Getting a kick out of it: multimodal signalling during male–male encounters in the foot-flagging frog *Micrixalus aff. saxicola* from the Western Ghats of India

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Several anuran species use multimodal signals to communicate in diverse social contexts. Our study describes acoustic and visual behaviours of the Small Torrent Frog (*Micrixalus aff. saxicola*), a diurnal frog endemic to the Western Ghats of India. During agonistic interactions males display advertisement calls, foot-flagging and tapping (foot lifting) behaviours to signal the readiness to defend perching sites in perennial streams. Results from a quantitative video analysis of male–male interactions indicate that foot-flagging displays were used as directional signals toward the opponent male, but were less abundant than calls. The acoustic and visual signals were not functionally linked. The call of *Micrixalus aff. saxicola* thereby did not act as an alert signal. Analysis of behavioural transitions revealed that kicking behaviours (physical attacks) significantly elicited kicks from interacting males. We suggest that foot-flagging displays ritualized from this frequently observed fighting technique to reduce physical attacks.

Keywords: Anura, Micrixalidae, physical attack, small torrent frog, visual communication.

ANURANS predominantly use acoustic signals for communication and a long history of studies has provided comprehensive information about acoustic signal properties1-8. However, evidence is mounting that a growing number of anurans also use visual cues in various social contexts1-6. Signals or cues in more than one sensory modality (multimodal communication) could improve signal perception in complex environments3,8 and facilitate faster detection for receivers9. For instance, the bright vocal sac pulsating during calling was shown to act as an additional visual display enhancing signal localization, detection and discrimination in dense choruses10-12. Foot-flagging, a conspicuous visual display performed

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with the hind legs, and independently of calling behaviour is also assumed to facilitate signal detection in noisy environments constraining anuran communication\cite{3,14}. The behaviour has evolved convergently in five anuran families and was mainly observed during male–male agonistic interaction\cite{4,14,16}, and also during courtship\cite{15}.

Previous studies on foot-flagging behaviour in the Ranid genus \textit{Staurois} from Borneo demonstrated that visual displays dominate agonistic male–male communication and are used to defend signalling sites against conspecifics\cite{13,14,17}. The advertisement calls and foot flags of \textit{Staurois} spp. form a temporally functional unit in a bimodal signal pattern\cite{3,14,17}. The advertisement call functions as an alert signal to receivers and draws attention to the second signal component, the visual signal. Short latency times between calls and following foot-flagging displays support the inter-signal interaction hypothesis in \textit{Staurois} species\cite{17}.

The so far less studied genus \textit{Micrixalus} comprises 11 species endemic to the Western Ghats of India\cite{18}, of which 2 (\textit{M. fuscus} and \textit{M. saxicola}) have been reported to display foot-flagging behaviour\cite{9,20}. The Small Torrent Frog (\textit{M. aff. saxicola}) lives exclusively along perennial streams\cite{8}, in which males defend calling sites on pebbles and rocks against rivals using a diverse signal repertoire of calls, foot-flagging and tapping (foot lifting)\cite{20}. Former studies on allied species showed that acoustic signals are not impaired by environmental stream noise, but suggest that concurrently calling conspecifics could mask conspecific calls\cite{12}. Experimental investigations using playbacks and a model frog demonstrated that advertisement calls elicit calling and tapping behaviour in males, whereas simultaneous inflations of a bright white vocal sac to call playbacks are necessary to evoke foot-flagging signals\cite{12}.

To find out how multimodal signalling behaviour and in particular foot-flagging displays have evolved, comparative studies on several species in a similar social context are imperative. Detailed descriptions of signalling behaviour and receiver responses will allow us to highlight differences and commonalities across anuran foot-flagging species. The aims of this study on \textit{M. aff. saxicola} were to (1) determine activity patterns of signal production, (2) describe the signalling behaviour during agonistic male–male encounters, (3) test the alerting-signal hypothesis of multimodal signals\cite{21} and (4) compare our results with previous studies on other foot-flagging frog species.

