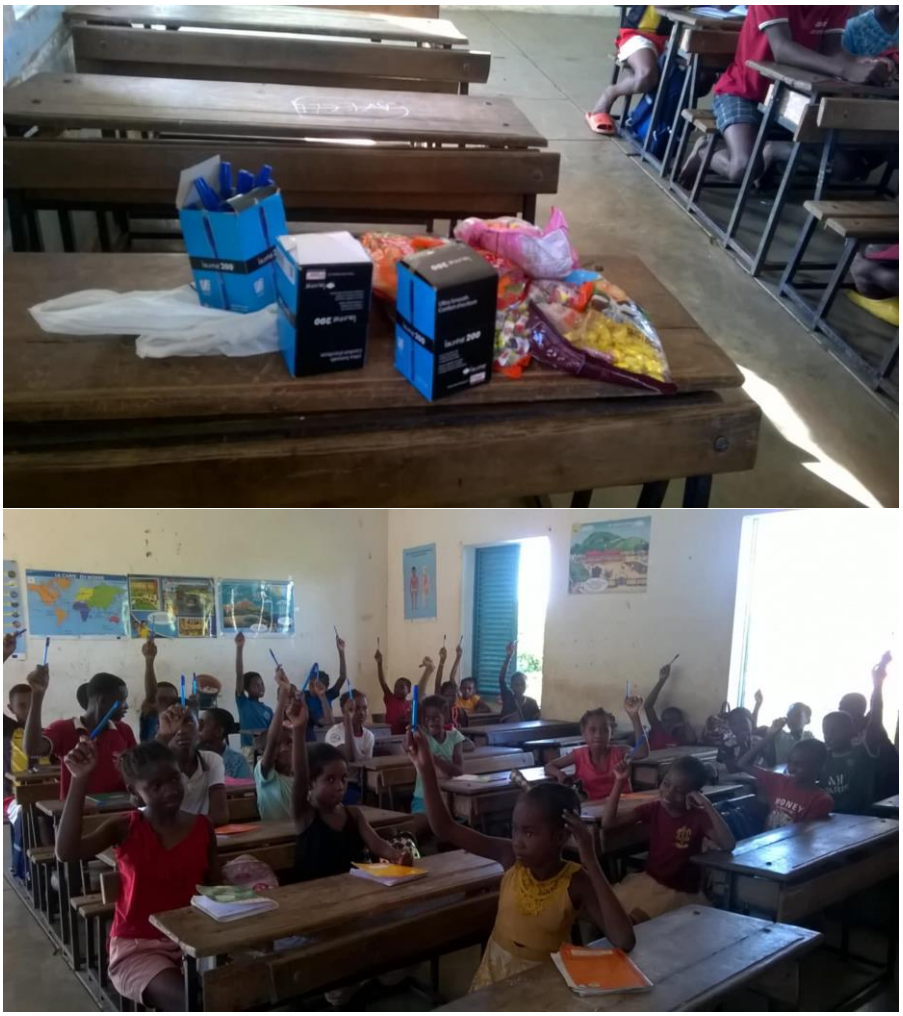


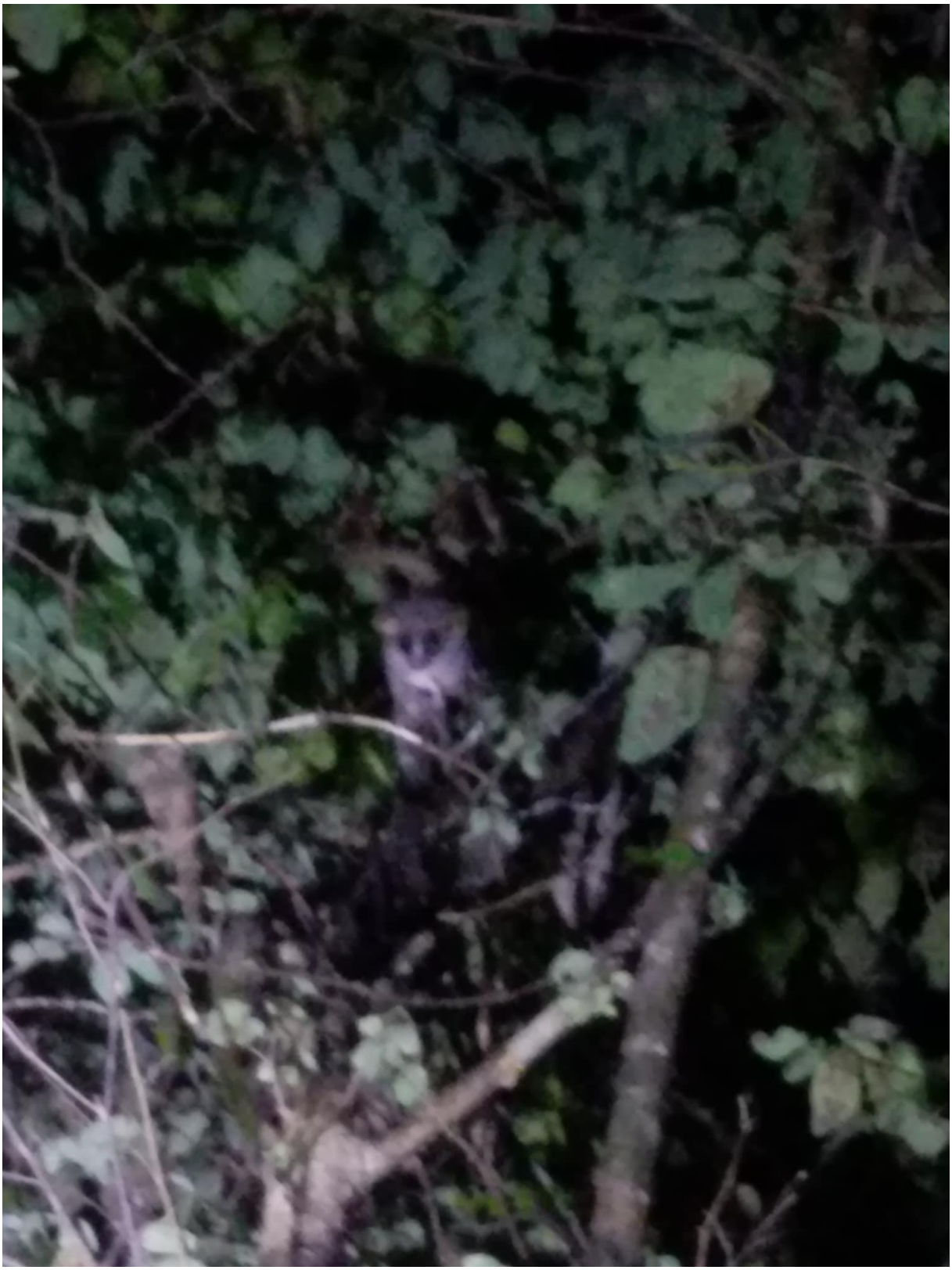
Figure 2 : Environmental education and sensibilization for conservation

