## **RESEARCH ARTICLE**



# Sex differences in leadership during group movement in mantled howler monkeys (Alouatta palliata)

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#### Abstract

Benefits of group life depend in large part on whether animals remain cohesive, which often requires collective decisions about where and when to move. During a group movement, the leader may be considered as the individual occupying the vanguard position of the group progression, when its movement evokes following by other group members. In nondespotic societies, individuals with greater incentives to move frequently are leaders. During 15 months of observations (1,712 contact hours), we investigated two mantled howler monkey (Alouatta palliata) groups at La Flor de Catemaco (Los Tuxtlas, Mexico) to examine whether sex and female reproductive state influenced leadership likelihood in two contexts: movements toward feeding trees; movements associated with loud calls, a group-defense behavior used by males of this genus. Females led and occupied forward positions during group movements toward feeding trees more often than adult males. Adult females led these movements more frequently when they were gestating than when they were lactating or cycling. There were no differences between sexes in the leadership of group movements associated with loud calls. Leadership by gestating females is perhaps the result of their higher nutritional/energetic needs when compared with cycling females, and of their greater mobility when compared with lactating females carrying dependent offspring. Female leadership during movements toward feeding trees may be a mechanism to optimize access to food resources in mantled howler monkeys.

#### KEYWORDS

collective behavior, group defense, leadership, movement, progression order

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Collective movements play an important role in determining the structure and dynamics of populations and ecosystems, as well as in the evolution and diversity of organisms (Aves, Insecta, and Mammalia: Bullock, Kenward, & Hails, 2002; Clobert, Danchin, Dhondt, & Nichols, 2001; Dingle, 1996; Swingland & Greenwood, 1983). In heterogeneous groups of individuals, members often differ in their physiological needs and abilities (Primates: McCabe &

Fedigan, 2007; Equidae: National Research Council, 1989; Bovidae: Prins, 1996; Ursidae: Robbins et al., 2007), and to maintain group cohesion during movements, they must make decisions despite all possible interindividual conflicts of interest (Conradt & Roper, 2003, 2005).

In group movements, the leader may be defined as the subject influencing and coordinating movement by other group members (Pyritz, King, Sueur, & Fichtel, 2011a). Although spatial position during group movement is not necessarily explicative to the role of

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leader (Kummer, 1968; Pyritz, Fichtel, & Kappeler, 2010), individuals occupying the first position of the group progression eliciting following behavior by other group members may be considered leaders (Pyritz et al., 2011a; Rhine & Westlund, 1981; Watts, 1994). Individuals that occupy the front positions of group progressions can benefit from having greater control over time, distance, and direction of movement. They can also have priority of access to food resources and thus optimize energy and nutrient intake, improving their physical condition and, potentially, their long-term reproductive success (Barelli, Boesch, Heistermann, & Reichard, 2008; Beauchamp, 2000; Boinski, 1991; Erhart & Overdorff, 1999). Under distributed leadership (i.e., different group members act as leaders), individual attributes such as age, sex, and reproductive state may influence the likelihood of leading group movements (Fichtel, Pyritz, & Kappeler, 2011; Fischhoff et al., 2007; King, Johnson, & van Vugt, 2009; Leca, Gunst, Thierry, & Petit, 2003; Stueckle & Zinner, 2008).

Female mammals face higher metabolic demands during gestation and lactation than at other times (Gittleman & Thompson, 1988; Speakman, 2008). In primates, daily energy requirements may increase by 25% for gestating females and by 50-100% for lactating females (Key & Ross, 1999; Portman, 1970). These requirements are subsidized by changes in energy and nutrient acquisition (Kunz & Orrell, 2004), either through the metabolization of fat reserves or increases in food intake (Dufour & Sauther, 2002; Emery Thompson, 2013). The latter could explain why in several primate species females lead group movements more often than males (e.g., Eulemur rufifrons: Pyritz, Kappeler, & Fichtel, 2011; Hylobates lar: Barelli et al., 2008; Propithecus diadema edwardsi and Eulemur fulvus rufus: Erhart & Overdorff, 1999; Propithecus verreauxi: Trillmich, Fichtel, & Kappeler, 2004) and gestating and lactating females lead more often than other group members (Eulemur flavifrons: Volampeno, Masters, & Downs, 2011). In this context, as leaders may decide which food sources are searched for and exploited (i.e., "finder's advantage": Giraldeau & Caraco, 2000), female leadership could be a mechanism to increase access to food resources that allow coping with high nutrient/energy requirements.

