Monkeys crying wolf? Tufted capuchin monkeys use anti-predator calls to usurp resources from conspecifics

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The use of ‘tactical deception’ is argued to have been important in the cognitive evolution of the order Primates, but systematic studies of active deception in wild non-human primates are scant. This study tests whether wild tufted capuchin monkeys (*Cebus apella nigrinus*) use alarm calls in a functionally deceptive manner to usurp food resources. If capuchins use alarm calls ‘deceptively’, it was predicted that false alarms should be: (i) given by subordinates more than by dominants, (ii) more frequent when food is most contestable, (iii) more frequent when less food is available, and (iv) given when the caller is in a spatial position in which it could increase its feeding success if conspecifics react to the call. These predictions were tested by observing subjects in experimental contexts, in which the amount and distribution of a high-value resource (banana pieces) were manipulated using wooden platforms suspended from tree branches. While false alarms were non-significantly more common when more food was available, the three remaining predictions were supported. These results generally support the hypothesis that alarm calls are used by capuchins to reduce the effects of feeding competition. Whether this is intentional on the part of the caller requires further investigation.

Keywords: alarm calls; feeding competition; deception; communication; primates; *Cebus apella nigrinus*

1. INTRODUCTION

Animal signals are argued to function to manipulate the behaviour of signal receivers in a way that preferentially benefits the signaller (Dawkins & Krebs 1978; Krebs & Dawkins 1984). Anti-predator signals have long been challenging to explain because of the danger that the signaller imparts on itself in an apparent attempt to warn others of impending danger. While numerous hypotheses potentially explain how an individual who has detected a predator can benefit directly or indirectly by eliciting anti-predator behaviour in conspecifics (see the reviews by Hauser 1996; Wheeler 2008), individuals could also use alarm calls in the absence of a predator to distract signal receivers and take advantage of the momentary diversion of attention. Cases such as this wherein individuals produce a signal outside its ‘normal’ context in order to distract listeners is a form of what has been termed tactical or functional deception (Whiten & Byrne 1988; Hauser 1996, 1997).

Functionally deceptive behaviours are expected to be uncommon, especially in social animals where the need to cooperate with group members is common and the potential for targets to habituate to such behaviours is high (Cheney & Seyfarth 1990). This prediction has been largely supported by the fact that observation of behaviours that can be interpreted as functionally deceptive is rare and largely anecdotal (Byrne & Whiten 1990). However, functionally deceptive behaviours can, in theory, be relatively common if the cost of not responding to an ‘appropriate’ reaction is high (Mitchell 1988), or if

targets are largely unable to determine whether or not the agent’s behaviour was indeed deceptive or honest (Whiten & Byrne 1988). Both of these criteria may apply to alarm calls, as the cost of not responding to an anti-predatory behaviour is potentially death, and because false alarms owing to misclassification of innocuous stimuli may be common (e.g. Haftorn 2000), especially in environments with poor visibility (Evans 1997).

Given these features of alarm calls, it is perhaps not surprising that nearly all systematic studies of functionally deceptive uses of vocalizations among vertebrates in natural conditions have involved the use of predator-associated calls outside a predatory context. In one of these studies, it was found that the post-copulatory calls given by male formosan squirrels (*Callosciurus erythraeus*) do not differ acoustically from the calls that are typically given in response to terrestrial predators and that playbacks of post-copulatory calls cause receivers to employ anti-predator behaviours similar to those observed in reaction to calls that are given in response to predators (Tamura 1995). Such anti-predator reactions in post-copulatory contexts probably benefit the caller because they reduce the likelihood of sperm competition and therefore increase the proportion of the female’s litter being sired by the caller. Similarly, male barn swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) frequently give false alarm calls in apparent attempts to mate-guard (Møller 1990). In a third study, two avian taxa, white-winged shrike tanagers (*Lanio versicolor*) and bluish-slate antshrikes (*Thamnomanes scitogynus*), were observed to use false alarms to distract foraging competitors in a way that potentially allowed the caller to arrive at the food source before it could be obtained by the competitor (Munn 1986).

