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## Singing Duets May Keep Fairy-Wrens From Cheating on Their Partners

Researchers found that pairs of males and females who sang together when sexual rivals approached were less likely to cheat

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Could making sweet music together keep your partner from straying from the nest? If you're a red-backed fairy-wren, a new study suggests the chances are good. Researchers from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology found that pairs of male and female fairy-wrens who sang lusty duets when sexual rivals approached were less likely to cheat on each other.

The petite Australian songbirds may look innocent, but their colorful feathers and upturned tails mask their infamous sexual promiscuity. "Cheating on your partner is more the rule than the exception," said co-author Daniel Baldassarre, formerly of the Cornell lab and now at the University of Miami.

Male and female fairy-wrens will pair up for life, but both will continue to mate with others in their territory. As a result, males often end up raising other males' offspring—a phenomenon evolutionary biologists call cuckoldry.

The males aim to raise their own chicks. Dr. Baldassarre and his colleagues initially predicted that aggressive males would be cuckolded less than timid ones, but an experiment to test the theory showed no correlation with how many non-biological chicks the males raised.

"We were all shocked," said Emma Greig, a co-author and project leader of the Cornell lab's Project Feederwatch.

What happened next offered a clue to what drives the birds' sexual decisions. When interlopers approached, pairs would fly off to a nearby branch and begin singing together. Males who sang duets quicker and more avidly with females raised more of their own young, researchers found, suggesting that duetting is a key way that the birds choose sexual partners. The study appeared last month in *Biology Letters*.

The duet's lyrics are still unclear. Stephen Pruett-Jones, an associate professor of ecology and evolution at the University of Chicago who was not involved in the study, said that pair bonds in birds are similar to those in humans. He suggested that a fairy-wren pair's duets could be evidence of a stronger commitment to one another.

Or, Dr. Baldassarre said, the male could be blocking the female's signals to his rival.

"We don't know which is happening. That's the next question," Dr. Baldassarre said. As in humans, "this mating behavior is just a complete soap opera."