

# Intense sunning by an Eastern Whipbird *Psophodes olivaceus*

Clifford B. Frith<sup>1\*</sup> and Angus Emmott<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Malanda QLD 4885, Australia. Email: frithandfrith@bigpond.com

<sup>2</sup>Lake Eacham QLD 4884, Australia. Email: ajemmott62@gmail.com

\*Corresponding author.

**Abstract.** An Eastern Whipbird *Psophodes olivaceus* was observed and photographed performing an intense ‘spreadeagle’ sunning posture as the first record of sunning by the species and genus. The function of sunning in birds is briefly reviewed and discussed.

## Introduction

Sunning, or sunbathing, by birds is a well-known behaviour that has been recorded in numerous families. Sunning is described as “behaviour by which a bird deliberately positions itself in the sun, often adopting a special posture” (Simmons 1985, p. 569) or “behaviour by which a bird deliberately positions itself in the rays of the sun (electromagnetic radiation, solar radiation, insolation), often adopting a special posture” (Simmons 1986, p. 1). In CBF’s experience, however, such a posture is also often instantly, presumably instinctively, adopted when a bird suddenly finds itself (as opposed to placing itself), by moving from a shaded area, directly exposed to bright sunlight and warm-to-hot sun rays (e.g. conspicuously so in hornbills, Bucerotidae: Frith & Douglas 1978; Kemp 1995).

The Eastern Whipbird *Psophodes olivaceus* has a broken distribution along the broad coastal zone of eastern Australia, on and east of the Great Dividing Range, from Cooktown, North Queensland, in the north to near Grantville, Victoria, in the south, and occurs from the coast to 1500 m above sea level (Higgins & Peter 2002). It is a species that frequents dense vegetation where it forages on or close to the ground. Although its loud ‘whip-crack’ call (a duet between adult male and female of this monomorphic, territorial, and monogamous species) is well known and is commonly heard in suitable forest habitats, the bird is difficult to see let alone observe closely (Boles 1988; Menkhurst *et al.* 2017). As a result of its “often shy, skulking and cryptic” habits and its “occupying dense habitats, and heard more often than seen” its social organisation and behaviour are poorly known (Higgins & Peter 2002, pp. 916, 915–929, respectively). It is therefore unsurprising that the species (and the similarly cryptic Western Whipbird *P. nigrogularis* of extreme southern Australia) appears never to have been documented performing any kind of sunning behaviour (Higgins & Peter 2002; Boles 2007). We detail and illustrate, for the first time, an instance of an Eastern Whipbird sunning.

## Observation

At 1218 h on 14 December 2024, AE was photographing birds at Lake Eacham, North Queensland, at an altitude of 791 m, where lawn met densely foliated rainforest. An



**Figure 1.** A subadult Eastern Whipbird performs a ‘spreadeagle’ intense sunning posture on a perch fully exposed to direct hot sunlight. Photo: Angus Emmott

Eastern Whipbird appeared from within the forest to perch on a sunlit branch 1.5 m above ground and 0.5 m from the nearest dense foliage of the forest edge. Here it instantly performed a ‘spreadeagle’ intense sunning posture, with fully extended opened wings drooped and the tail fanned, in response to the sudden intensity of the light and/or heat. It retained this sunning posture for at least 40 seconds before returning into the rainforest. The brownish apex to its crest feathers, less than entirely pure-white cheek-patch, and dark iris suggest a less than fully mature adult (Figure 1).

## Discussion

This appears to be the first report of, and documented photographic evidence for, sunning by a whipbird *Psophodes* spp. It involved a high-intensity ‘spreadeagle’ posture as an immediate response to the bird seeking out or suddenly finding itself exposed to direct hot sunlight. Simmons’ (1986, p. 101) study of sunning in birds concluded that there are two adaptive types of sunning:

- (i) sun-basking (a form of heat-basking functioning to absorb heat, and therefore thermoregulatory and energy conserving in nature); and
- (ii) sun-exposure, or sunning

proper (of uncertain function but possibly a form of feather maintenance, as well as serving other purposes, for example the synthesis of Vitamin-D).

Harrison (1946, p. 276) suggested, on the basis of his anecdotal observations, that sunning could also be linked to moulting in birds through “its local effect in stimulating the feather papillae to develop”. Feather-maintenance sunning may also involve an attempt to rid the plumage and/or skin of external parasites by exposing them to intense sunlight and/or its heat (Simmons 1986; Erritzoe *et al.* 2007).

Other than a bird making its way to a suitably sunlit location in order to sunbathe, birds that suddenly find themselves in such a location have frequently been seen to instantaneously adopt a sunning posture (Hauser 1957; Frith & Douglas 1978). This immediately instinctive sunning has been called “compulsory” and occurs “when the bird is suddenly and apparently unexpectedly exposed to direct sunlight, under more or less extreme conditions of humidity and heat” (Hauser 1957, p. 78). Given the tropical location and time of year, it is unlikely that thermoregulation was a driver for the Eastern Whipbird sunning reported here. It may conceivably have sought out sunshine but the distinct impression was gained that the bird instinctively responded to suddenly finding itself in hot sunshine and thus likely represented an example of “compulsory” sunning.

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