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An additional study conducted under experimental conditions similarly showed that great tits (*Parus major*) successfully used false alarms to distract competitors during feeding (Møller 1988). Here it was found that individuals did not give false alarms if they were only in the presence of individuals whom they could easily displace with threat displays (i.e. subordinate individuals), but did when in the presence of those that could not be easily displaced (i.e. individuals of similar or higher rank). In addition, false alarms were more common when the food was more clumped, and therefore more easily monopolized by dominants, than when it was more dispersed. Similar uses of false alarms in feeding contexts have been observed anecdotally in a number of taxa, including nuthatches (Tramer 1994), foxes (Rüppell 1986) and primates (Byrne & Whiten 1990; Gouzoules *et al.* 1996).

To date, only a pair of studies have examined passive deception (i.e. the withholding of information) in free ranging primates by showing that some species selectively withhold food calls on some occasions (Hauser 1992; Di Bitetti 2005). Passive deception is probably more common among animals than active deception (i.e. providing false information such as producing food calls in the absence of food) owing to the difficulty in detecting the behaviour (Cheney & Seyfarth 1990). However, the classification of instances in which individuals do not provide information to others as deceptive has been criticized on the basis that the withholding of an altruistic act is not necessarily 'cheating' (Owings & Morton 1998). In contrast, actively providing false information is more widely accepted as a functionally deceptive behaviour (Searcy & Nowicki 2005). There is no systematic evidence yet that any primates actively use signals outside their 'appropriate' context (but see Slocombe & Zuberbühler 2007 for evidence of functionally deceptive exaggeration of signals in chimpanzees, *Pan troglodytes*). Systematic studies of such behaviour with wild primates are important, given that the ability to use tactical deception is argued to have been an important factor in the cognitive evolution of primates (Whiten & Byrne 1988).

This study examines the use of terrestrial predator-associated calls by tufted capuchin monkeys (*Cebus apella nigrinus*) in experimental feeding contexts when no predators or other potentially threatening stimuli are present. This study was undertaken after initial ad libitum observations indicated that these calls were given far more often in these experimental contexts than in natural contexts, although it was not clear if this increased production of alarm calls reflected a strategy for usurping resources, as has been shown in the avian taxa discussed earlier. If anti-predator calls are indeed used during feeding to usurp resources from conspecifics, several testable predictions can be made. First, because dominants can easily usurp resources from subordinates through displacements (although the reverse is not true), false alarms should be given more often by subordinates than by dominants (Møller 1988). Second, false alarms should be more common when food is more clumped, and therefore more contestable, than when more dispersed. Third, false alarms are expected to be more common when less food is available. Fourth, false alarms should be given when the caller is close enough to the contested resource to take advantage of any conspecific reactions. Finally, the

false alarms should elicit anti-predator reactions, just as alarm calls given in response to real threats do (B. C. Wheeler, in preparation).

2. METHODS

(a) *Study site and subjects*

Data were collected between May 2005 and December 2006 in Iguazú National Park, Argentina (25°40' S, 54°30' W), a semi-deciduous and subtropical forest (see Di Bitetti *et al.* 2006 for additional details regarding the study site). Tufted capuchins are largely frugivorous primates, although a considerable portion of their diet consists of insect prey (Brown & Zunino 1990). In Iguazú, capuchin groups typically range in size from 7 to 30 individuals (Di Bitetti 2001), although groups of up to 45 individuals have been observed (C. Janson 2004, unpublished data). Dominance hierarchies are linear, with dominant individuals winning contests over food and spatial position (Janson 1985, 1990; Di Bitetti & Janson 2001). The species is mostly arboreal, primarily inhabiting the mid-to-lower canopy (Fleagle & Mittermeier 1980). All data for this study came from a single study group, the Macuco Group, which ranged in size from 23 to 28 individuals during the study period. All study subjects were readily recognizable based on facial characteristics.

