

Eurasian Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) at Roebuck Plains Roadhouse, Western Australia, the first record for Australian Territory

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Abstract. On 10 November 2011 one juvenile/immature Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops* was seen and photographed at the Roebuck Plains Roadhouse, approximately 30 km north east of Broome, Western Australia 17°50'50.49"S, 122°30'00.69"E. The bird was seen several times within a one hour time period feeding and resting on grassed lawn and perched low in adjacent trees. This is a distinctive and unique bird which is unlikely to be confused with any other species. This constitutes the first record of this species for Australian Territory and has been accepted by the Birdlife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC case number 729).

Observations

On 10 November 2011, KO, CH, MH and AK had lunch at the Roebuck Plains Roadhouse, approximately 30 km north east of Broome, Western Australia. KO and CH left the roadhouse first and while walking toward the vehicle parked outside, KO noticed a bird flying low and landing on the grass under two Frangipani (*Plumeria* sp.) trees. The bird had strongly striped markings on its upperparts in flight which prompted KO to point the bird out to CH and ask "what's that bird?" Initially, CH thought KO was referring to a crow! But when the distinctive crest of the bird could be seen just above a ridge on the grass CH exclaimed "It's a f#\$@ing Hoopoe!" CH then went to alert MH and AK of the bird whilst KO retrieved her binoculars and camera from the vehicle. The bird flew from the grass to perch on the lower half of a *Bauhinia cunninghamii* tree (Figure 1) across the road (Broome Highway) from the roadhouse. From there, the bird was visible with binoculars. It was decided to wait for the bird to resettle on the grass rather than get too close and risk scaring it away from the site. Meanwhile, after some frantic phone calls, some other Broome birders (Clare and Grant Morton and Maurice O'Connor) arrived at the site and joined in observ-

ing and enjoying the bird. The bird moved to various trees around the roadhouse, mostly in the lower branches, and was observed several times feeding on the grass in front of and behind the roadhouse and at the grassed area of the roadhouse's caravan park. Various photographs were taken at these locations.

Once the bird had settled in some shade on the grass, all observers were able to get clear views of the bird as it rested and fed before heading towards the fence where the bird was left in peace due to its rarity.

The initial observations by KO and CH were made with the naked eye. These were later enhanced through use of binoculars (Swarovision EL 10 x 42, Swarovski SLC 10 x 42 ED60, and Bausch and Lomb 10 x 42).

The weather was sunny, though the bird spent most of its time in the shade, making it difficult to get exceptional photographs on the first day it was sighted. The bird was subsequently viewed until late December 2011.

Description

KO's first observations were of the strong cream/peach and dark brown/black barred patterning



Figure 1. The first image of the Hoopoe perched in a *Bauhinia cunninghamii*, across the road from Roebuck Plains Roadhouse, 30 km north east of Broome, Western Australia on 10 November 2011. The photograph was taken shortly after the bird was first sighted on the lawn in front of the roadhouse. (Photograph: Kimberly Onton).

across the upperparts of the bird as it flew down to the lawn. CH first noted the distinct black-marked orange/peach crest on the bird's head and the long down curved bill. Once clear views were obtained of the bird, other noteworthy features included:

The estimated height of the bird was approximately 20 cm tall and 30 cm long (tail tip to bill tip).

The wings had a bold striped pattern of alternating black/brown with cream/peach colouration. The bird's upper torso, neck and head were an orange/peach colour. The tail was dark brown/black with a white band. The crest faced backwards and was an orange/peach colour with black dots when viewed front on.

The brown bill was long (approximately one quarter of the total tail to bill tip length), thin, pointed and down curved. The eyes appeared black or dark brown and were slightly forward of the centre line of the head when viewed in profile. The feet were difficult to see amongst the grass and when the bird was perched in trees, but appeared dark in colour and the images support this.

No calls were heard during the initial sighting but the bird was reported to have called quietly during subsequent sightings (Rohan Clarke pers. comm.).

Age

It is difficult to differentiate age in this species particularly for observers inexperienced with the species. We noted the well worn primaries as shown in Figure 2 that would indicate an adult bird, as a juvenile wing should be much less worn in December. However, the

moult around the face and neck of the bird (Figure 3) in early November suggests a young bird. Adults are known to moult body feathers in the breeding areas while juveniles tend to moult in the wintering areas (Cramp and Simmons 1985). There is overlap in timing and this reference does not indicate which subspecies this information is for. The body moult of the bird had finished by mid-December and the bird looked far 'smarter' and like an adult bird therefore our aging is uncertain.

Race/Subspecies

It is believed that this individual was of the northern subspecies *saturata*. Separation of subspecies is difficult and subjective, being mostly based on depth of colour of the orange/pink/cinnamon tones in the plumage. This is very difficult to judge without being very experienced in Hoopoes from a range of areas in the world. Our subspecies identification is mostly based on the likelihood of any one subspecies reaching Australia. *Upupa epops saturata* is a migratory race that breeds from south-central Russia to Transbaikalia, the south Russian Far East, central, east and north-east China and Korea (Brazil 2009).

