Description of five new species of the Madagascan flagship plant genus *Ravenala* (Strelitziaceae)

Thomas Haevermans¹⁺, Annette Hladik², Claude-Marcel Hladik², Jacqueline Razanatsoa³, Agathe Haevermans¹, Vololoniaina Jeannoda⁴ & Patrick Blanc⁵

Madagascar’s emblematic traveller’s tree is a monospecific genus within Strelitziaceae, the family of the South African bird of paradise. Until now, this endemic genus consisted of a single species: *Ravenala madagascariensis* Sonn., which is grown everywhere in the tropics as an ornamental plant. The plant is immediately recognizable for its huge fan-forming banana-like leaves and is locally referred to in Madagascar by several vernacular names. “Variants” have been mentioned in the literature, but without any attempt to recognize formal taxa based on diagnostic features. In this paper, we formally describe five new species and fix the application of the name *R. madagascariensis* to the populations growing on the eastern coast of Madagascar, with the epitype growing in the marshy Fort-Dauphin area in the south. This paper has numerous implications for conservation biology and other domains of life sciences, due to the importance of this genus for the conservation of Madagascan ecosystems, the ornamental plant trade, as well as for its invasive status in several tropical areas.

*Ravenala* Adans.¹, the traveller’s palm or traveller’s tree (*l’Arbre du Voyageur* in French, *ravinala* in Malagasy), is a member of the Strelitziaceae, a family within Zingiberales order whose evolutionary history is still not completely understood². *Strelitzia* Banks³, the most species-rich genus in the family, has received considerably more attention than the other two monotypic genera *Phenakospermum* Endl.⁴ and *Ravenala*. Synflorescences of *Ravenala* are distichous and monopodial, and possess a stiff basal bract enclosing 5–20 successive bracts, each one encasing a contracted monochasium (a cincinnus); the synflorescence is itself sometimes complemented by a basal leaf-like bract. Each element of the cincinnii comprises a petal-like bracteole encasing a single flower along with the remaining of the cincinnus, each flower being perfectly hermaphroditic and not varying with their position on the inflorescence. The flower structure of *Ravenala* has been interpreted variously in the literature, Perrier⁵ describing it as similar to a *Musa* L. flower with five true segments. However, the perianth is more aptly described as consisting of three petaloid sepals and three petals⁶ (two fused sheathing the immature stamens which mechanically need to be freed to liberate the anthers, and one free petal, whose morphological characteristics are of taxonomic importance for distinguishing the various species). The flowers contain six free stamens and a style that is roughly as long as the perianth. The fruit is a dehiscent dry woody trilocular capsule, the shape of the outer parts being of taxonomic significance. *Ravenala* seeds are attached to a fatty aril which has a distinctive bright ultramarine blue color (varying from deep ultramarine blue to sky blue depending on the maturity), which contrasts with the orange aril found in the other genera of Strelitziaceae (the South American endemic *Phenakospermum* and the South African *Strelitzia*). The adaptive significance of this difference may be linked to the dispersers of the seeds, the bright orange aril being documented as an adaptation to bird dispersal, while the blue color can be an adaptation to mammal dispersal. Studies have mentioned that some lemur species see only blue and green⁷–⁹, or have linked the bright blue aril of *Ravenala* to the fact that perception of this color has been maintained by evolution in some Madagascan nocturnal lemurs such as aye-ayes¹⁰. However, Kress¹¹ has also described *Ravenala* seed dispersal by birds. The morphological and ecological heterogeneity of wild *Ravenala* has been mentioned in several studies¹²–¹⁵, which were the first to consider scientifically these morphological

¹Institut de Systématique Évolution Biodiversité (ISYEB), Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Université des Antilles, Sorbonne Université, 45 Rue Buffon, CP 50, 75005 Paris, France. ²Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle, 57 rue Cuvier, 75005 Paris, France. ³Parc Botanique et Zoologique de Tsimbazaza, Antananarivo 101, Madagascar. ⁴Département de Biologie et Écologie Végétale, Université d’Antananarivo, Faculté des Sciences, Antananarivo 101, Madagascar. ⁵Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), 3 Rue Michel-Ange, Paris, France. *email: thomas.haevermans@mnhn.fr
variations. One of the differences highlighted is the seemingly variable suckering ability of *Ravenala*. This genus is usually represented as a tall suckering plant with leaves forming a perfect fan, and this can easily be appreciated from the many cultivated specimens throughout the world. However, some native Malagasy variants of the genus appear consistently devoid of suckers, even when cultivated *ex situ*, while others consistently form suckers. Producing basal suckers is regarded by Tomlinson as a feature of the order Zingiberales, with the genus *Ensete* Bruce ex Horan. being the sole exception (bud neof ormation can be artificially triggered in *Ensete* after removal of the main bud, but this is not true “suckering” from existing dormant buds). Solitary (non-suckering) *Ravenala* taxa are thus another exception in presenting a monocaulous monopodial architecture (Corner model) within a suckering order (Tomlinson model).

