

Display Behaviour of the Malaysian Rail-Babbler *Eupetes macrocerus*

Soon-Haur Teo & Chen Renxing

On July 2023 I was in the forest at Lenggor, Johor watching birds. I had already packed up and was ready to leave after a disappointing morning, when I received a message from a birding buddy who was still deep in the trail. He informed me that there were calls that sounded like the Malaysian Rail-Babbler *Eupetes macrocerus* or Garnet Pitta *Erythropitta granatina*. I immediately rushed to the spot.

Two Malaysian Rail-Babblers were heard calling around the area. After 15 minutes of waiting, one of them appeared right in front of us and seemed confiding, so we did not set up a bird hide. We had done some call playback earlier but stopped when the bird appeared. Although there were two birds, one was always hiding in the foliage.

Five minutes later the bird jumped up to a log and started displaying and singing non-stop for 30 minutes. It was an amazing experience! The log was like the bird's 'performance stage' and it danced from left to right and right to left, repeatedly.



Plate 1: Front view of the calling posture of the Malaysian Rail-Babbler

When calling out, a thin monotone whistle, the bird bends the legs, leans forwards "so that the breast nearly touched the ground, and stretching the neck and head out parallel with the ground, bare throat-patches inflated balloon-like" (Wells 2007). See Plates 1 and 2. At times the head and bill are held upwards. The tail is spread open and the wings are also occasionally opened in display. During vocalisation the neck pouches inflate extensively showing the blue neck skin and enabling the bird to sustain the whistle (Yong 2005; Bowler 2008; Foley 2011).

A video recording of the behaviour can be seen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1a1lm8eD4>

We also saw the bird take a cricket from the forest floor (see Plate 3). It was consumed by the bird soon after. No other foraging activities were observed. The foraging and food sources for this species are poorly documented.



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Plate 2: Side view of the calling posture of the Malaysian Rail-Babbler

Discussion

Malaysian Rail-Babblers, although elusive lowland forest birds, are known to be easily attracted by call playback or an imitation of the long-call (Wells 2007; Bowler 2008). This form of display, often in response to a human observer, has also been observed between two birds (Lee 2009). Although considered to be possibly part of courtship behaviour, as it is not associated with any aggressive behaviour, it is very likely a territorial display; the rapid response to call imitation or playback suggests this (Yong & Foley 2012; Lee 2009). Logs are often used as staging locations to display.

On this occasion we observed another bird, not sighted, calling not far behind. Hence, this could be a territorial display.



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Plate 3: Malaysian Rail-Babbler feeding on an insect

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