The alarm call repertoire of tufted capuchins includes three acoustically distinct call types: one of these (the 'bark') is given exclusively in response to aerial stimuli, while the other two (the 'peep' and the 'hiccup') are given in response to both felids and snakes (B. C. Wheeler, in preparation). The number of hiccups an individual produces seems to reflect the degree of risk facing the caller. Callers tend to give two or more hiccups in quick succession in high-risk situations (such bouts are hereafter referred to as 'high-urgency hiccups'). By contrast, in non-urgent situations (i.e. when no predators are present), which are nevertheless stressful for the caller (primarily when the risk of falling is high), callers tend to produce only a single call (B. C. Wheeler, in preparation). Playbacks of both barks and high-urgency hiccups indicate that these calls elicit anti-predator reactions in call receivers, although 'look' reactions are far more common than 'escape' reactions (B. C. Wheeler, in preparation). By contrast, call bouts consisting of a single hiccup only rarely elicit anti-predator vigilance reactions in call receivers (B. C. Wheeler, unpublished data), indicating that conspecific listeners do not interpret such calls as indicative of a threat.

(b) *Experimental protocol*

Data on false alarm call production during feeding were collected in experimental contexts wherein the quantity and distribution of a high-quality resource (banana pieces measuring approx. 2.5 cm) were manipulated using 1 m × 1 m platforms suspended from tree branches by a system of ropes and pulleys at 3–10 m above the ground (see also Janson 1996; Di Bitetti & Janson 2001 for additional descriptions of feeding platform experiments). Within a given experimental site, the fruit pieces were distributed across one to six platforms in order to vary the degree of monopolizability of the resource. The quantity of food available was manipulated by varying the number of bananas provided from 2 to 30. Within a site, individual platforms were spaced at least 15 m apart, but the site was spread over no more than 40 m. Different experimental sites were separated by at least 250 m and were placed at least 150 m

from naturally occurring fruit patches. The spatial distribution of the platforms within and between sites, relative to group spread, allowed each site to mimic a single food patch, while different sites mimicked distinct patches. During most months, two experimental sites were used simultaneously; the sites were set up on the final day of the month and were provisioned once a day for 13 consecutive days following their discovery by the study group. During the three months of the Argentinian winter, there were eight sites used simultaneously and bananas were provided at each site everyday that the study group visited for the entire three-month period.

The banana pieces were placed in the platforms as the group approached the experimental site, but before arriving. When the group arrived, one or two observers each chose a focal individual over six months in age (when they begin to spend most of their time away from their mothers), following it until all banana pieces had been eaten, and collected data on its behaviour using both instantaneous and continuous sampling methods (Martin & Bateson 2007). All data were spoken into an audio recorder. Every 30 s, observers noted the focal animal's location (within 2 m of a platform with food or greater than 2 m from a platform with food). All hiccups given by the focal animal were noted continuously, and the animal's location at the moment the call was given was recorded. All occurrences of anti-predator escape reactions employed by other group members within a 10 m radius of the focal animal following an alarm call by the focal were noted.

