

Common Name/Scientific name: Varied Sittella / *Daphoenositta chrysoptera*

At first glance a foraging Varied Sittella may appear to behave rather like a treecreeper as it probes crevices in the bark of trees for insects and other invertebrates while scurrying about the branches and trunks. However, closer observation shows that sittellas spiral head-first down the trunks of trees, while treecreepers spiral up the trunks. There is much variation in the appearance of sittellas throughout their range, in mainland Australia — they appear so different that in years gone by many of them were treated as separate species. This species has many names including Black-capped or Orange-winged Sittella, Nuthatch or Barkpecker.

Description: The Varied Sittella is a small, short-tailed, dumpy bird which is usually heard before it is seen in the upper branches. There are five sub-species, differing in the patterns on the head and neck, the amount of streaking and in the wing patterns. The iris is orange-yellow, and the eye-ring, legs and feet are yellow. The bill is long and slender and slightly up-turned. All adults are greyish above and white below, with varied streaking. The upper tail coverts are pale, with dark-barring underneath. The tail is dark with a white tip. The upper wings are dark; in southern and eastern birds the underwings have an orange-rufous band, while in the north the band is white. Males have longer bills than females and tend to feed lower. Sittellas are usually seen in flocks, moving swiftly between trees or foraging busily over branches or the trunk.



Feeding & Behaviour in the gardens: Varied Sittellas are widespread in mainland Australia. They are found in eucalypt woodlands and forests throughout their range. They prefer rough-barked trees like stringybarks and ironbarks or mature trees with hollows or dead branches. We have many rough barked eucalypts in the gardens, but few of these are mature trees with hollows. They feed mainly by gleaning on tree trunks or branches, moving downwards or along branches, searching for insects. They land at the top of a tree and work downwards, searching and poking into cracks and under things, chattering noisily.

Breeding and Nesting: The Varied Sittella's nest is a deep open cup, like a cone, of bark and spider web, decorated on the outside with long pieces of bark, camouflaged to look like the fork or branch where it is placed. This species usually breeds cooperatively, with the breeding pair having several helpers. They will sometimes also breed in single pairs. Only the breeding female incubates the eggs and broods the young. All help to feed the young and remove faecal sacs.

Similar Species in the gardens: The Varied Sittella's distinctive shape, size, calls and foraging behaviour make this species unmistakable.