

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher, Jim Butler



Image: A foraging Varied Sittella taken by Ed Frazer at Brookfield

shared foraging methods (hopping head-first down branches and trunks) and prey species (insects and spiders under the bark) have given rise to two unrelated bird species with

No! Don't reorient this page. The dramatic photo is oriented correctly and that is blue sky behind the beautiful and uniquely-shaped Varied Sittella (10cm). They are usually found high-up in the canopy, hence the photo's composition, and they forage for insects as they travel down the branches and trunks. This species inhabits large areas across the whole of Australia and Papua New Guinea but has different coloured heads in different places, hence the name "Varied" Sittella. The Sittellas that live here in Brisbane have white heads.

The Varied Sittella was first described by John Latham, the "grandfather" of Australian ornithology, in his 1801 book (in Latin) on Australian birds. From their appearance, Latham took our Sittellas to be related to the Northern Hemisphere Nuthatches. I made the same mistake when I first went birding in Canada! But it is now clear that the Nuthatches and the Sittellas are a textbook example of convergent evolution. Their

very similar body shapes in the two hemispheres. The distinctive shape, size, calls and foraging behaviour make the Varied Sittella elusive but unmistakable in Australian forests. You really need binoculars!

Varied Sittellas are usually seen in flocks, dashing between trees or busily working their way down branches and trunks searching for prey while making lots of chattering vocalisations. They inhabit eucalypt forests and woodlands, especially those containing rough-barked tree species or smooth-barked trees with many dead limbs. Varied Sittellas occur in sedentary groups which occupy large territories. They roost communally and are cooperative breeders. The group feeds the incubating female and the subsequent nestlings and juveniles. The Varied Sittella does not coexist in woodland patches dominated by Noisy Miners.

Look up high to see the Varied Sittellas coming down!

~ Jim

Contact Jim: beautifulbirds@y7mail.com