A hiccup produced in the experimental feeding contexts was considered a resource-related (functionally) deceptive alarm (RRDA) call if certain criteria were met that eliminated other likely explanations for call production. First, there must have been an absence of actual or potentially threatening terrestrial stimuli (i.e. felids, snakes or any similar stimuli that could reasonably be misclassified by the caller to be one of these threats). Because the observer might not see all such stimuli, calls given in conjunction with additional anti-predatory behaviours (including escape reactions, threat displays or sudden vigilance towards the ground) were considered to have been given in response to actual or potential threats. Similarly, the focal animal's alarm call had to be the first one given in the bout (i.e. no alarm calls were produced by other individuals in 1 min preceding the focal animal's alarm call), as calls given in response may reflect the caller's perception of danger. Second, because hiccups are frequently given by individuals receiving aggression (Di Bitetti 2001), calls given in this context were not considered to be RRDA. While such calls may be functionally deceptive, as this often causes the aggressive bout to end suddenly, dismissing these calls is a conservative approach towards testing the resource usurpation hypothesis. Finally, the calling bout had to consist of at least two hiccups given over a period of 3 s or less; this rate is similar to the higher-urgency bouts typically associated with the detections of vipers and felids. Audio recordings made during the experiments with a K6/ME67 Sennheiser microphone connected to a Marantz PMD-660 digital audio recorder were reviewed to determine whether the call rate was sufficient to be considered high urgency.

(c) Data analysis

For each individual focal follow (of which there were one or two per individual experiment), it was noted simply whether or not the focal animal gave an RRDA at any point during the

experiment. Unless otherwise stated, the tests described below are based on whether RRDA were produced during an observation period, not the number of RRDA given. A Fisher's exact test was used to test whether subordinate individuals were more likely to produce RRDA than dominants. The six highest ranking individuals (as determined through analysis of dyadic agonistic interactions; see Wheeler 2008 for additional details), including the group's four adult males and the two highest ranking adult females, were placed in the 'dominant' category as these are the only individuals who were able to effectively exclude more subordinate individuals (18 of which were sampled) from accessing the platforms (personal observation). For this test, each individual was scored on the basis of whether it was observed to give an RRDA at least once during any of the first 20 experiments in which it was a focal animal. Many animals were sampled more than 20 times, but additional experiments were not included in this analysis in order to avoid oversampling certain individuals. A few individuals from the study group were sampled less than 20 times (e.g. owing to death or dispersal). Although some of these individuals were observed to produce RRDA, all undersampled individuals were excluded from this analysis in order to prevent a bias towards calling. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests for small sample sizes (Siegel & Castellan 1988) were used to test whether individuals produced RRDA more often when food was more monopolizable (i.e. distributed across one to three platforms) than when less contestable (four to six platforms). To be included in this analysis, each individual had to be sampled at least five times in each of the two conditions. Because most individuals were not sampled an equal number of time in both conditions, additional experiments of the oversampled condition were not included in the analysis. For example, if an individual was sampled 10 times with one to three platforms and 15 times with four to six platforms, then only the first 10 experiments with four to six platforms were included in the analysis; alarm calls given in any subsequent experiments were not counted. The percentage of experiments that elicited RRDA was then calculated for each individual in each of the two experimental conditions. This same methodology was used to test whether false alarms were more common when less food was available (i.e. when 10 bananas or less were presented) than when more than food was available (more than 10 bananas). A binomial test was used to determine whether RRDA were given more often than expected when an individual was within 2 m of a platform with food, as callers could easily take advantage of any escape reactions the calls elicited from this short distance. The expected values for this test were calculated as the mean of the per cent time (based on the instantaneous focal samples) the callers spent within 2 m of a platform during each experiment in which an RRDA was produced. Although some individuals were observed to produce RRDA during more than one experiment, only the first such observation by each individual was included in this analysis in order to avoid pseudoreplication. Fisher's exact tests were conducted using SPSS 15.0. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests for small sample sizes were calculated following Siegel & Castellan (1988).

3. RESULTS

A total of 321 individual feeding platform experiments were successfully conducted during the study period.

