

Varied Sittella involved in distraction displays during June

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While conducting one of my regular surveys along Fitness's Road in the hills above Martins Creek near Paterson (32° 34'S 151° 39'E) on 14 June 2004 I encountered a flock of about eight Varied Sittellas *Daphoenositta chrysoptera*. I was standing on the road trying to call up some thornbills when the sittellas came down and hovered round me like butterflies with their wings spread displaying their broad orange wing stripe. This behaviour persisted for about a minute. I have seen this behaviour on one previous occasion several years ago on Black Rock Road approximately 1 km downhill from Fitness's Road.

I then descended about 30 metres downhill into a wooded area and again attempted to call up thornbills. To my surprise I was again surrounded by the flock of sittellas. One bird alighted within 0.5 metres of my head at eye level. I then realised that the entire flock had settled on the bare limbs of shrubs within 2 metres of me and at heights ranging from 1.5 to 3 metres from the ground. Each bird was vertically orientated with its head pointed downwards and its wings fully extended exposing the orange wing stripe to maximum advantage. Again the display persisted for at least a minute in response to "pishing" noises.

No sittellas were seen during a subsequent visit to the area on 21 June 2004.

I subsequently also observed a flock of Varied Sittella exhibiting similar behaviour near Mt Molloy in North Queensland (16° 40'S 145° 20'E) in August 2004. On this basis the behaviour appears to be normal for the species.

Distraction displays of this type have been described in conjunction with breeding activity (Higgins *et al.* 2002). However in NSW the usual breeding period of the Varied Sittella is from

August to February (Higgins *et al.* 2002) with the earliest seasonal breeding records in the Hunter Region involving records of nest building on 7 August 1999 and 21 August 2000 and a bird on a nest on 13 August 2005 (Stuart 2000, 2001 and 2006). On this basis the above observation may indicate that sittellas breed during early winter under exceptional circumstances. For instance during May and the first half of June of 2004 the Hunter Region experienced unusually warm and dry conditions. Alternatively it is possible that sittellas exhibit distraction displays in response to perceived threats outside the breeding season.

REFERENCES

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