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SHORT NOTE

California Quail distracts a stoat

For 23 years (1926-1951), I was on a farm in the Norsewood district of southern Hawke's Bay. During a farm muster, while waiting for part of the muster to catch up, I was on an elevation overlooking a clearing about 40 metres wide in the scrub. A file of 10-12 California Quail (*Lophortyx californica*) chicks emerged from the scrub and set a swift course for the opposite side of the clearing. About 12-15 paces behind the chicks an adult bird emerged from the scrub and moved hesitantly after the chicks. A third of the way across the clearing it stopped and looked back. A stoat came out of the scrub, following the birds, its nose to the ground.

As soon as the stoat appeared, the adult quail moved off almost at right angles to the direction taken by the chicks. When the stoat reached the point of divergence, it stopped, looked about the clearing, and then continued as before. The adult quail had also stopped. As soon as the stoat moved after the chicks, which had just reached cover across the clearing, the adult ran towards the stoat until 2-3 paces from it.

The stoat hesitated and then made for the adult, which fled but did not fly. Seeing the adult's speed, the stoat returned to the trail of the chicks, but the quail countered by moving back towards the stoat. The stoat seemed confused but, after some hesitation, chased the quail again, which again retreated. This sequence happened three more times before the quail reached the scrub with the stoat in pursuit. Each time the stoat had hesitated and looked back towards the chicks, the adult quail had also stopped and cautiously approached the stoat, and each time the stoat resumed the chase the quail retreated, but without flying.

I did not see the quail or its chicks again; and a second adult quail did not appear. The bird gave no call of warning or alarm; the whole incident was silent.

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