**Results**

Several morphotypes within *Ravenala* have been observed throughout Madagascar, but the taxonomic study of this genus had always been impaired by the extreme difficulty of collecting these enormous plants plus the added difficulty accessing most areas in Madagascar, leading to a paucity of adequate specimens in natural history collections. Our own field and herbarium specimen observations of the various morphotypes led us to recognize and distinguish six stable units defined by observable characteristics (i.e. species), consisting of five new species in addition to *Ravenala madagascariensis*. Thus, the total number of species recognized in *Ravenala* is now similar to the number of species in its sister genus *Strelitzia* from southern Africa. Although the large *Strelitzia* species are difficult to distinguish when not in flower, *Ravenala* species can be identified when not flowering as the characters we used to define our species are observable at different developmental stages (young plants, non-fertile adults, flowering and fruiting plants, distinct flowering periods). While the distribution of the genus in Madagascar and the exact location of our type specimens can be mapped (Fig. 1), the exact extent of occurrence of each species is difficult to assess due to the aforementioned lack of available specimens. For example, in the Manombo area (eastern Madagascar), two variants are listed (the single-trunked *tokam-pototra* and the suckering *maroanaka*), but no specimens are available for scientific scrutiny to allow us to assign them to one of the taxa described here. One of the solitary morphotypes called *malama* from the Andasibe area (our *R. blancii*), may correspond to the variant called locally *fontsy ala* discovered in the Forest Reserve of Ranomafana (200 km to the south of Andasibe, at the same elevation range), but again we lack specimens to attest the presence of this taxon. This suggests that this peculiar *malama* variant could be present across a large part of the eastern coast of Madagascar, at elevations ranging from 600 m to 1,100 m. All species except *Ravenala agatheae*

![Figure 1. Distribution of identified specimens and observations of genus *Ravenala* in Madagascar. (a) *R. agatheae* (blue), *R. hladi korum* (green), and *R. madagascariensis* (red). (b) *R. blancii* (red), *R. grandis* (green), and *R. menahirana* (blue). Maps generated using R version 4.0.5 (https://www.r-project.org/) and Rstudio version 1.3.1093 (https://www.rstudio.com/) softwares.](https://www.nature.com/scientificreports/)

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are distributed along the eastern coast of Madagascar (Fig. 1), and their distribution range seems to follow an elevation gradient\(^2\), with \(R. \) blancii and \(R. \) hladikorum being found at the highest elevations, \(R. \) grandis at mid-elevation, and \(R. \) madagascariensis and \(R. \) menahirana being found at sea level (of these, only \(R. \) madagascariensis appears to be distributed all along the coast). By contrast, \(Ravenala \) agatheae from the north-western part of Madagascar is not found elsewhere on the island (Fig. 1). The major traits used to distinguish these species, as detailed in the identification key and the taxonomic treatment, are: plants suckering or strictly solitary; the flowering period; traits pertaining to the petiole such as the presence of various papery appendages or color patterns; the inflorescences; the flower structure (especially the length of the free petal vs. the length of the two fused petals); and shape and structure of the fruit apices (Fig. 2).

**Figure 2.** Comparison of non-opened fruit apices. (a) \(R. \) agatheae. (b) \(R. \) blancii. (c) \(R. \) hladikorum. (d) \(R. \) grandis. (e) \(R. \) madagascariensis. (f) \(R. \) menahirana. Ink drawings on 75 µ polyester tracing paper by Agathe Haevermans©.

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**Taxonomic treatment**

**Generic name.** \(Ravenala\) Adans.\(^1\) (1763: 67). \(\equiv\) \(Urania\) Schreb.\(^2\) (1789: 212). – \(Ravenala\) Scop.\(^3\), nom. illeg. (1777: 96) as “\(Ravenalla\) Adans”.

**Type species** \(Ravenala \) madagascariensis Sonn.\(^4\).

**Note:** Dorr & Parkinson\(^5\) proposed to conserve the spelling \(Ravenala\) Scop. (and correct Scopoli’s original orthography “\(Ravenalla\)”) against \(Ravenala\) Adans. on the basis that Adanson’s generic names (using a uninominal
nomenclature for species) were invalid. Brummitt rejected this proposal and considered that Adanson's generic names were valid and thus that there was no need to use Scopoli's Ravenala (Ravenella). Moreover, the exact wording in Scopoli (1777: 96) is “Ravenella Adans.”, citing Adanson explicitly, but with an incorrect spelling for the generic name (the double “T”).

**Typification and emended description.** *Ravenala madagascariensis* Sonn. (1782: 2[ed. qto.]: 223, tt. 124–126).

≡ *Ravenala madagascariensis* J.F.Gmel. (1791: 567). ≡ *Urania madagascariensis* (Sonn.) Schreb. ex Forsyth f. (1794: 212). ≡ *Heliconia ravenala* Williemet (1796: 22). ≡ *Urania speciosa* Willdenow (1799: 7). ≡ *Urania ravenalia* (Willmet) A.Rich. (1831: 19). – *Ravenala madagascariensis* Adams. (1763: 597), *nomen invalid.*

Type Lectotype, here designated: The plate numbered 126, representing the typical lax mature infructescence, in Sonnerat (1782: plate 126). Epitope, here designated: MADAGASCAR. • *Fort-Dauphin, Forêt de Manantantely, [24°58′59.98878″S, 46°55′0.012″E, calc. from label], 60–300 m elev., 15 September 1928, H. Humbert 5730* (Epitope: MNHN-P-P02234599!, Isoepitypes: MNHN-P-P02234602!, MNHN-P-P02234604!, MNHN-P-P02234605!).

Additional specimen examined: MADAGASCAR. • Toamasina: Foulpointe, Analalava Forest, plant growing close to the main forest station, 17°42′3′S, 49°27′38″E, 50 m elev., 20 March 2016, *T.Haevermans, M. Vorontsova, S. Dransfeld & J. Razanatsoa* 821 (TAN!, P!, K!).

• Along Route #5 from Fenerive to Moronguela, disturbed areas along road, 100 m elev., 28 February 1975, *T. B. Croat 32540* (L-WAG.1111446!, L-WAG.1111447!, MO-358490!, MO-358491!, MO-358523!).