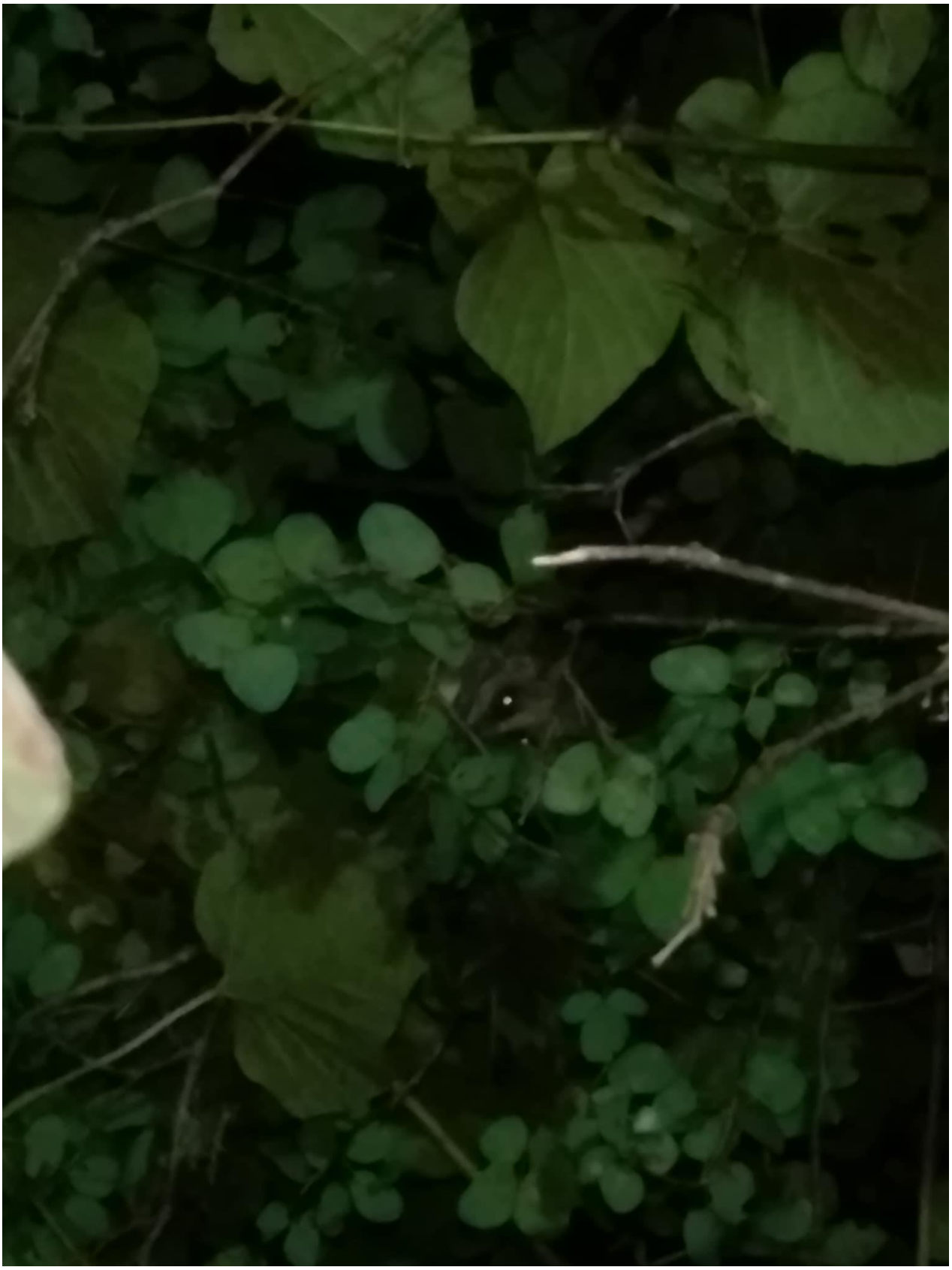
Preliminary Results and Challenges

Despite being in its early stages, the project has already shown promising results :

- Local guides and students were successfully trained in ecological monitoring and lemur identification.
- Environmental education activities were well received, especially among schoolchildren.
- Preliminary forest inspections helped identify key habitats and priority areas for future work (Figure 3).
- Collaboration with local authorities and the Ministry of Environment was strengthened.

However, heavy rains and flooding caused by a tropical cyclone in February 2025 temporarily limited access to some forest sectors. Roads became impassable, delaying field surveys and logistics. Some equipment was also affected by the humidity. Nevertheless, the team adapted quickly and continued community outreach and administrative coordination without major disruption.