Male leadership during group movements may be interpreted as a reproductive strategy. Mountain gorilla silverback males (Gorilla gorilla beringei), for instance, lead group movements to avoid lone males (Watts, 1994), and spider monkey males (Ateles geoffroyi) frequently lead all-male subgroups toward home range limits (Chapman, 1990), where raids against neighboring communities may increase reproductive opportunities (e.g., finding sexually receptive females: Aureli, Schaffner, Verpooten, Slater, & Ramos-Fernández, 2006). Conversely, male positioning during movement has been associated with group defense in risk situations (Petit & Bon, 2010), such as encounters with extra group individuals (Rhine & Tilson, 1987; Rhine & Westlund, 1981). Given that males from several species use long-range vocalizations (henceforth loud calls) to signal their location and competitive potential (e.g., Cebus apella: Robinson, 1982; Cercocebus albigena, Cercopithecus mitis, C. ascanius, C. mona: Waser & Waser, 1977; Colobus guereza: Harris, 2006; Hylobates agilis, H. concolor, H. boolock, H. klossii, H. lar: Cowlishaw,

1996; *Leontopithecus rosalia*: Halloy & Kleiman, 1994; *Nomascus concolor*: Peng-Fei, Wen, Sheng, & Xue-Long, 2009; *Presbytis thomasi*: Steenbeek, Assink, & Wich, 1999), it could be expected that movements associated with loud calls are more likely led by males than females.

In this study, we examine leadership behavior during group movements in mantled howler monkeys (Alouatta palliata). Mantled howler monkeys live in multimale-multifemale groups that are usually spatiotemporally stable (Di Fiore & Campbell, 2007). As in other howler monkey species (A. caraya: Fernández, Kowalewski, & Zunino, 2013), adult group members have been observed to lead group movements more often than immature individuals (Costello, 1991), probably because the latter have limited knowledge of their home ranges and of resources therein (Janson & van Schaik, 1993). Mantled howler monkeys are classified as nonseasonal breeders (Di Bitetti & Janson, 2000) and births may occur in any month of the year (Estrada, 1982; Jones, 1980). Their diet varies from frugivorous to folivorous depending on seasonality in food item availability (Dias & Rangel-Negrín, 2015). During gestation and lactation mantled howler monkey females increase the consumption of fats, proteins, and energy (Serio-Silva, Hernández-Salazar, & Rico-Gray, 1999), and have higher glucocorticoid hormone concentrations (independently of psychosocial activation of the stress axis: Dias, Coyohua-Fuentes, Canales-Espinosa, Chavira-Ramírez, & Rangel-Negrín, 2017) than cycling females. Female energetic condition (assessed via urinary Cpeptide concentrations) does not vary significantly among reproductive stages, although gestating females tend to have higher physical condition than other females (Cano-Huertes et al., 2017). This evidence suggests that female mantled howler monkeys meet the increased metabolic demands of gestation and lactation through diet adjustments and metabolization of energy reserves.

Adult howler monkey males produce loud calls periodically during the day (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1976). The loud calls of howler monkeys seem to be multifunctional, as they have been associated with mutual avoidance among neighboring groups (Whitehead, 1987), advertising of territory occupation (da Cunha & Byrne, 2006), advertising of competitive ability (Kitchen, 2004, 2006; Sekulic, 1982), and border defense (da Cunha & Jalles-Filho, 2007). Simulated home range invasion elicits vocal responses and group movements led by males (da Cunha & Byrne, 2006; Whitehead, 1987), and males have been observed leading groups during intergroup encounters (Fernández et al., 2013), suggesting that leadership by male howler monkeys could be part of a group-defense strategy.

Our aim was to determine variation between sexes in leadership likelihood during group movements in mantled howler monkeys. We hypothesized that leadership is a behavioral strategy that adult males and females exhibit differently depending on the context. We made three predictions of this hypothesis. First, to have greater control over the type and quality of food sought and consumed, females should lead group movements toward feeding trees more often than males. Second, as reproductive females face higher nutrient and energy demands than nonreproductive females, gestating and lactating females should lead group movements toward feeding trees more often than cycling females. Third, because the main mechanism of group defense by males is loud calling, males should lead group movements associated with the occurrence of loud calls more often than females.

