“RODENT-RUN” DISTRACTION DISPLAY BY A PASSERINE, THE SUPERB BLUE WREN MALURUS CYANEUS (L.)

by

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(With 4 Figures)

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INTRODUCTION

Distraction-display in the vicinity of nest or young is a feature of avian behaviour that has received much attention and discussion over the years (JOURDAIN, 1936-7; NICE, 1943; ARMSTRONG, 1947, 1949; WILLIAMSON, 1950; SIMMONS, 1952, 1955). CHISHOLM (1936 and 1950) and ROBERTS (1944) have discussed the occurrence of this behaviour in Australian species. ARMSTRONG (1949) separated four distinct types of distraction-display, and this paper is concerned with type three—eccentric deportment—as it occurs in the diminutive passerine Malurus cyaneus and its near relatives. The display takes the form of a typical “rodent-run” 1), so named by WILLIAMSON (1950) because of its “...semblance of a small mammal running away”, and described by SIMMONS (1955), under the synonym “small mammal type”, as “...distraction-display in which by combinations of creeping movements, twinkling gait, squeaking voice, etc., they resemble small rodents.”

Previous descriptions of this form of behaviour have stemmed from the Charadriiformes, especially the genus Calidris and its close allies. NICE (1943) gives an impressive list of species performing distraction-display, many of which “rodent-run”. The theory that passerines do not use this display has already been disproved by BLAIR (1950) and CHISHOLM (1950), as has the theory that only ground-nesters and birds nesting in open expanses perform.

Fifty years ago the Superb Blue Wren, Malurus cyaneus, was described as giving a typical “rodent-run” display (DOVE, 1910), the author commenting that he was convinced “...a mouse or young rat had invaded...”. LITTLEJOHNS and LAWRENCE (1920) also referred to the display and illustrated

1) This name seems preferable to ARMSTRONG’s (1949) “mammal-run” or SIMMONS’ (1952) “small mammal type”.
their book with a photograph of the male performing. CHAFFER (1929), HINDWOOD (1951), and CHISHOLM (1956, p. 145) have since confirmed this behaviour for the species.

Malurus cyaneus has recently been the subject of an intensive study at Canberra (ROWLEY, in prep.) in the course of which observation of, and experimentation with, this facet of behaviour was possible. *M. cyaneus* is a member of the sub-family Malurinae (Australian warblers) in the family Muscicapidae (MAYR and AMADON, 1951) and is a diminutive insectivorous, shrub-nesting bird that spends much of its time on the ground, over which it moves in rapid hops, propelled by its long legs.

**OBSERVATIONS**

In the course of colour-banding *M. cyaneus* at Canberra nestlings were handled, and this frequently evoked typical "rodent-run" behaviour. Both sexes participated, though there appeared to be a large measure of individual variation — at some nests the males were more demonstrative, at others the females.

![Fig. 1](image1.png)

![Fig. 2](image2.png)

![Fig. 3](image3.png)

![Fig. 4](image4.png)


Fig. 4. Normal stance for comparison.

The stippled areas of plumage are coloured salvia blue.

(Drawings traced by Mrs BETTY TEMPLE-WATTS from photographs taken by the author).