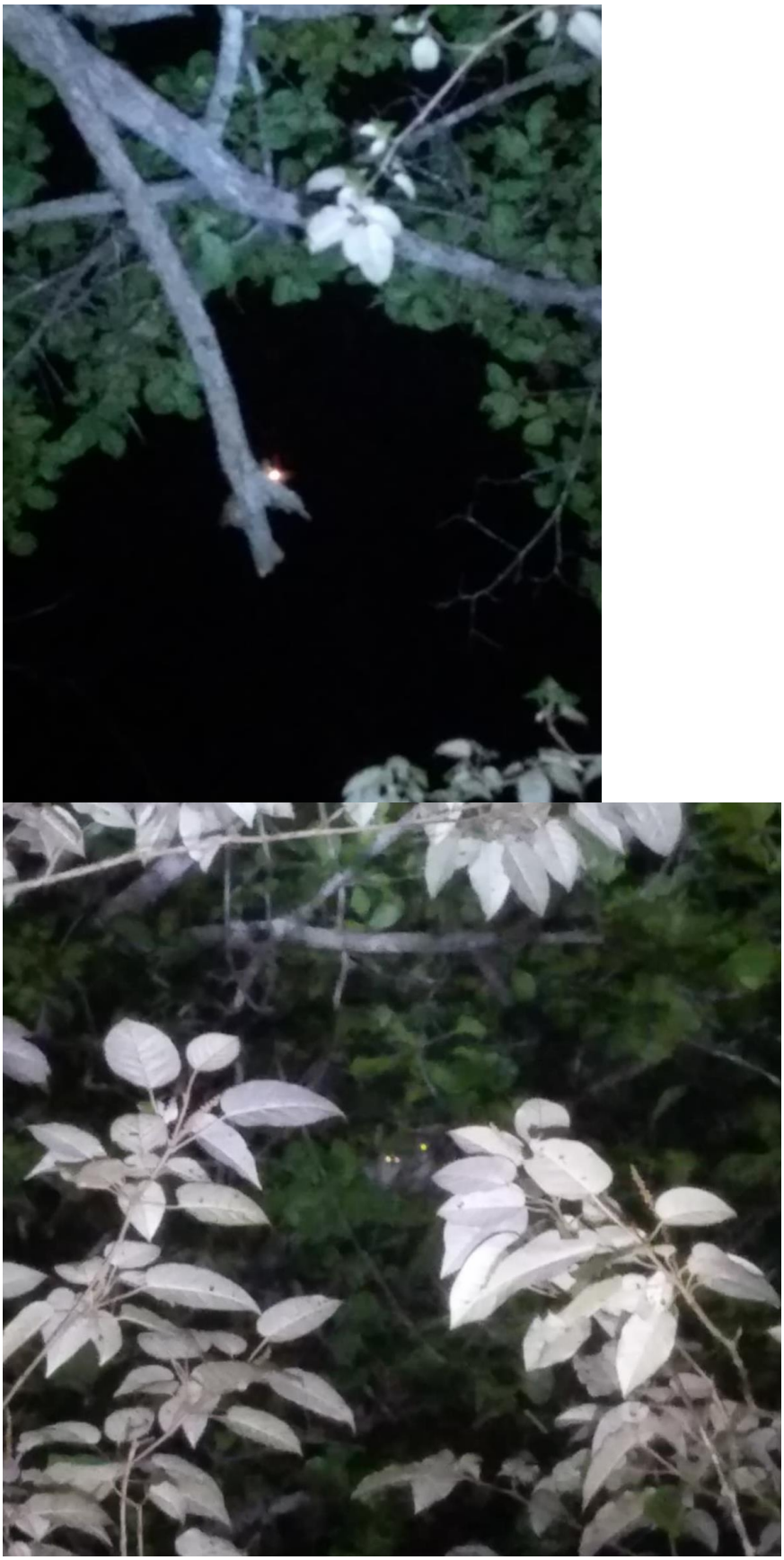


Figure 3 : Observation of *Microcebus* sp. of Ambalakida forest

Current Status and Next Steps (May – July 2025)

The next phase will focus on continued fieldwork and data collection in all selected forest sectors.

The upcoming activities will aim to:

- Confirm the presence of specific *Microcebus* species in the Ambalakida Forest.
- Assess their distribution and population trends.
- Support the design of effective conservation strategies adapted to local conditions.

All activities will be conducted in close collaboration with local communities and authorities, following ethical standards and conservation guidelines.

Acknowledgements

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