## 2 | METHODS

## 2.1 | Ethical note

Our study was noninvasive and adhered to the ASP Code of Best Practices in Field Primatology and to the ASP Principles for the Ethical Treatment of Nonhuman Primates. Research protocols were approved by the Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (permits SGPA/DGVS/10637/11 and SGPA/DGVS/04999/14) and complied to the legal requirements of Mexican law (NOM-059-SEMARNAT-2010).

## 2.2 | Study site and subjects

We conducted our study at La Flor de Catemaco (18°26'43" N, 95°02'49" W) located within the Los Tuxtlas region in Veracruz (Mexico). This site is a 250-ha ranch that mainly produces ornamental palms in the shade of a 100-ha lowland tropical high evergreen rain forest. The forest floor and understory are disturbed by the palm plantations, but the canopy and emergent strata correspond to mature forest, both in terms of tree structure and composition (Bongers, Popma, Meave, & Carabias, 1988). Arboreal fauna at La Flor de Catemaco is diverse, including, in addition to mantled howler monkeys, other mammals (e.g., coatis: Nasua narica; Mexican hairy dwarf porcupines: Coendou mexicanus; tamanduas: Tamandua mexicana), birds (e.g., keel-billed toucans: Ramphastos sulfuratus; ornate hawk-eagles: Spizaetus ornatus; scarlet macaws: Ara macao), reptiles (e.g., Mexican parrot snakes: Leptophis mexicanus), and insects (e.g., leaf-cutter ants: Atta mexicana). The climate is tropical, with mean annual rainfall of 2,600 mm and a mean ambient temperature of 26°C.

The mantled howler monkey population of La Flor de Catemaco was established in 2004 through the translocation of two groups into the area (Aguilar-Cucurachi et al., 2010; Shedden-González & Rodríguez-Luna, 2010). The population has been monitored since, and by March 2017 (when this study was finished), 20 mantled howler monkeys lived in three groups and four individuals lived solitarily. We studied the two mantled howler monkey groups that have been observed since translocation: G1, with three adult males, three adult females, and one infant; G2, comprising three adult males, four adult females, and three infants. Our study concentrated on the 13 adult subjects, which were fully habituated to the presence of researchers and were easily recognized through anatomical and physiognomic characteristics.

We classified adult females as cycling, gestating, or lactating. We based this classification on the observation of births and infants ages 6 months before, during, and 6 months after the study. In this species, 6 months is the mean duration of gestation (Glander, 1980) and of the period during which milk is the only source of nutrition for infants (Balcells & Veà, 2009). Thus, for each study month females were classified as (a) gestating, during the 6 months before the birth of their infants; (b) lactating, during the first 6 months postpartum; (c) cycling, when they were neither gestating nor lactating. During the 15-month data collection period, we recorded 54 cycling female/months, 19 gestation female/months, and 24 lactation female/months (Table S1).

## 2.3 | Behavioral data collection

From January 2016 to March 2017, we observed each study group 4 days per week, from 6:00 to 18:00 hr. Using all-occurrences sampling (Altmann, 1974), we (three observers) recorded all instances of group movement, for a total of 1,712 hr. We defined group movement as every time >50% of the adult group members moved to a different tree and engaged in a different activity from that in the starting tree. We considered a movement to end when  $\ge$ 75% of the adults stayed in the same tree for at least 15 min. For this study, we focused on two types of group movements: (a) movements toward feeding trees, which ended in a feeding tree where  $\ge$ 75% of adult individuals fed within 15 min after the end of the movement (N = 286 events); (b) movements associated with vocalizations, in which at least one group male loud-called during or up to 15 min after the end of a movement (N = 275 events), and the movement did not finish in a feeding tree.

## 2.4 | Leadership measures

We defined two leadership measures. The first measure was being at the front of the group during group movements. For each group movement, we recorded the identity of the leader, defined as the first group member to move from the tree at movement onset. We also recorded the identity and order of followers and any occasion in which a new individual occupied the leading position. In the analysis, we only used movements without leader replacement (movements toward feeding trees = 244; movements associated with loud calls = 242).