• Toalagnaro, Ebäkika, District de Fort-Dauphin, 12 July 1932, *R. Decary 10107* (P02234596!).

• Vondrozo (commune de Farafangana), 16 September 1926, *R. Decary 3428* (P02234588!, P02234591!, P02235392!) • 2 km E of Ramanofana towards Brickaville, 18.965° S, 48.8564° E, 4 March 1992, *J. Kress et al. 92-3412* (US00424302!, US00424299!, US00424301!, US00424303!).

• 2 km E of Ramanofana, 25 km W of Brickaville, 18.9453° S, 48.8664° E, 4 March 1992, *J. Kress et al. 92-3413* (US00424312!, US00424311!, US00424310!).

• MAURITIUS • *Isle de France, s.dat., Commerson s.n.* (P02234587!, P-JU!, P-LAM!).

**Identity of Ravenala Sonnerat.** —Figs. 2d, 3d, 4d, 5d— In the absence of a specimen undoubt- edly collected or seen by Sonnerat (Commerson's specimens, collected in Mauritius and preserved in both Jus- sieu's and Lamarck's herbaria at the Paris herbarium (P-JU and P-LAM), might actually be part of original mate- rial from Mauritius). We decided to adopt the typification from plates 124, 125 and 126 of the protologue in Sonnerat's valid publication of the species. On page 225, Sonnerat mentions that the plant originated from Madagascar but was transported and established in Mauritius (known at the time as Isle de France). We observed plants growing in this garden as well as naturalized plants occurring in the wild in Mauritius; all the plants we saw sucker and possessed the characteristic pointed conical fruits also observed in the Fort-Dauphin popu- lation. Sonnerat also specified that the original plant grew in marshy areas, which corresponds exactly to the coastal populations that can be found on the eastern coast of Madagascar (i.e. the “Horonorona” variant of Blanc et al.).

Plate 126 shows the typical mature infructescence of the species, with the space between bracts increasing before releasing the seeds (unlike other species of Ravenala). However, the “tree” pictured on plate 124 is a non-suckering plant, which in our opinion can be explained as artistic license on the part of the illustrator, as all the plants observed in Mauritius consistently sucker, like the plants growing in the south-eastern marshy areas. We also decided to designate an epitope with a documented locality in Madagascar (the material in P-JU and P-LAM does not bear a precise indication of locality) to fix the application of the name *R. madagascariensis* to the populations occurring in the marshy areas surrounding Fort-Dauphin, where only one morphotype is known.

**Emended description.** Plants suckering, 6–12 meters tall (adult), trunk circumference (d.b.h.) 20–30 cm. Juvenile and adult laminae distributed in a perfect fan, 14–25 leaves simultaneously alive on the adult plant, 1–3 leaves between inflorescences. Leaves adult petiole 380–440 cm long, greenish-yellow, slightly waxy, sheath margin undeveloped to moderately developed (0–9 mm), entire, not drying, slightly splitting when aged (Fig. 3d), petiole/lamina ratio 1.9–(2.2)–2.3, adult lamina 200 × 100 cm, light green, juvenile laminae base non-decurrent. Inflorescences 4–6 live lateral inflorescences at a time, 100 × 100 cm (peduncle excluded), 8–16 bracts per inflorescence, bracts 200–450 × 50–100 mm, with some waxy to very waxy, margin uniformly green (Fig. 4d), cin- cinnii of ca. 10 flowers per bract, flowering sequentially, bracteoles without a colored stripe. Flowers 240–280 mm long (ovary included), inferior ovary 40–50 mm long, perianth yellowish, sepals narrowly triangular 240–250 × 10–12 mm, sheathing (fused) petals narrowly triangular 220–230×ca. 10 mm, free, petal acicular 180–190 × 5 mm, slightly smaller than the remaining perianth with mean free petal/mean fused petal length ratio = 0.8, petal blotches absent, stamens (roughly) the same size as the perianth, 200–210 mm long, style 200–230 mm long, stigma 15–20 mm long, oblong ovoid with a basal constriction. Infructescences lax (bract bases not imbricate at maturity), stiff and coriaceous persisting bracts, old infructescences deciduous, 4–8 fruits per bract. Fruits 70–120 ×30–35 mm, trilocular septicidal capsule, apices conical (Fig. 2d), seeds 6–(8.5)–11 × 5–(6.4)–8 mm, shiny, dark brown, mostly globose, varying in shape according to their distribution in the capsule, ultramarine blue aril. Ecology *Ravenala madagascariensis* is a low-altitude species restricted to swampy areas of the eastern coast of Madagascar. Populations outside of Madagascar on nearby islands are reputedly non-indigenous.

**Preliminary IUCN assessments** We propose a Least Concern status for *R. madagascariensis*, having an E.O.O. > 20,000 km2 and an A.O.O. > 2,000 km2 (criterion B).

**Note** This emended description for *R. madagascariensis* was drawn up from our own observations and collections, and was made comparable point by point to the descriptions of the five new species presented below, along with a dichotomous identification key to all six species.
New species descriptions. *Ravenala agatheae* Haev. & Razanats. sp. nov.—Figs. 2a, 3a, 4a, 5a, 6.

**Type**
Madagascar • Antsiranana: Ambanja District, along R.N.6 road to Ankaramibe, 13°45′54.8″S, 48°21′27.7″E, 30 m elev., on degraded lateritic slopes, 28 October 2018, T. Haevermans, A. Haevermans & J. Razanatsoa 830 (Holotype: TAN!, Isotypes: K!, MO!, P!).

