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# URBAN ANTICS

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## Four and Twenty Magpies

Armed like warriors from a forgotten past we trudged our way through the rising mist, pausing at every shrub. Ned Kelly helmets made from Weeties packets, tennis racquets raised for action. This was IT. MAGPIES... the demon heralds of spring, hell-bent on pursuing and dewigging small schoolchildren. MAGPIES... black-masked hooligans in dinner suits that haunted every tree and power-pole on the long road from school to home.

The scent of spring always evokes a strange kind of nostalgia. Misty winter days give way to sudden sunshine, small things in the gravid earth thrust out new shoots, and the season of winged terror begins.

What makes this morning songster turn overnight into a kamikaze?

Magpies are not, by nature, solitary birds, as anyone who has fed them will know. Take a few scrag ends of steak or some breadcrusts out for the lone maggie on the lawn, and the next morning, at breakfast time precisely, a tidy queue of five birds will present themselves. This is a deputation from 'the tribe': an association of magpies a bit like a chartered accountants' guild.

The tribe is closed-shop, and mixing with the common 'flock' is not encouraged. Tribes usually have between two and ten adult members of both sexes and, like accountants, they stake out the best watering holes for themselves, and will vigorously defend them against intrusion by the flock. Tribal territories can cover as much as eight hectares, and invariably contain a source of permanent water, and enough tall trees to shelter and nest in.

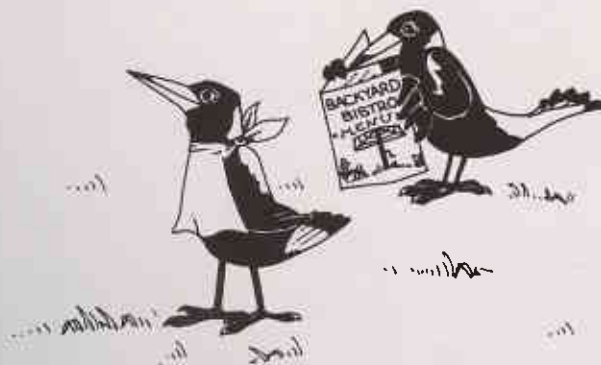
Flocks are groups of the outsiders: birds too old to breed, or groups of young adults not yet breeding. The flock lives in areas which do not have enough water or feeding places to suit a tribe, and moves from place to place in search of food. Occasionally, flock birds will try to oust a tribe member, but they rarely succeed. When an existing tribe breaks down, flock birds may either be admitted, or a new tribe will form from the flock and take over the tribal territory. George Orwell could have found a profound message for humanity in the behaviour of magpie society.

How does this cast light on the problem of avoiding aerial attack?

Between August and October the tribes build nests, lay eggs, and raise their young. This is the time when all intruders in the tribe's territory must beware. Magpies will buzz hawks, cats, dogs, horses and humans, so don't feel singled out for persecution. Removing magpie nests is not a solution, as the birds will rebuild and extend their swooping time. If the breeding pair is shifted another will undoubtedly move in, and the cycle will start again.

There are ways of seeing out the blitz unharmed and unarmed but to do so requires nerves of steel. To recoin an old phrase, the best form of defence is a hat. Bike helmets, boaters, top hats, Darth (may the force be with you) Vader helmets, cardboard boxes, paper cones, umbrellas, whatever suits your personality or takes your fancy. If you ride a bike attach a tall flag to the carry-frame or wear a helmet.

But these are all crisis measures. In the long run your peace of mind and the rescue of your terror-struck children (or vice versa) depends on you.



Get to know your local maggies. That's it. The answer. Simple isn't it? But what does it involve? There is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that magpie tribes in newer suburbs are more aggressive during nesting than their counterparts in areas settled earlier. Unlike accountants, magpies have no known respect for old money or colonial architecture, so perhaps Perth's older residents have discovered the clue to living with magpies. Bacon rinds, or any other tasty morsel you can spare. Befriend your local tribe with food, and they will soon learn to recognise you as a source of nourishment/friendship propelled at ground level on two legs, as opposed to cats (a source of disappearing chicks propelled at grass level on four paws).