The second measure was the position of followers (i.e., individuals that occupied nonleading positions) during group movements, calculated as a progression order index (Barelli et al., 2008). For each group movement, we standardized the position of each subject in the sequence of followers by dividing its position (minus one) by the number of subjects in the sequence (minus one). We averaged progression order indexes per individual per month, excluding movements in which it had the leading position. To assess whether individuals most frequently assumed front or back positions during group movements, subjects with monthly indexes <0.5 were categorized as usually occupying front positions, whereas those with average monthly indexes >0.5 were categorized as usually occupying back positions.

#### 2.5 | Data analysis

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To test our predictions, we used generalized linear mixed models (GLMM) with binomial error distributions. To test the first prediction, we ran two models. In the first, the number of times each individual moved toward a feeding tree as a leader and as a follower per month was added as a two-vector response variable (using function "cbind" in R: R Core Team, 2019) and the fixed predictor was sex. In the second model, the mean individual monthly progression order index during movements toward feeding trees categorized as "front" or "back" was the dependent variable and sex was the fixed predictor. We used two models to test the second prediction: in the first, the number of times each individual moved toward feeding trees as leader and as follower per month was added as a two-vector response variable and the fixed predictor was female reproductive state; in the second, mean individual monthly progression order index during movements toward feeding trees categorized as "front" or "back" was the dependent variable and female reproductive state was the fixed predictor. Finally, we ran two models for the third prediction: first, the number of times each individual moved in association with the occurrence of loud calls as leader and as follower per month was added as a two-vector response variable, and sex as the fixed predictor; second, mean individual monthly progression order index during movements associated with the occurrence of loud calls, categorized as "front" or "back", was the dependent variable and sex was the fixed predictor. In all models, subject identity was included as a random factor to account for the repeated sampling of individuals through time.

During the study, there was an uneven number of subjects of each sex and of females in each reproductive state category. To determine if results were biased in favor of categories with more data points in the analysis, we calculated a control variable as the relative contribution of each category to the data set by dividing the number of individuals in each particular category (i.e., male/female in tests of the first and third predictions and cycling/gestating/lactating females in tests of the second prediction) per month by the number of individuals in the category with the most individuals in that month. We prepared two sets of models, one with the models described in the previous paragraph, and another one in which the control variable was added as a fixed factor. We compared models for each prediction with and without the control variable with a likelihood ratio test and in all cases, the comparisons were nonsignificant (p > .05). Thus, as variation in the number of subjects contributing data to each category in each month did not affect results, for simplicity we present model results without the control variable.

To determine whether the random factor (i.e., identity) had a stronger impact on dependent variables than fixed factors (Pinheiro & Bates, 2000), we compared all complete models (i.e., with fixed and random factors) with a null model including only the response and the random variables with a likelihood ratio test. In all cases, complete and null models were significantly different (p < .001), indicating that the random factor had a lower influence on variation in dependent variables than fixed factors. When the reproductive

state had a significant effect in response variables, we ran post hoc Tukey pairwise comparisons. All analyses were performed with R 3.6.0 (R Core Team, 2019) using packages "car" 3.0-3 (Fox, Weisberg, & Price, 2019), "Ime4" 1.1-21 (Bates, Maechler, Bolker, & Walker, 2019), and "multcomp" 1.4-10 (Hothorn, Bretz, & Westfall, 2019).

## 3 | RESULTS

#### 3.1 | Movements toward feeding trees

Females were more likely than males to lead group movements toward feeding trees (GLMM:  $\beta = -1.22$ , 95% C.I. = -1.73-(-0.71), Z = 5.11, p < .001; Figure 1a). Gestating females led group movements more often than females in other reproductive states (Figure 1b and Table 1). Concerning the position of non-leaders during group movements toward feeding trees, regardless of reproductive state, females occupied front positions more frequently than males (GLMM:  $\beta = 2.40$ , 95% C.I. = 1.28-3.74, Z = 4.20, p < .001; Figure 2). The reproductive state was not associated with significant variation in the likelihood of females occupying front or back positions during group movements toward feeding trees (Table 1).