**Paratypes**
Madagascar • Antsiranana: 57–58 km N of Ambanja, 13°22′59.9″S, 48°48′E, 22 May 1974, A.H. Gentry 11878 (L-W AG.1111448!, L-W AG.1111449!, MO-358489!, TAN) • Ampasindava, forêts d’Ambilanivy et Rangoty, 13°48′36″S, 48°10′48″E, 29 November 2007, L. Nusbaumer 2658 (G334213/1!, MO!, TAN) • Mahajanga: Morafenoibe, Beravy, 15 km from Beravy, near the road from Orombato to Beravy, 18°3′50″S, 44°31′46″E, 09 June 2016, F. Rakotonasolo et al. 2772 (K, P00782931!, TAN).

**Diagnosis**
Similar to *Ravenala madagascariensis* but differs in its dark green narrower laminae, tricolor petioles with very developed dryish petiole sheath margins, very waxy petioles, the persistence of older infructescences for several years, a purple stripe on the bract margin, longer bracts, a whitish perianth, brown blotches on its mature fused petals, the bracteole apex tinged with pink, an ovoid pointed stigma, dense infructescences, smaller inflorescences, the free petal much shorter than the fused petals, and an end of year flowering period.

**Distribution**
Plants restricted to Madagascar, growing in the north-western part of the island. We observed it growing from the southern part of the Diego Suarez area (on the hills along the road leading to Tsingy Rouge
and the city of Sadojava to the north to the western part of the Mahajanga province down to the Melaky region, with most observations around Ambanja. We also observed that the species was cultivated on Nosy Be.

**Preliminary IUCN assessments** We propose a Least Concern status for *R. agatheae*, having an E.O.O > 20,000 km² and an A.O.O. > 2,000 km² (criterion B).

**Ecology** This species is adapted to seasonally dry and warm coastal habitats, growing on slopes at low elevations in north-western coastal areas of Madagascar, from Antsiranana (Diego-Suarez) down to the Melaky region in the Mahajanga province.

**Etymology** This species is named after to the first author’s wife, Agathe Haevermans, a botanical illustrator at the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle, who helped discover this species in the field with the collecting team and who contributes greatly to botany by producing illustrations of new taxa from biodiversity hotspots such as Madagascar.

**Description** Plants suckering, 6–10 meters tall (adult), trunk circumference (d.b.h.) 20–30 cm, juvenile and adult laminae distributed like a regular fan, 9–22 leaves simultaneously alive on the adult plant, 1–3 leaves between inflorescences. Leaves adult petiole 300–460 cm long, tricolor (dark green with a waxy white strip and red petiole sheath margin subsequently drying out, Fig. 3a), very waxy, sheath margin very developed (10 mm and more), entire, dryish-papyraceous and protruding at 90 degrees, petiole/lamina ratio 1.7–(1.95)–2.2, adult

**Figure 4.** Comparison of inflorescences. (a) *R. agatheae*. (b) *R. blancii*. (c) *R. grandis*. (d) *R. madagascariensis*. (e) *R. menahirana*. (f) *R. hladikorum*. Photographs Thomas Haevermans©.
lamina 174–210 × 72–86 cm, dark green, juvenile lamina base non-decurrent. Inflorescences 4–6 live lateral inflorescences at a time, 70–90 × 90–100 cm (peduncle excluded), 10–14 bracts per inflorescence, bracts 450–500 × 80–90 mm, with some waxiness (Fig. 4a), margin bearing a purple stripe, cincinnii of 8–10 flowers per bract, flowering sequentially, some pink tinge at the apex of bracteoles. Flowers 260–310 mm long (ovary included), inferior ovary 40–60 mm long, perianth whitish, sepals narrowly triangular 220–250 × ca. 10 mm, sheathing (fused) petals narrowly triangular 200–220 × ca. 10 mm, free petal acicular 130–140 × 5 mm, much smaller than the remaining perianth with a mean free petal / mean fused petal length ratio = 0.6, petal blotches present, stamens (roughly) the same size as the perianth, 210–220 mm long, style 220 mm long, stigma 15 mm long, ovoid-pointed with basal constriction. Infructescences compact (bracts bases imbricate at all stages of maturity), stiff and coriaceous persisting bracts on mature infructescence, persistence of old infructescences, 4–10 fruits per bract. Fruits 90–110 × 30–45 mm, trilocular septifragal capsule, apices conical (Fig. 2a), seeds shiny, dark brown, mostly globose, varying in shape according to their distribution in the capsule, ultramarine blue aril.

Ravenala blancii Haev., V. Jeannoda & A. Hladik sp. nov. —Figs. 2b, 3b, 4b, 5b, 7. Type MADAGASCAR • Andasibe; 18°56′00″S, 48°25′06″E; 940 m elev.; 01 December 2002; A. Hladik & C.-M. Hladik 6760 (Holotype: TAN!, Isotypes: K!, MO!, P!).