\textit{Micrixalus} aff. \textit{saxicola} is diurnal and inhabits streams within evergreen forests in localities characterized by low water, air and soil temperature compared to other stream habitats in the Western Ghats\cite{18}. We investigated males signalling from exposed sites on rocks in a stream at Kathalekan \textit{Myristica} swamp forest (14.27414°N, 74.74704°E) in the central Western Ghats, India at the end of the monsoon season from September to October 2010. The study site is considered to be a relict forest with evergreen vegetation and is exposed to the southwest monsoon with seasonal rainfall of 3000–5000 mm (ref. 22) and an average temperature and humidity of 25°C ± 1°C and 85% during the period of study respectively. Males in our study population had an average snout-urostyle length of 23.6 mm (SD ± 0.6, \(n = 13\)) and a mean mass of 1.1 g (SD ± 0.14, \(n = 13\))\cite{12}.

To determine the activity patterns of \textit{M. aff. saxicola} during the course of a day, we scan-sampled on an average three individuals for 5 min every half hour from 6 am until 6 pm for a period of five days (16–20 September 2010). During the observations we recorded three types of behaviour (call, flag and tap) and determined the means for each of the individuals.

For a more detailed description of \textit{M. aff. saxicola} signalling behaviour, we recorded ten male–male agonistic interactions of two individuals with a video camera (Sanyo Xacti WH1) on a tripod from a distance of 1–2 m to the focal individuals. We only used interactions between frogs for video analysis during which we could determine clearly visible resident and intruding males, and that ended with a winner and loser. An intruder was determined as the individual that jumped towards a resident individual at a distance closer than 30 cm and immediately started signalling. The individual that left the area first was considered the loser. We analysed frequency and duration of the behaviours: call, foot flag, turn, kick and location change with the video coding software Solomon Coder\cite{23}. Two types of behaviours can be considered as exclusive visual signals: tap and foot flag. For a tap a male lifted either the right or the left leg without extending it, whereas during a foot flag (Figure 1), a male raised one hind leg and stretched it in an arc above the substrate level before returning it to the body side\cite{3}. We documented foot flags carried out with closed and open interdigital webbing separately. To determine side preferences we documented foot-flagging performed with the left or right leg in connection to the positions of

![Figure 1. Foot-flagging male \textit{Micrixalus} aff. \textit{saxicola} during an agonistic interaction.](image-url)
interacting males. The behaviour termed ‘kick’ describes an aggressive physical attack with one hind leg in the majority of cases pushing the opponent off the rock. When individuals moved away, from or to either sides of the opponent, we recorded this behaviour as location change and a rotating movement on the spot as turn.

We compared the frequency of acoustic and visual signals (call, foot flag and tap) during the morning and afternoon using chi-squared tests and behavioural frequencies during male–male agonistic interactions applying Kruskal–Wallis tests followed by post hoc comparison with rank sums (Dunn–Bonferroni tests).

To study differences in duration between foot-flagging behaviours performed with the interdigital webbing spread out or closed, we chose a linear mixed model (LMM). The LMM allows repeated measurements of the same individual to be fitted to a model as random variables, thus controlling for differing number of displays per male individual. The statistical assumptions for LMM analysis were met (Kolmogorov–Smirnov test). Foot-flagging duration was entered as the dependent variable with the relationship of open or closed web as predictor variable. The identity of individual (foot flag) was entered as a nested random factor. The duration of the different stages of foot-flagging and overall tapping behaviour was determined by calculating medians and ranges.

To test the hypothesis that foot flags are directional signals towards the interacting male, we used chi-square tests to analyse possible side preferences. Differences in behavioural frequencies between winners and losers and between residents and intruders were compared using Wilcoxon signed ranks test.

We analysed signals in relation to successive behaviours of interacting males. The behavioural transitions were displayed in the form of a first-order 6 × 6 contingency table and analysed using a Monte Carlo test. Transitions that suggested the largest differences between observed and expected frequencies were further tested using chi-square tests.