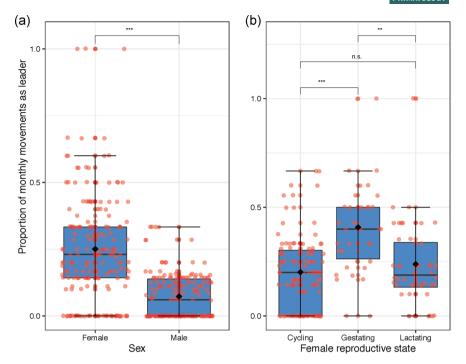
## 3.2 | Movements associated with loud calls

There were no significant differences between sexes in the likelihood of leading (GLMM:  $\beta$  = .17, 95% C.I. = -0.34-0.67, *Z* = 0.72, *p* = .470) or occupying front/back positions (GLMM:  $\beta$  = -.09, 95% C.I. = -1.55-1.29, *Z* = -0.14, *p* = .887) in group movements associated with loud calls.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

In this study, we observed that all adult mantled howler monkeys belonging to two groups successfully (i.e., were followed by other group members) led group movements toward feeding trees and movements associated with loud calls. Adult females led their groups and occupied front positions during movements toward feeding trees more frequently than adult males. Additionally, females were more likely to lead groups to feeding trees when gestating than when cycling or lactating. There were no differences between sexes in the likelihood of leading groups during movements associated with loud calls.

In several primate species, differences in feeding patterns between sexes have been documented, with females spending more time feeding, having higher feeding rates, and consuming more food than males (e.g., *Pongo pygmaeus*: Rodman, 1977; *C. albigena*: Waser, 1977; *Aotus trivirgatus* and *Callicebus moloch*: Wright, 1984; *Saimiri oerstedi*: Boinski, 1987; *Cebus capucinus*: Rose, 1994; *C. olivaceus*: Fragaszy & Boinski, 1985). One possible mechanism underlying such differences could be female leadership of group movements toward feeding trees, which may yield greater control over the type and quality of food sought and consumed (Barelli et al., 2008; Boinski, 2000; Fischhoff et al., 2007; Overdorff, Erhart, &



**FIGURE 1** Differences between sexes (a) and among females in different reproductive states (b) in leadership during group movements toward feeding trees in two groups of mantled howler monkeys studied at La Flor de Catemaco (Mexico), between January 2016 and March 2017. For illustrating purposes, leadership is represented as the proportion of monthly movements led by each individual. Thick lines inside the boxes are the medians; black diamonds are the means; box limits are the 25th and 75th percentiles; whiskers indicate 1.5\*interquartile ranges. Data points are plotted as red circles. n.s. = nonsignificant, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001. In B, pairwise comparisons calculated with Tukey tests. In A, N = 180 movements from 13 subjects; in B, N = 94 movements from seven subjects

**TABLE 1** GLMM results of variation in the likelihood of leading (A) and occupying front/back positions (B) during group movements toward feeding trees according to female reproductive state in two groups of mantled howler monkeys studied at La Flor de Catemaco (Mexico), between January 2016 and March 2017 (N = 94 group movements)

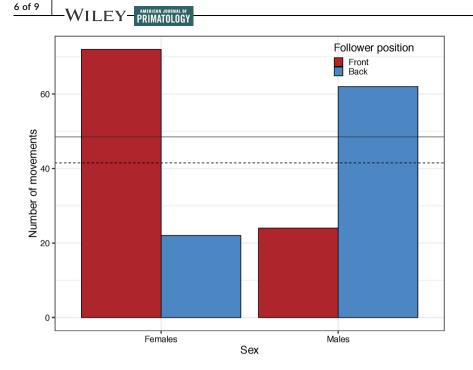
Model/term	β	SE	95% C.I.	Z	р
A) Leading position Intercept Reproductive state <sup>a</sup>	-1.44	0.20	-1.92 to -1.06	-7.13	<.001
Gestating Lactating	0.81 0.29	0.24 0.26	0.33 to 1.29 -0.21 to 0.80	3.31 1.10	<.001 .270
B) Follower position Intercept Reproductive state <sup>a</sup>	-1.12	0.45	-2.16 to -0.22	-2.52	.012
Gestating Lactating	-1.57 05	1.10 0.61	-4.55 to 0.31 -1.33 to 1.60	-1.42 -0.09	.156 .932

Abbreviation: GLMM, generalized linear mixed models. <sup>a</sup>Comparisons against the cycling female category.