Once you start entertaining the tribe you will be amazed by the rewards. Half-a-dozen carolling choristers will greet you as you rise, perched on your balcony rail. A regular dawn patrol from the tribe will scour your lawns, removing scarab beetle larvae, caterpillars, and tonnes of other garden-destroying pests every year. You will get hours of entertainment watching the antics of the tribe as it defends its territory against all comers, and performs astounding aerobic feats for your delectation. But, best of all, in THE SEASON, the tribe will be your friend and concentrate its energy on harassing strangers who unwittingly venture into its territory.



# LETTERS

## '1080' BAITING

We are very concerned about the massive '1080' poison baiting in W.A. — over 3 million baits in 1985 — and to be repeated in 1986. One wonders if there will be an article on '1080' in a future edition of *Landscape*.

*S. Ford*  
Hon. Treasurer  
World League for Protection of Animals

Baiting programs are the responsibility of the Agriculture Protection Board. There are no immediate plans to publish an article in *Landscape* on 1080 baiting. It is worth noting that many native animals have a high resistance to sodium fluoroacetate, the active ingredient in 1080. This compound occurs naturally in native plants of the genera *Gastrolobium* and *Oxylobium*. Ed.

## BOAB BUNGLES

I would just like to mention that the Prison Tree illustrated on the back cover of your magazine (Vol. 1, No. 4) is not the one at Derby, but is the one near the Meatworks Pumping Station about 30 km south of Wyndham.

We were there last August. It is worth a trip via Wyndham's Mookalubra Dam where there is a great wall of rock with cave paintings, and a good picnic spot with boabs and lily ponds. The dam itself is unique with a steel mesh covering — the road in is rough.

*H.S. Buckley*

## WILDLIFE PROTECTION ACT

Your article on 'Selling Australia's Heritage' was excellent.

Our group is active in New South Wales in investigating the illegal export of native birds and I was particularly interested in your comments.

However, I believe the deficiencies of the Wildlife Protection Act should be highlighted. There is an alarming lack of enforcement. Customs Officers Association gave evidence at recent Senate Select Committee on Animal Welfare Hearings in Canberra which demonstrated that 90 per cent of exports leave the country uninspected.

*Sue Arnold*  
Co-ordinator  
Australians for Animals

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

In the December 1985 edition of *Landscape* it was reported that Mr Slek Rabczynski was prosecuted successfully for illegal export and possession of certain birds. Subsequent to the guilty findings there was a successful appeal to the Supreme Court and the convictions were quashed.

**Your letters are welcome. Please address any correspondence to:**

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50 Hayman Road  
COMO 6152**



The Derby Prison Tree

# Landscape

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## COVER PHOTO

A tender moment between human and whale shows the care which was a feature of the highly successful Augusta whale rescue.

Photo courtesy of the Western Mail.

## A Conflict of Interests

Why are there so many conflicts when it comes to our natural environment? There is conflict among industrial groups exploiting natural resources; environmentalists advocating preservation of wildlife; government agencies; and recreation groups.

In an ideal world we would have a total understanding about ecosystems and natural resources, and of the long term needs of the community. But this is not an ideal world, and much of the conflict stems from a lack of agreement about environmental impact and human needs.

Take whale strandings for instance. From the time whales beach, tissue damage occurs due to a rise in body temperature and the sheer weight of the mammal. We don't know how long they have to lie there and how hot they have to get before the chances of survival are next to nil. Strandings may be part of a natural culling process or accidents caused by human impact on the environment. And, what about the people who turn out in large numbers under often adverse conditions, and become so emotionally caught up in saving these creatures? What weight do we put on their need?

It is not an ideal world. We are a long way from knowing the answers to too many important questions.

There is a need for more investigation, better communication and a broader understanding of environmental processes and human needs.

This brings us to *Landscape* and its purpose. Its prime objective is to achieve an understanding about conservation of ecosystems and management of natural resources.

*Landscape's* aim is to provide expert information on the major conservation issues, latest developments, research in progress and general features of the State's wildlife, national and marine parks, nature reserves and forests.

It will give a balanced representation of viewpoints and will not shy from contentious issues.

*Landscape* will inform readers about the natural wonders of our environment, the management considerations involved and the lifestyle of its inhabitants. It will not provide all the answers, but it will present the facts and therefore a basis for sound argument.

*Landscape* is Western Australia's own conservation and wildlife magazine.

## Wetlands

The theme for this year's World Environment Day has been 'Wetlands — Not just for the Birds'. In this issue of *Landscape* we feature the ecological importance of wetlands.