

Sunning behaviour in Noisy Miners

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In December 2010 at about 12.30pm a Noisy Miner *Manorina melanocephala* was observed near the end of Ridgeway Road in Blackbutt Reserve, New Lambton. When first seen from a distance of about 20 metres, it was lying on its back on the path, with both wings outstretched and bill wide open. Initially it was thought to be dead. A second bird was then noticed lying nearby in a chest down position; its tail was fanned out and wings spread wide either side. This bird was visibly panting and appeared to be gasping for air. Both birds were then observed through binoculars from a distance of about 10 metres. At this time the possibility of a mid-air collision between the two birds was mooted. The birds stayed in these positions for several minutes until one bird got up and flew to a tree branch, ruffled its feathers before flying back to the path and resuming its former prostrate position. This behaviour continued for around 10 minutes until the birds were disturbed and flew off into the trees.

Initial thoughts were that the birds were anting or dusting as a way of controlling parasites. However, inspection of the area of track where they had lain dispelled this idea. The aggregate surface was in full sun and quite hot to the touch, with the temperature at that time around 29° C. The track did not appear to be dusty and no ants or other insects were observed. The Noisy Miners may have been using the hot aggregate as a parasite deterrent, but this remains unclear.

Research found only one other reference to this behaviour in Noisy Miners. This was recorded by Larry Dunis in Brisbane in 2009 (**Figures 1 and 2**). His detailed description of that event is comparable with what was observed by the author. Dunis' conclusion was that this behaviour leant toward control of lice or mites. D. Dow (pers. comm.) has also observed Noisy Miners exhibiting similar behaviour, which he attributes to "sunning", a poorly understood plumage conditioning strategy similar to anting and dust bathing.

A Dictionary of Birds (Campbell & Lack 1984), discusses two types of "sunning" behaviour termed sun-basking and sun-exposure. Sun-basking is mainly a form of thermoregulatory behaviour while sun-exposure is suggested to be a method of feather maintenance where sunning increases the flow of preen-oils and encourages ectoparasites to become more active or to disperse from areas of the plumage that are less accessible with the bill. It is also suggested that the effect of the sun's rays on the plumage is beneficial by acting on the lipids for the synthesis of Vitamin D. The latter explanation involving sun-exposure appears relevant to the present observations.



Figures 1 and 2. Noisy Miners "sunning" themselves in Brisbane. (Photos: Larry Dunis, published with permission of Vik Dunis)

REFERENCES

- Dunis, L. (2009). Larry's Gallery: Noisy Miner <http://www.bushpea.com/bd/pg/laz/n/noisy%20miner%2007.html> Permission of Vik Dunis.
- Campbell, B. and Lack, E. (1985). 'A Dictionary of Birds'. (T & AD Poyser: Bath, Great Britain.)