Figure 5. Species of Ravenala in their natural habitat. (a) R. agatheae. (b) R. blancii. (c) R. grandis. (d) R. madagascariensis. (e) R. menahirana. (f) R. hladikorum. Photographs Thomas Haevermans©.
Figure 6. *Ravenala agatheae*. (a) young infructescence. (b) adult plant habit showing the suckers at the base and the persistent petioles and old infructescences. (c) fruit with a conical apex. (d) infructescence with remains of dried flowers and dried bracts. (e) style apex. (f) inflorescence with open flowers. (g) open flower. Ink drawings on 75 µ polyester tracing paper by Agathe Haevermans© from specimen Haevermans et al. 830, and observations in-situ.
Figure 7. *Ravenala blancii*. (a) juvenile plant habit with roots. (b) juvenile plant showing the arrangement of laminae. (c) adult plant habit. (d) mature infructescence segment. (e) juvenile leaf showing the attenuate base of the lamina. (f) inflorescence with sub-simultaneous opening of the flowers. (g) young infructescence with already degraded bracts. (h) seeds with arilla. (i) open flower. (j) details of the stigma. (k) style. Ink drawings on 75 µ polyester tracing paper by Agathe Haevermans® from specimens Hladik 6790, 6239, 6650, Haevermans et al. 832, and observations in-situ.
**Paratypes** MADAGASCAR • Andasibe; 18°56′00″S, 48°25′06″E; 940 m elev., 23 Aug. 1998, A. Hladik & al. 6239 (P!, fruits) • June 2001, A. Hladik & al. 0650 (P!, leaves, fruits, bracts) • Andasibe-Mantadia area, Vakôna, Kalonora; 18°53′17.3″S, 48°25′51.3″E, 08 November 2018, 934 m elev., T. Haevermans & al. 832 (K!, MO!, P!, TAN!).

**Diagnosis** Similar to *Ravenala madagascariensis* but differs in its non-suckering habit, decurrent juvenile lamina bases, toroidal distribution of juvenile laminae, smaller number of leaves simultaneously alive on the adult plant, dark green lamina and green non waxy petiole, smaller leaves, smaller number of live inflorescences, smaller number of bracts in an inflorescence, non-waxy bracts, sub-simultaneous flowering, smaller flowers, smaller inflorescences, non-persistence of entire bracts on dry inflorescences, October/November flowering period.

**Distribution** Andasibe-Mantadia, Ranomafana31. Restricted to Madagascar.

**Preliminary IUCN assessments** We propose a Data Deficient status for *R. blancii*; further fieldwork is required to understand its precise distribution and the status of its populations33.

**Ecology** High-elevation species found in eastern rainforests at elevations between 600 and 1,100 m. The species seems to favor cool tropical humid and shady conditions.

**Etymology** This species is named after Dr. Patrick Blanc, world renowned botanist, plant ecologist and street artist, inventor of the planted vertical walls known as “Mur Végétal” and who first recognized the sheer originality of the juvenile phases of this peculiar taxon.

**Description** Plants solitary (never suckering), 10–15 meters tall (adult), trunk circumference (d.b.h.) 20–30 cm, juvenile laminae distributed in a toroidal shape, adult laminae arranged in a regular fan, 9–16 leaves simultaneously alive on the adult plant, 2–4 leaves between inflorescences. *Leaves* adult petiole 240–310 cm long, green, not waxy, sheath margin undeveloped, entire, not drying. Smooth with a worn-out irregular aspect (Fig. 3b), petiole/lamina ratio 1.8–2.0, adult lamina 120–160 × 46–50 cm, dark green, juvenile lamina base non-decurrent. *Inflorescences* 2–3 live lateral inflorescences at a time, 60–70 cm long (peduncle excluded), 4–6 bracts per inflorescence, bracts 160–350 × 50–90 mm, no waxiness (Fig. 4b), margin color uniformly green, cinnamini of 5–14 flowers per bract, flowering sub-simultaneously, bracteoles sometimes pink colored. *Flowers* 165–280 mm long (ovary included), inferior ovary 40–50 mm long, perianth whithish-yellow, sepals narrowly triangular 125–231 × 10–12 mm, sheathing (fused) petals narrowly triangular 105–190 × 10 mm, free petal acicular 105–178 × 3–5 mm, free petal and fused petals of sub-equal size with a mean free petal / mean fused petal length ratio = 1.0, petal blotches absent or present, stamens (roughly) the same size as the perianth, 115–186 mm long, style 132–220 mm long, stigma 20–25 mm long, ovoid to ovoid-pointed, with a basal constriction. *Inflorescences* compact (bract bases imbricate at all stages of maturity), torn and degraded bracts on mature infructescence, old inflorescences deciduous, 5–14 fruits per bract. *Fruits* 80–120 × 32–45 mm, triocular sepifragal capsule, apices conical (Fig. 2b), seeds 6–10 × 3.2–6 mm, shiny, dark brown, mostly globose, varying in shape according to their distribution in the capsule, ultramarine blue aril.

**Note** The strong leaf dimorphism between juvenile and adult forms is characteristic of this species, a phenomenon which is not present in the other taxa. The base of the juvenile plant usually grows buried in the leaf litter due to the action of traction roots13, its decurrent leaves (Fig. 7) giving it the aspect of a bird's nest fern.

*Ravenala grandis* Haev., Razanats., A. Hladik & P. Blanc sp. nov.—Figs. 2c, 3c, 4c, 5c. **Type.** MADAGASCAR • Ampasimbe Commune, Maromaniary Fokontany, along Route Nationale, 18°57′10″S, 48°25′41″E, 258 m elev., 08 November 2018, T. Haevermans, A. Hladik & J. Razanatsoa 831 (Holotype: TAN!, Isotypes: K!, MO!, P!).

**Paratypes** MADAGASCAR • Varanoa, près d'Ambohimahasoa-sud, 15 May 1964, R. Capuron 26014SF (P02234597!) • Soanianana-Antasibe[Andasibe], 350 m elev., 10 December 1938, H.J. Lam & A.D.J. Meeuse 5867 (L-WAG.1111450!, L-WAG.1111451!, L-WAG.1111452!, L-WAG.1111453!, L-L.1477714!, L-L.1477715!).

**Diagnosis** Similar to *Ravenala madagascariensis* but differs in its non-suckering habit, much larger dimensions, very thick leathery laminae, very waxy dark green-yellowish petioles, much larger bracts and overall dimensions, whitish/pure white perianth, strong reddish-pink stripes on its bracteoles, cylindrical stigma without basal constriction, stamens much shorter than perianth, and fruit with a truncated apex.