To test the alert-signal hypothesis we compared temporal interactions between the advertisement call and the foot-flagging behaviour and vice versa. The latency times between behaviours were compared with Wilcoxon signed ranks test. All statistical tests were performed with SPSS version 19 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

Microtus aff. saxicola males were active during the whole day (Figure 2), with higher calling ($\chi^2 = 29.2; df = 1; P < 0.001$) and tapping ($\chi^2 = 9.7; df = 1; P < 0.01$) activity levels during the morning (06:00 am–12:00 pm) compared to the afternoon (12:00 pm–18:00 pm). Foot-flagging behaviour did not differ between morning and afternoon hours ($\chi^2 = 0.1; df = 1; P > 0.05$).

During male–male agonistic interactions with an average duration of 395.0 s ($N = 10$, range: 35–1285 s), comparison of behavioural frequencies indicated differences between the number of displayed behaviours (Kruskal–Wallis ANOVA: $H = 15.375$, $df = 5$, $P < 0.01$, $N = 10$). Males performed more calls than foot-flagging behaviours (pairwise comparison: $P < 0.05$). Other behaviours did not show significant differences in signalling frequency (Figure 3).

We found no difference in duration between foot flags performed with the foot web open or closed (GLMM: $F_{1,60} = 2.023$, $P = 0.16$). The median duration of a foot flag was 4.38 s (range: 3.19–13.31 s), the interdigital webbing was spread for an average period of 1.08 s (range: 0.54–1.61 s) and the leg was rested behind the body for 2.67 s (range: 1.88–12.04 s). Median tap duration was 0.35 s (range: 0.29–0.38 s). There were no differences between foot-flagging behaviours conducted

![Figure 2](image-url)  
**Figure 2.** Individual signalling activity of *M. aff. saxicola* over the course of a day. Recorded signalling types include advertisement calls, tapping (foot lifting) and foot-flagging displays. Bars show means ± SE per individual and hour.

![Figure 3](image-url)  
**Figure 3.** Frequency of different behavioural displays by opponent *M. aff. saxicola* males during an agonistic interaction of an average duration of 395.6 s ($N = 10$). Box plots show the median response with interquartile range and 10th and 90th percentile.
with the right or left leg ($\chi^2 = 0.89$, df = 1, $P > 0.05$; Table 1). Foot flags were performed significantly more often in the direction of the interacting male than to the opposite side ($\chi^2 = 5.8$, df = 1, $P < 0.05$; Table 1), whereas no differences in signalling frequency were observed between the opponent male sitting in front of or behind the displaying individual ($\chi^2 = 2.6$, df = 1, $P > 0.05$; Table 1).

Intruders changed their location more often than residents (Wilcoxon signed-ranks: $Z = 36$, $P = 0.012$, $N = 10$; Figure 4a), all other behaviours did not differ between the resident and the intruding male.

We found no difference in behavioural frequencies between winners and losers (Wilcoxon signed-ranks test: $P > 0.2$, $N = 10$, in all cases; Figure 4b). Analyses of a dyadic matrix (Table 2) showed that a behaviour performed by one individual was associated with the subsequent behaviour performed by another individual significantly more often than random expectations (number of trials = 100,000, $P < 0.001$, $N = 538$). Calling was preceded by calling, tapping and location change significantly more often than expected. Although calling was the primary response (35%) to all displays from an interacting male, the behaviour did not occur more often than expected (e.g., call–call: $\chi^2 = 1.135$, df = 20, $P > 0.05$; Table 2). Kicking was preceded by kicking significantly more often than expected ($\chi^2 = 42.131$, df = 20, $P < 0.01$).

To study if the call is functionally linked to the foot-flagging signal, we compared the timing relationship between advertisement calls and foot flags of 19 males. The average delay between an advertisement call and a foot flag was 2.52 s (range: 0.12–9.87 s, $N = 19$), compared to 2.91 s (range: 0.15–8.49 s, $N = 19$) between a foot flag and a subsequent advertisement with differences being not significant (Wilcoxon matched pairs, $Z = 0.702$, $P = 0.48$, $N = 19$; Figure 5).