Table 1. The total number of focal follows conducted with a given number of bananas distributed across a given number of platforms.

no. of platforms	no. of bananas				total
	2–4.9	5–9.9	10–19.9	20–30	
1	4	20	28	0	52
2	8	38	49	0	95
3	5	43	39	0	87
4	0	15	78	60	153
5	0	0	23	19	42
6	0	13	43	14	70
total	17	129	260	93	499

Table 2. The number of high-urgency hiccups produced by focal animals attributed to each eliciting stimulus.

context of call production	no. of instances
reactions to potential terrestrial threats	4
reactions to other alarms	15
reactions to conspecific aggression	16
RRDA	25
total high-urgency hiccups	60

This resulted in a total of 499 focal follows and a total of 45 h of focal animal observation. The total number of focal follows conducted with a given number of platforms and food quantity is provided in table 1. Focal animals did not produce high-urgency hiccups in the vast majority of experiments; such bouts were observed during 60 focal follows, while bouts that met the criteria to be considered an RRDA were given by 13 different animals during 25 individual experiments (5% of all focal follows; table 2).

Production of RRDA was non-random in terms of which individuals called and in what contexts they did so. Twenty-four of the 25 RRDA were given by subordinate individuals. When considering only those individuals sampled at least 20 times, none of the four dominant individuals was observed to produce an RRDA during the first 20 experiments in which they were sampled, while seven of eight subordinate individuals did so, a significant difference (Fisher’s exact test: $n = 12$; $p = 0.010$). The remaining subordinate individual produced an RRDA on one occasion, but not until the 22nd experiment, in which it was the focal. Among those individuals who were observed to give one or more RRDA, eight gave the calls more when the banana pieces were distributed across one to three platforms, two did so more often when four to six platforms were used and one individual showed no difference between the two treatments (two-tailed Wilcoxon signed-rank test: $T^- = 6$; $n = 10$; $p = 0.027$). Indeed, closer examination shows that the calls were most common when food was distributed across one or two platforms than across three or more platforms (figure 1). However, the frequency of RRDA did not vary based on food quantity. While eight individuals called more when more than 10 bananas were presented and only three called more when 10 or fewer bananas were given, the difference was not significant

Figure 1. The number of experiments with a given number of platforms in which a focal animal did and did not produce RRDA calls. Deceptive alarm calls were given more often than expected when food was distributed across fewer platforms.

(two-tailed Wilcoxon signed-rank test: $T^+ = 18.5$; $n = 11$; $p = 0.206$).

Of the 14 individuals observed to produce RRDA, 12 (85.7%) were within 2 m of a feeding platform during the first observed calling bout, a significant deviation from the expected value of 5.9152 (based on an average of 42.252% of the experimental time spent in such locations for these 14 experimental observation periods; one-tailed exact binomial test: $p = 0.001$; figure 2). When considering all 25 RRDA (therefore including multiple contributions from some individuals), 20 (80%) were given when the caller was within 2 m of a feeding platform, again a significant deviation from the expected value of 10.869 (based on an average of 43.476% of the experimental time spent in such locations for these 25 experimental observation periods; one-tailed exact binomial test $p = 0.0002$; figure 2).

The false alarm calls elicited anti-predator escape reactions in one or more neighbouring conspecifics in 10 of 25 cases (40%). In seven of these 10 cases, the caller probably increased its feeding success as a result of the conspecific reactions. On four occasions, the caller entered a feeding platform and obtained banana pieces immediately after others jumped out in response to the false alarm. On three occasions, the caller was already in a platform, but the false alarm caused others also in the platform to jump out, while the caller stayed and continued feeding. In the three remaining cases, the caller was unable to enter the platform because, although at least one neighbouring individual reacted, one or more individuals did not and remained on the feeding platform.

4. DISCUSSION

The resource usurpation hypothesis for false alarm call production was broadly supported, with four of the five

Figure 2. The number of RRDA calls that were given when the caller was within 2 m and more than 2 m from a feeding platform versus the expected values that calls would be given when the caller was in such a location. Bars on the left side are based on the first observed RRDA from each calling individual. Bars on the right side are based on all 25 observed RRDAs. In both cases, deceptive alarm calls were given more often than expected when individuals were within 2 m of a platform.