**Distribution** Eastern rainforests at around 200–500 m elevation in Madagascar15,20.

**Preliminary IUCN assessments** We propose a Data Deficient status for *R. grandis*; further fieldwork is required to understand its precise distribution and the status of its populations33.

**Ecology** This species seems to favor growing in low discontinuous forests on inselbergs12 and thrives in secondary degraded vegetation on the slopes of eastern rain forests.

**Etymology** The name of this species is in reference to its stature and habit, the most robust species of *Ravenala* known.

**Description** Plants solitary (never suckering), 20–30 meters tall (adult), trunk circumference (d.b.h.) 30 cm, juvenile and adult laminae distributed in a perfect fan, 15–30 leaves simultaneously alive on the adult plant, usually 3 leaves between inflorescences. *Leaves* adult petiole 390–440 cm long, dark green/light green-yellowish, very waxy (Fig. 3c), sheath margin moderately developed to undeveloped (0–9 mm), entire on young leaves, splitting and dryish when old, petiole/lamina ratio 1.8–2.2, adult lamina 170–230 × 94–120 cm, light green, juvenile lamina base non-decurrent. *Inflorescences* 4–6 live lateral inflorescences at a time, 100–120 × 80–100 cm (peduncle excluded), 10–20 bracts per inflorescence, bracts 440–540 × 140–170 mm, some waxiness (Fig. 4c), margin color uniformly green, cinnamini of ca. 20 flowers per bract, flowering sequentially, bracteoles with a strong reddish-pink stripe. *Flowers* 300 mm long (ovary included), inferior ovary 50–70 mm long, perianth whithish/pure white, sepals narrowly triangular 220–240 × 10–15 mm, sheathing (fused) petals narrowly triangular 210–220 × 10–12 mm, free petal acicular 150–170 × 3 mm, slightly smaller than the rest of the perianth with a mean
Ravenala hladikorum Haev., Razanats., V. Jeannoda & P. Blanc sp. nov. — Figs. 2f, 3f, 4f, 5f. **Type MADAGASCAR.** Andasibe; 18°56′00″S, 49°25′06″E; 940 m elev.; 05 February 2004; A. Hladik & C.-M. Hladik 6842 (Holotype: TAN!, Isotype: PI!). **Paratypes.** MADAGASCAR. Andasibe; 18°56′00″S, 49°25′06″E; 940 m elev.; 23 August 1998; A. Hladik & al. 6240 (fruit with seeds: PI!), Andasibe-Mantadia area, Vakôna, Kalonora; 18°53′17.3″S, 48°25′51.3″E; 934 m elev., 08 November 2018; T. Haevermans & al. 833 (TAN!, PI, K!, MO!). **Diagnosis** Similar to *Ravenala madagascariensis* but differs in its non-suckering habit, the alternate positioning of its adult laminae, its dark green leaves, non-waxy petioles with their very papyraceous petiole sheath margins, more than 1 cm long, smaller lamina dimensions, smaller number of simultaneously live inflorescences, purple stripe on bracts and on bracteoles, non-waxy inflorescences, smaller inflorescences, dense inflorescences, truncated fruit apices, and short flowering period from November to December. **Distribution** Andasibe, Mantady, Ranomafana35. Restricted to Madagascar. **Preliminary IUCN assessments** We propose a Data Deficient status for *R. hladikorum*; further fieldwork is required to understand its precise distribution and the status of its populations35. **Ecology** High-elevation species found in eastern rainforests at elevations between 600 and 1100 m. The species seems to favor cool tropical humid and shady conditions. **Etymology** This species is named in honor of Annette and Claude-Marcel Hladik from the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris, who dedicated their lives to the study of Madagascan biodiversity and contributed greatly to the discovery of this species. **Description** Plants solitary (never suckering), 10–15 meters tall (adult), trunk circumference (d.b.h.) 20–30 cm, juvenile laminae distributed like a fan, adult laminae arranged in an irregular fan, 9–18 leaves simultaneously alive on the adult plant, 1–3 leaves between inflorescences. Leaves adult petiole 280–440 cm long, greenish-yellow, not waxy (Fig. 3f), sheath margin very developed (10 mm and more), split, very papyraceous with min. 1 cm brown dry expansions, petiole/lamina ratio 2.1–(2.42)–2.8, adult lamina 120–160 × 102–116 cm, dark green, juvenile lamina base non-decurrent. Infructescences 2–3 live lateral inflorescences at a time, 60 × 90 cm (peduncle excluded), 4–7 bracts per inflorescence, bracts 150–510 × 64–100 mm, no waxiness (Fig. 4f), margin green with a purple stripe, cincinnii of 5–14 flowers per bract, sequentially flowering, bracteoles with a dark purple colored stripe. Flowers 240–320 mm long (ovary included), inferior ovary 40–60 mm long, perianth whitish, sepal narrowly triangular 210–265×5 cm. 10 mm, sheathing (fused) petals narrowly triangular 190–240×5 cm. 10 mm , free petal acicular 135–220 × 5 mm, almost the same size as the fused petals with a mean free petal / mean fused petal length ratio = 0.9, petal blotches unknown, stamens (roughly) the same size as the perianth, 170–230 mm long, style 187–250 mm long, stigma 20–25 mm long, ovoid with a basal constriction. Infructescences compact (bract bases imbricate at all stages of maturity), stiff and coriaceous persistent bracts on mature infructescence, old infructescences deciduous, 5–14 fruits per bract. Fruits 82–108 × 34–48 mm, trilocular septifragal capsule, apices truncate (Fig. 2f), seeds 4–9 × 3–6 mm, shiny, dark brown, mostly globose, varying in shape according to their distribution in the capsule, ultramarine blue aril. **Scientific Reports** | (2021) 11:21965 | https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-01161-1