The results indicate that males of $M$. aff. saxicola announce the readiness to defend their perching sites against rivals using both acoustic and visual signals. The elevated activity during morning overlapped with observations on the appearance of amplexant pairs preparing to spawn. In the presence of females, males accumulating in areas of shallow water probably are most active defending areas favourable for reproduction. Calls were the most common response type during our observations, confirming results from previous experimental studies suggesting that acoustic signals represent the primary modality for communication in $M$. aff. saxicola.

Analysis of successive behaviour types between two males showed that all behaviours except for kicks were responded by the opponent with calls. Kicking was responded with kicks. Kicking behaviour represents the fighting strategy of $M$. aff. saxicola used to defend resources needed for reproduction. To perform the behaviour, males position themselves close to their opponents and repeatedly hit the rivals with their hind legs until they are thrown off the perching site (D. Preininger & H. Hödl, pers. obs.). Other foot-flagging frog species display foot-lifting behaviour (e.g. $Hylodes asper$ and $Hylodes dactylocinus$) or tapping (species of the Bornean

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**Table 1.** Side preferences of foot-flagging behaviour of Micriscalus aff. saxicola collected from 20 individuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foot flag</th>
<th>Right</th>
<th>Snout</th>
<th>Vent</th>
<th>Left</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.** Kicking was preceded by kicking significantly more often than expected ($\chi^2 = 42.131$, df = 20, $P < 0.01$).

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**Figure 4.** Frequency of different behavioural displays by two $M$. aff. saxicola males during an agonistic interaction of an average duration of 395.6 s ($N = 10$). Behavioural frequencies are separated according to the status of the male individual at (a) the beginning (resident or intruder) and (b) the end (winner and loser) of an agonistic interaction. Box plots show the median response with interquartile range and 10th and 90th percentile.
The two signals could be redundant displays increasing the accuracy of response or act as a back-up to enhance signal efficacy\(^{21,27}\).

Foot-flagging displays are performed at lower frequency than actual kicking behaviour in M. aff. saxicola in response to a signalling opponent. Aggressive or threat signals usually reflect a former fighting strategy or posture movements before the initial attacks\(^7\). We assume that a response by a receiver being out of reach to perform an actual kick initially served as source of selection in the evolution of foot-flagging signals. From our behavioural observations, the characteristics of foot-flagging signals and comparison with other species, we interpret foot-flagging in M. aff. saxicola as an agonistic signal ritualized from physical attacks\(^{25}\). Signals displayed during male–male interactions should improve communication leading to lower rates of actual attacks thereby reducing the risk of injury for the opponents\(^9\). Biotic and abiotic noise was suggested to further support the selection of visual displays in addition to or in place of acoustic signals\(^{12,14}\). Diurnal activity may have favoured the evolution of conspicuous foot colourations to increase signal efficacy\(^{25}\).

The present study was based on basic behavioural observations during which natural interactions of frogs were recorded and analysed. In previous behavioural experiments using model frogs, M. aff. saxicola males rarely responded with foot flags and never kicked a model frog hence males did not present their full range of behaviour. The behaviour of foot-flagging frogs appears complex, including a large behavioural repertoire that cannot be imitated by models. To correctly analyse the natural range and frequency of behaviours as occurring in natural frog populations, simple observational studies seem crucial. Combining similar studies across species and comparing environmental and behavioural factors may help to

table 2. Dyadic matrix of behavioural inter-individual transitions during ten male–male agonistic interactions of M. aff. saxicola

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kick</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foot-flagging</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tap</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\*Indicates transitions that occurred at frequencies higher than expected (\(P < 0.01\)) according to chi-square tests.
better understand the evolution of multimodal communication in anuran amphibians.


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Observation of forest phenology using field-based digital photography and satellite data

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The present communication reports species-specific phenological events in three tropical dry deciduous forest species and herbaceous plants growing below their canopy. Digital photographs of the tree species –

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