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MAGPIES

and

HOW TO LIVE WITH THEM



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The Australian Magpie has become one of the distinctive features of the Australian landscape since it has been able to adapt very successfully to agricultural and urban areas. Beautiful carolling, a relish for eating many harmful insect pests and its lack of shyness have made the magpie a popular and encouraged friend to the suburban gardener and farmer alike.

There are two sub-species of magpie in Western Australia. The Black-backed and the Western Magpie. The Western Magpie occurs in the south-west of the State and the Black-backed in the central and northern regions. They interbreed where their ranges meet. Magpies are protected in Western Australia under the Wildlife Conservation Act. The Department of Fisheries and Wildlife is responsible for the protection and management of magpies. Magpie attacks can cause a great deal of distress to children, and to some adults. Nevertheless many people derive pleasure from feeding and gaining the confidence of these birds and enjoy the company of this member of the varied wildlife of Western Australia.



NESTING

Magpies prefer to nest in tall trees. Nesting occurs between August and October. The female bird generally does all the work involved in rearing the young. She selects the nest site, builds the nest, incubates the eggs and usually does most of the feeding of the young birds. The eggs are incubated for about three weeks and the young are fed in the nest for about another four weeks. Between one and six eggs are laid and a new clutch may be laid if for any reason the first brood fails.

FEED ON PESTS

Magpies eat a wide range of both animal and plant food. They feed mainly on small insects and other animals that live in, or just under the ground—creatures like beetles, ants, spiders, frogs, lizards and even carrion and occasionally grain, (when necessary).

Their favourite food is the larvae of the scarab beetle. These larvae do a great deal of damage to lawns. Magpies also eat other garden and farm pests. The important point here is that they control insect pests in a natural way, thus reducing the need for man to use more dangerous techniques such as the application of pesticides.



TRIBES AND FLOCKS

Magpies form two main associations—tribes and flocks. Tribes consist of two to ten birds of both sexes which defend a territory of up to 8 ha. They vigorously defend this territory against other magpies because this is the area in which they obtain their food and rear their young. It always contains enough tall trees in which the birds can shelter and nest, and a permanent supply of water.

Flocks consist of birds unable to form a tribe or gain access to a territory. They are composed of young adults and old non-territorial birds which do not breed. These birds live in areas which are unsuitable as a territory because there is no permanent water or not enough feeding places. The flock is forced to move from place to place in search of food.

Periodically, birds from flocks attempt to oust birds from a tribe, but they are usually unsuccessful. A bird from a flock may join a tribe when a tribe member dies, or a new tribe may form from a flock when an existing tribe breaks down after losing several individuals.

ATTACKS

During the nesting season the magpie's urge to defend its territory becomes very strong. This drive is often extended to include people who are "invading" the territory. The magpies' natural reaction is to protect the eggs and young from attack.



Magpies rely largely on intimidating human intruders. They fly low and fast over the person and often clack their bill as they pass overhead. The sound of their wings whistling past and the movement of air often proves alarming to the "intruder". But threats are just that, and, by confidently continuing on your way, the bird will often retreat to the safety of a tree and watch you until you leave the territory. Like dogs, magpies seem to sense fear and will capitalise on it by pressing an attack. A threatening gesture with a hat, stick or umbrella will usually cause the bird to retreat. Occasionally a magpie will actually strike an intruder on the head with its bill; but such strikes are rare.

The birds only attack during the relatively short period of the nesting season and for the majority of birds it is merely bluff. Magpies which become used to people feeding them with meat scraps and bread will often become quite tame and friendly and accept people, even when the birds are breeding.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE A PROBLEM BIRD

Several avenues of action are open to you. The Department hopes, of course, that having read this brochure most residents will have gained a better understanding of magpie behaviour and a reassurance that the problem is not really as bad as it looks.

Keep in mind that the birds attack only during the nesting and rearing period, that most of the supposed attacks are really bluff and that the bird rarely has any intention of actually striking. Wearing a hat while working or playing in the backyard and garden is one of the simplest and most effective means of protection, especially for children. The hat may deter the magpie and it will also deflect an accidental or intentional strike by the bird should this occur.

If a magpie is nesting and defending its territory in an area children frequent on their way to and from school, it would be a good idea for the children to find a different route during the short period the magpie is aggressive.

Somewhat surprisingly, adopting a confident or threatening stance towards the bird also has a strong deterrent effect. This response is most commonly used by adults but can easily be taught to children.

Feeding is by far the most effective and most pleasant way of avoiding attack problems. Birds fed regularly with household scraps, particularly bread and meat, soon get to know you and will accept you without fear right through the breeding season.

If you find that none of these solutions is sufficient you can contact the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife on (09) 325 5988 and a "licence to take dangerous fauna" may be issued. However, this licence will only be issued by the Department in the most extreme circumstances and only where it can be shown that all other tactics have failed. While removing the magpie or the nest usually stops the attacks it is not uncommon for a magpie to start rebuilding immediately and the problem starts all over again. Often it is better to live with the problem bird for six to eight weeks until the chicks are learning to fly and the problem ceases.

Because the magpie is a protected bird no person is permitted to take the law into his own hands and destroy one. When the Department exercises its responsibility and issues the "licence to take dangerous fauna" it is conscious of the fact that this action may cause nestlings to starve or freeze to death or may result in breakdown of the magpie tribe with further repercussions on surrounding territories and flocks.



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