**Ravenala menahirana Haev. & Razanats. sp. nov.** — Figs. 2e, 3e, 4e, 5e. **Type MADAGASCAR.** Foulpointe, Analalava Forest; 17°42′33″S, 49°27′38″E; 50 m elev.; 20 March 2016; T. Haevermans, M. Vorontsova, S. Dransfield & J. Razanatsoa 826 (Holotype: TAN!, Isotype: PI!, K!, MO!). **Diagnosis** Similar to *Ravenala madagascariensis* but differs in its non-suckering habit, the alternate dark green laminae tending not to form a perfect fan (Fig. 5e), dark red petioles with a zigzagging well developed dryish sheath margin, more strongly obovoid laminae, smaller number of simultaneously live inflorescences, smaller inflorescences tinged with red, pure white/whitish perianth, smaller flowers, dense inflorescences, the fruit apices truncate with a mucro, and subequal free and fused petals. **Distribution** Appears to be restricted to the east coast in the area around Analalava-Foulpointe up to the Mananara-Avaratra area. Two human observations from Marojejy (North-East) and Tampolo (Masoala) seem also to be this species. Restricted to Madagascar. **Preliminary IUCN assessments** We propose a Data Deficient status for *R. menahirana*; further fieldwork is required to understand its precise distribution and the status of its populations35. **Ecology** This coastal forest-dwelling species favors low-elevation tropical humid conditions in the Analalava-Foulpointe area, extending north to Mananara-Avaratra area, and maybe up to Marojejy. **Etymology** The name of this species is in reference to one of its local names “menahirana”, given to the species in the Analalava-Foulpointe area and meaning “red ravenala”. **Description** Plants solitary (never suckering), 6–10 meters tall (adult), trunk circumference (d.b.h.) 20–30 cm, juvenile laminae distributed like a fan, adult laminae arranged in an irregular to regular fan, 12–18 leaves simultaneously alive on the adult plant, 3 leaves between inflorescences. Leaves adult petiole 200–230 cm long, dark red, slightly to very waxy, sheath margin very developed (10 mm and more), red, entire, forming a three dimensional zigzag pattern (Fig. 3e), then splitting and drying on old leaves, petiole/lamina ratio 1.4–(1.7)–1.9. adult lamina 350 × 120 cm, lamina color dark green, juvenile lamina base non-decurrent. Infructescences 1–2 live...
lateral inflorescences at a time, 60 × 70 cm (peduncle excluded), 10–12 bracts per inflorescence, bracts 260–360 × 50–80 mm, very waxy (Fig. 4e), margin color uniformly reddish-green, cincinni of 8–12 flowers per bract, flowering sequentially, no colored stripe on bracteoles (apices sometimes suffused with pink). Flowers 220–250 mm long (ovary included), inferior ovary 40–60 mm long, perianth pure white to whitish, sepals narrowly triangular 180–230 × 12–16 mm, sheathing (fused) petals narrowly triangular 160–180 × 5 mm, free petal acicular 160–170 × 5 mm, free petal the same size as the remaining perianth with a mean free petal / mean fused petal length ratio = 1.0, petal blotches absent, stamens the same size (roughly) as the perianth, stamen 150–160 mm long, style 150–200 mm long, stigma 10 mm long, oblong with a basal constriction. Infructescences compact (bract bases imbricate at all stages of maturity), stiff and coriaceous persisting bracts on mature infructescences, old infructescences deciduous, 8–12 fruits per bract. Fruits 80–100 × 30–35 mm, trilocular septifragal capsule, apices truncate with a mucro (Fig. 2e), seeds shiny, dark brown, mostly globose, varying in shape according to their distribution in the capsule, ultramarine blue aril.

Note This species is similar to R. hladikorum but is easily distinguished by, in addition to its petioles and its ecology, its truncate mucronate fruit apices, the shape of the synflorescence bracts and the absence of a red stripe on the cyme bracteoles.

Identification key to the species of genus Ravenala.

1. Suckering .......................................................... 2
   - Solitary ............................................................................... 3

2. Petiole uniformly yellowish-green, petiole wing slightly developed, free petal same size as fused petals
   - Petiole tricolor (waxy white, green, reddish/dry), petiole wing developed and dry, free petal much smaller than fused petals .......................................................... Ravenala madagascariensis
   - Ravenala agatheae

3. Petiole dark red, petiole wing with a dark red zigzag .................................................. Ravenala menahirana
   - Petiole green or yellowish green, petiole wing developed or absent ........................................... Ravenala hladikorum

4. Very developed papyraceous and deeply split petiole wing ............................................. Ravenala blancii
   - Undeveloped eroded petiole wing ................................................................................................. 5

5. Non-waxy petiole, thin non-leathery lamina, plant with small stature, conical fruit apex ........ Ravenala grandis
   - Very waxy petiole, thick leathery lamina, very large and robust plant, truncate fruit apex .......... Ravenala agatheae