predictions finding support in this study: subordinate individuals produced the calls far more often than dominants, the calls were given more often when the contested resources could most easily be monopolized by dominants, callers tended to be well positioned spatially to take advantage of any potential anti-predator reactions the calls elicited and the RRDAs distracted conspecifics by eliciting anti-predator escape reactions (doing so nearly twice as often as did playback of 'honest' alarm calls; B. C. Wheeler, in preparation), with callers most often taking advantage of these reactions. The only prediction not supported was that RRDAs would be more common when less food was available. In fact, RRDAs were slightly, but non-significantly, more common when more food was available. Even without support for the latter prediction, it seems that capuchin monkeys, similarly to some avian and rodent taxa (e.g. Munn 1986; Tamura 1995), use alarm calls to distract others during competitive situations, alleviating some of the costs associated with contest competition for food.

Functionally deceptive signalling is thought to have to be rare and/or have a low cost for the 'deceived', otherwise the signal will simply be ignored and become ineffective (Fitch & Hauser 2002; Searcy & Nowicki 2005). In the current study, RRDAs were quite common, being given at a rate of 0.56 deceptive calls per individual per hour in the experimental feeding contexts. Previous studies have shown that false alarm call rates can exceed the rates in which alarm calls are given in response to real threats and still regularly elicit anti-predator reactions (Munn 1986; Möller 1988). It seems likely that in these cases, the cost of being deceived is indeed relatively low (loss of a small amount of food)

compared with the cost of not responding to a real threat (potentially death). Call receivers may therefore employ a 'better safe than sorry' approach in response to alarm calls (Haftorn 2000) as the cost of being deceived, even on a regular basis, may be less costly than ignoring all calls given in competitive situations.

While these results support a *functionally* deceptive interpretation for the production of false alarms during feeding, it is difficult to prove that this behaviour is *intentionally* deceptive (Hauser 1997). A study of the proximate causes of call production would be needed to provide more insight in this regard (Fitch & Hauser 2002). Intentionally deceptive calls would be driven proximately by the cognitive ability to understand the 'beliefs' of others (Hauser 1997). Alternatively, false alarms may be common during feeding because, after having once produced an alarm call in this context, observed the reaction of neighbouring conspecifics and acquired food as a result, individuals associate call production with access to food. While such an explanation requires that individuals learn to associate false alarm production with a food reward, it does not require special cognitive abilities. It is also plausible that call production is driven proximately by physiological mechanisms. Previous work has shown that captive tufted capuchin monkeys who experience high cortisol levels owing to chronic stress produce these calls more often than those under less stress (Boinski *et al.* 1999; see also Bercovitch *et al.* 1995; Blumstein *et al.* 2006). Subordinates may experience elevated stress (and increased cortisol levels) when the group is feeding on high-quality food resources that are highly clumped in their distribution because dominant individuals can easily exclude subordinates from feeding (e.g. Janson 1985; Koenig *et al.* 1998). Additional research is needed to confirm whether stress is indeed a possible proximate explanation for call production.

This study would not have been possible without the years of work Charles Janson put in to developing platform experiments with the Macuco Group. Andreas Koenig and Charles Janson provided indispensable advice during all phases of this project. Helpful advice was also provided by Sue Boinski, Mario Di Bitetti, John Fleagle and Barbara Tiddi. Comments by Julia Fischer, Kate Lessells, Robert Seyfarth, and an anonymous reviewer greatly improved this manuscript. I thank the Centro de Investigaciones Ecológicas Subtropicales (CIES) and the Delegación Técnica of the Argentine Administration of National Parks for permission to live and work in the park. I owe a debt of gratitude to many for assistance in the field, especially Fermino Silva. Funding was provided by the American Society of Primatologists, the Wenner-Gren Foundation (grant no. 7244), the National Science Foundation (DDIG nos 0550971 and BCS-0515007 to C. Janson) and the National Geographic Society Committee on Research and Exploration (grant to C. Janson). The study received IACUC approval from Stony Brook University (ID numbers 2005-1448 and 2006-1448).

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