Mutschler, 2005). Future research on this putative mechanism, as applied to mantled howler monkeys, could examine interindividual variation in access to food, in the intake of different types of foods, and on the nutritional contents of the ingested foods.

Adult females led group movements toward feeding trees more frequently when they were gestating than when they were lactating or cycling, although reproductive state did not affect the likelihood of occupying front or back positions when females were followers. Both theoretical models and empirical studies have emphasized the importance of energy requirements in the probability of individuals acting as leaders (King & Sueur, 2011a, 2011b). In cohesive social units, variation in energy reserves results in divergent behavioral roles: individuals with lower energy reserves act as "pace-makers" of movement, and may eventually emerge as leaders (Rands, Cowlishaw, Pettifor, Rowcliffe, & Johnstone, 2003). The energetics of female reproduction seem to be an important factor in determining female leadership in group movements (Conradt, Krause, Couzin, & Roper, 2009; Sueur, Deneubourg, Petit, & Couzin, 2010), and may result from the relatively high motivation of reproductive females to find food resources, as they normally require more energy than males for reproduction (Emery Thompson, 2013; Erhart & Overdorff, 1999; Richard, Dewar, Schwartz, & Ratsirarson, 2000), a pattern also observed in non-primate species (e.g., Equus burchelli: Fischhoff et al., 2007, Mungos mungo: Furrer, Kunc, & Manser, 2012; Suricata suricatta: Turbé, 2006). Higher motivation to reach food resources could explain why gestating and lactating females of this species tend to have higher physical condition than cycling females (Cano-Huertes et al., 2017; Dias et al., 2017).

Lactating females led group movements to feeding trees less frequently that gestating females. This may be associated with the observed trend of lactating primate females to spend, compared to females in other reproductive states, a lower proportion of time moving and feeding but more time resting or in vigilance (*Alouatta* 



**FIGURE 2** Differences between sexes in non-leading positions occupied during group movements toward feeding trees in two groups of mantled howler monkeys studied at La Flor de Catemaco (Mexico), between January 2016 and March 2017. For illustration purposes, the expected number of movements per position per sex under a 50:50% situation is represented as lines (solid = females, dashed = males), corrected by the total number of sampled subjects of each sex (females = 7 subjects, males = 6). N = 180 movements

pigra: Dias, Rangel-Negrín & Canales-Espinosa, 2011; *Symphalangus syndactylus*: Lappan, 2009; *Papio hamadryas ursinus*: Barrett, Halliday, & Henzi, 2006). Increased resting time may operate as an efficient strategy to store and save energy (Dasilva, 1992; Dunbar & Sharman, 1984), which is required for milk production and maternal care (Emery Thompson, 2013). Given that in this species maternal behavior varies through lactation (e.g., Dias, Coyohua-Fuentes, Canales-Espinosa, Chavira-Ramírez, & Rangel-Negrín, 2018), it remains to be determined whether leadership patterns in lactating females vary according to infant age through the examination of a larger sample of females.

Our results do not support the prediction that leadership during movements associated with loud calls is part of a group-defense strategy by male howler monkeys. It is possible that, instead of mobilizing their groups to reach specific areas where loud calls are given, males vocalize depending on group location (da Cunha & Byrne, 2006; Fernández et al., 2013; Sekulic, 1982; Whitehead, 1989). For instance, black-and-gold howler monkey (*A. caraya*) males are more likely to lead movements when other groups come into visual contact (Fernández et al., 2013). Thus, although male leadership during movements may be part of a group-defense strategy in howler monkeys (da Cunha & Byrne, 2006; Fernández et al., 2013; Sekulic, 1982; Whitehead, 1989), it is not directly associated with loud calls.

In conclusion, we found evidence of sexual asymmetry in leading during group movement toward feeding trees, which suggests that female mantled howler monkeys use leadership as a mechanism to optimize access to food. Leadership in this context was particularly frequent in gestating females, perhaps as a result of their higher nutritional/energetic needs when compared with cycling females, and of their greater mobility when compared with lactating females carrying dependent offspring. Our results indicate that males do not lead movements associated with the production of loud calls.

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author at a reasonable request.

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### SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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