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Cocked-tail Display and Evasive Behavior of American Oystercatchers

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This report describes two patterns of behavior of the American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) that apparently have not been described. I made the observations in April of 1978 and 1979 while staying on Sapelo Island, Georgia as a guest at the Marine Institute of the University of Georgia.

Cocked-tail display.—Although I have encountered no description of this display for *H. palliatus*, Cobb (1933, Birds of Falkland Islands, London, H. F. and G. Witherby), and Maclean (1972, Zool. Africana 7: 57) have described it for the Magellanic Oystercatcher (*H. leucopodus*). Kenyon (1949, Condor 51: 193) describes the same display as being performed by both members of a mixed pair of *H. bachmani* and *H. palliatus* following an attack on a Common Raven (*Corvus corax*). The descriptions of these authors are brief, giving little information on the context of the display. I saw the display performed 47 times, either by a single bird or, more rarely, by both members of a pair. Thirty-two of the performances were in relation to conflicts where the birds were anticipating an attack from a neighboring pair. The remaining 15 were associated with courtship, when the members of pairs were alone with no threat from neighbors. The contexts of these courtship displays were nest scrapes ($n = 8$), no special occasion noted ($n = 4$), and return of one member of a pair after the two had been separated ($n = 3$).

Evasive behavior in conflicts.—In this performance, one or both members of a pair threw itself sideways against the sand when trying to dodge the long bill of an opponent swooping down from above. I saw this only in severe territorial conflicts. I saw the evasive behavior of the oystercatchers performed on 4 different days without apparent provocation. For example, the members of one pair were idling about the upper beach on 14 April, when one of them suddenly ran a few steps to flop awkwardly against the sand. It then started to walk to the water edge 20 m away, breaking its progress five times to swerve to the side or rear in similar fashion. The beach was bare and free of other birds. It is difficult to interpret such apparently evasive behavior when done *in vacuo*. All of the oystercatchers that did so were ones that had been engaged in severe territorial conflicts for several weeks. Mathiessen (1973, The wind birds, New York, Viking Press), describing the lifting-of-one-wing display of the Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Tryngites subruficollis*), wrote that it sometimes “displays in solitude, in silence, as if practising for some dread fray that awaits it in the future.” Received 25 June 1979, accepted 15 October 1979.