Habitat

Roebuck Plains Roadhouse is located on Broome Highway near the intersection with the Great Northern Highway. The roadhouse is surrounded by gravel roads and lush grass lawn at the front and rear of the road-



Figure 2. Hoopoe photographed on 12 December 2011 foraging in the grass in the shade at Roebuck Plains Roadhouse, Western Australia. (Photograph: Danny Rogers).

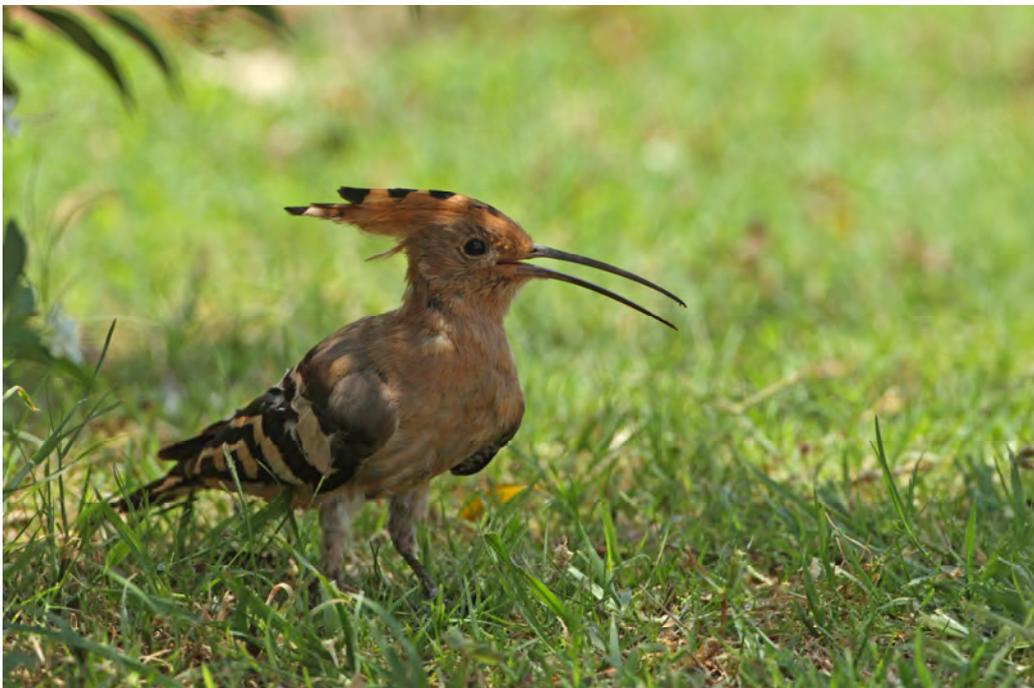


Figure 3. Hoopoe resting in the shade at Roebuck Plains Roadhouse, Western Australia on 16 December 2011, showing moult of body feathers around head and neck. (Photograph: Adrian Boyle).



Figure 4. Hoopoe photographed at Roebuck Plains Roadhouse, Western Australia on 16 December 2011 foraging on a large Lepidoptera larva. (Photograph: Adrian Boyle).

house, alongside the highway and in front of the small caravan park to the east. The lawns were heavily irrigated on the day of sighting. Trees in the vicinity include a scattering of some palm trees, two large frangipanis (*Plumeria* sp), *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* and *Bauhinia cunninghamii*. The lush lawn and tall trees are somewhat of an oasis in an area surrounded predominantly by Pindan acacia woodland.

Behaviour

The bird was first observed flying down to the lawn then flew to nearby trees usually perching in the lower branches. The bird spent most of its time on the grass where it was observed resting in the shade and foraging. It was observed preying upon large moth larvae and pupae (Order: Lepidoptera) as captured in photographs (Figure 4; Luke Halling, Department of Agriculture and Food WA, pers. comm.). Foraging involved pecking at the grass repeatedly without any apparent visual cues. It flew low in a gliding motion when coming to land on the grass. It was observed in the company of Torresian Crow (*Corvus orru*), Crested Pigeons (*Ocyphaps lophotes*) and Peaceful Doves (*Geopelia striata*) on the grass. In the trees it was solitary.

Discussion

There has been much speculation on social-media websites as to how this bird arrived at a roadhouse in north-west Australia. Our opinion is that it is a 'free flying' vagrant and not ship-assisted, as the chance of the bird

boarding a ship and then getting off and flying out to the roadhouse is unlikely. It seems more probable that this was a young bird getting its first migration 'wrong'. There have also been records of Hoopoes in Malaysia in November of the same year (2011) where it is now a very rare bird (Simon Buckell, pers. comm.). It was speculated that the recent very wet weather and extensive flooding in large areas of south-east Asia may have pushed birds further south this year (Simon Buckell pers. comm.).

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References

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