Discussion

The five new species described in this paper can be easily identified at both young and adult stages from distinctive morphological characters defined from petiole sheath margins, petiole coloring and morphology, suckering or solitary habits and flower and fruit traits. The main stable character distinguishing these species is the ability to produce suckers (R. agatheae, R. madagascariensis) like other members of Zingiberales, or its absence (i.e. strictly monopodial) (R. blancii, R. grandis, R. hladikorum, R. menahirana) (Table 1). The laminae arrangement in space is also of taxonomic significance, especially for the juvenile R. blancii, whose leaves, although distichally inserted, have laminae distributed in such a way as to form a torus (Fig. 7b), which is likely to be an adaptation to the low light intensity of the forest floor where it germinates. At early stages, this species, with its decurrent laminae arranged in a torus, bears a striking resemblance to the bird’s nest fern (Asplenium nidus Linnaeus). The genus occurs across a variety of bioclimates and habitats, with each species seemingly favoring a specific niche. Both suckering species occur at sea level and on low-elevation coastal hills, with the well-known R. madagascariensis being documented in the coastal marshes of the east coast of the island, whereas R. agatheae is documented in the north-western part of the island (Fig. 1). The comparatively drier climates in which the latter occurs may favor the persistence on the “trunk” of a blanket of dry petioles and infructescences which may be involved in some form of fire resistance. By contrast, the solitary species are all distributed on the eastern part of Madagascar from sea level to around 1000 m elevation, on slopes originally covered by forests. Their distribution likely follows an elevation gradient, with R. menahirana found in now rare sea level coastal forests, R. grandis in mid-elevation (300–500 m) forests on steep inselbergs slopes (see Figs. 2, 3, and 4 in Blanc et al.12), while R. blancii and R. hladikorum are found in sympathy in the shade in high elevation (1000 m) rain forests. Further research on the population genetics, pollination and seed dispersal of the formerly monotypic Ravenala would be essential within this new six-species framework. This genus may also prove to be a good model for studying sympatric speciation and provide a better understanding of the interactions of the endemic fauna of Madagascar with this flagship taxon.

Methods

Taxonomic treatment follows the International Code of Nomenclature (ICN) for algae, fungi and plants (Shenzhen Code). Specimen citations follow the CETA (Consortium of European Taxonomic Facilities) guidelines. Specimens were deposited in natural history collections as indicated by their international acronym. Descriptive terms follow standard botanical terminology. Macromorphological characters (see a summary in Table 1)
| Habit                      | R. agathae | R. blancii | R. grandis | R. hladikorum | R. madagascariensis | R. menahirana |
|---------------------------|------------|------------|------------|---------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Adult dimensions (m)      | 6–10       | 10–15      | 20–30      | 10–15         | 6–12                | 6–10         |
| Leaves lamina color       | Dark green | Dark green | Light green | Dark green     | Light green         | Dark green   |
| Leaves simultaneously     | 9–22       | 9–16       | 15–30      | 9–18          | 14–26               | 12–18        |
| Petiole color             | Tricolor   | Green      | Dark green | Greenish-yellow| Yellowish green     | Red          |
| Sheath margin dp.         | Developed  | Undeveloped| Developed  | Developed      | Developed           | Developed    |
| Sheath margin shape       | Dryish     | Eroded     | Entire/split| Brown papyraceous| Not dry, entire/split| Dark red     |
| Petiole & dry infr.       | Yes        | No         | No         | No             | No                  | No           |
| Juvenile lamina           | Non-decurrent| Decurrent | Non-decurrent| Non-decurrent  | Non-decurrent       | Non-decurrent |
| Adult leaves distribution | Regular fan| Regular fan| Regular fan| Regular fan    | Regular fan         | Regular fan  |
| Bracts #/Infl.            | 10–14      | 4–6        | 10–20      | 4–7           | 8–16                | 10–12        |
| Bracts L/I                | 450–500 × 80–90 (5.3) | 160–350 × 50–90 (3.9) | 440–540 × 140–170 (3.16) | 150–510 × 140–170 (2.3) | 200–450 × 50–100 (4.3) | 260–360 × 50–80 (4.8) |
| Bracts persistence        | Stiff and coriaceous | Torn and degraded | Stiff and coriaceous | Siff and coriaceous | Siff and coriaceous | Siff and coriaceous |
| Infructescence imbrication| Compact    | Compact    | Lax        | Compact        | Lax                  | Compact      |
| Flower length (+ovary)    | 260–310    | 165–280    | 300        | 240–320       | 240–280             | 220–250      |
| Free vs fused petals ratio| Much shorter (0.6) | Subequal (1) | Slightly smaller (0.8) | Slightly smaller (0.9) | Slightly smaller (0.8) | Subequal (1) |
| Stamens size vs perianth  | Similar    | Similar    | Much shorter | Similar      | Similar             | Similar      |
| Fruit apex                | Conical    | Conical    | Truncated  | Truncated     | Conical              | Truncated with bony micro |

Table 1. Comparison of the main distinctive morphological characters for the six species of *Ravenala*.

were studied in the field and in the laboratory from specimens the authors collected, according to national and international standards and regulation, and from specimens held in several herbaria where *Ravenala* specimens are deposited (G, K, MO, P, TAN, US)\(^39\). The distribution maps (Fig. 1) were prepared with the software R, using coordinates from our own collections and observation data, from other available specimens (n = 19 gatherings, represented as n = 40 sheets), as well as from the www.inaturalist.org website observations we managed to identify (n = 83). We used the triple equality sign (≡) to indicate homotypic synonyms, the equal sign (=) to indicate heterotopic synonyms and the ‘en-dash’ (–) to indicate invalid names. All protologues of relevant names were consulted to establish the nomenclatural synopsis.

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Author contributions
All authors conceived the experiment. All authors conducted the field expeditions. All authors analyzed the results and wrote the descriptions. A.H. prepared the drawing in Figures 2, 6 and 7. All authors reviewed and commented the manuscript.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information
Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to T.H.

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