

## Distraction behaviour by Variegated Fairy-wrens

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On two separate occasions I have noted distraction behaviour in Variegated Fairy-wrens *Malurus lamberti*. On both occasions birds affected a broken-wing display to distract me while I was removing other Variegated Fairy-wrens from mist nets. The first occasion occurred in May 2009 in a disused quarry in Kotara, a thick grassland habitat. One bird, either a female or sub-adult male, approached within 0.5m of me, making eye contact as I extracted a trapped juvenile from the net. On approach, the bird dropped one wing as if it were broken and appeared to limp. Having obtained my attention it walked under the net and flew to a nearby bush, perching briefly with both wings folded normally. After a few seconds the bird flew closer to the net, drooped a wing and limped under the net. These movements were repeated until the juvenile bird had been extracted and removed from sight by being placed in a bird bag. This behaviour was quite effective as a distraction technique as I found the movements fascinating and was distracted from the job of extracting the trapped bird.

The second occasion, in October 2010, occurred in dry sclerophyll forest in Blackbutt Reserve. Several Variegated Fairy-wrens, part of a group of ten birds, flew into the mist net almost simultaneously and were trapped. Three other Variegated Fairy-wrens, two males and a probable female, who had passed the net without capture, returned and fluttered around me, drooping one wing and again making eye contact with me. Although they hopped very close to the net at no time did they become trapped. Their intention was clearly to distract me from harming the trapped birds until those birds could effect an escape. They would also momentarily cease the distraction and fly normally to a perch before repeating the injured role.

Once extracted from the net, banded, measured and weighed, the trapped birds were released and rejoined their group. I have not observed this behaviour on any of the many other occasions when either Variegated or Superb Fairy-wrens

*Malurus cyaneus* have been trapped. Nor have I witnessed this behaviour in other species trapped in mist nets although on some occasions, in some species, a second bird has waited in a nearby tree until a juvenile or possibly a partner was released. On these occasions the birds make contact by calling.

The Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds (Higgins *et al.* 2001, p.317) recorded Variegated Fairy-wrens displaying parental anti-predator strategies at the nest where they give a single-syllable churring alarm call repeatedly when the nest is approached. Adults may then engage in a rodent-run distraction display in which the bird scuttles along the ground with head and tail lowered, back feathers raised, and head moved from side to side. Display may be performed by all members of a group. This display is said to be more noticeable and used more often by Variegated Fairy-wrens than other fairy-wren species. The display described is not identical to what I witnessed but is certainly similar.

A Dictionary of Birds (Campbell & Lack 1985, pp. 144-145) discussed four types of distraction display. The initial approach of the bird while staring me down is a distraction threat display, probably aimed at making me drop the bird I was extracting from the mist net. The 'broken-wing' display observed subsequently falls into the 'distraction-lure category', as does the 'rodent-run'; in both cases the bird is feigning injury to a predator to entice it away from the bird presently under threat.

### REFERENCES

- Higgins, P.J., Peter, J.M., and Steele, W.K. (Eds) (2001). 'Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds Volume 5: Tyrant-flycatchers to Chats'. (Oxford University Press: Melbourne, Australia.)
- Campbell, B. and Lack, E. (1985). 'A Dictionary of Birds'. (T & AD Poyser: Bath, Great Britain.)