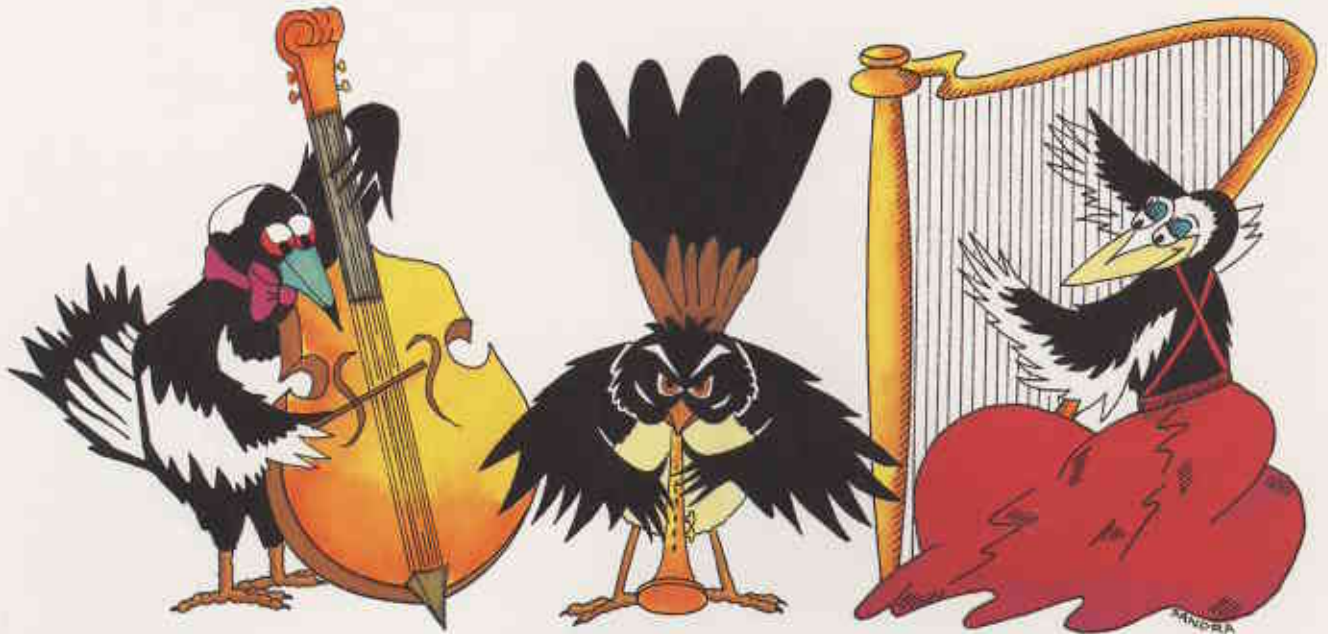


URBAN ANTICS!



BLACK & WHITE MINSTRELS

Thank goodness! Winter is over. Hang on to your hats, spring is here and . . . uh oh!

I think I hear the swish of little wings, and you can bet your boots I'm about to be entertained by the best group of performers since Daffy Duck played lead for Warner Brothers.

The west coastal suburbs of Perth have always had a fair spread of resident magpies, but mudlarks and willy wagtails have only been seen in isolated pockets, usually near permanent water. During the last year, however, they have become permanent residents in my neighbourhood, sharing territories with local magpies. The reason for this uncharacteristic 'togetherness' is possibly due to an increase of insect food in the area, because people are using less insecticide, and an increase in the transitory movements of the birds.

While they are unrelated and physically quite different, magpies, mudlarks and willy wagtails share spasmodic aggressiveness, exceptional vocal ability and the same stark monochrome appearance.

The black and white patching of magpies and mudlarks is striking against the lush green of winter grass, making them look formidable and dominant. The dainty, wren-like wagtails while

not having the same war-like appearance, show fearless aggression, especially at breeding time when they will even harass and dive bomb magpies. To show they are not the sissies of the group, the mudlarks occasionally attack their own reflection in the hub caps and wing mirrors of parked cars.

During the day, twelve or so magpies descend from their jealously guarded old tuart tree, to wander parkland, verges and gardens. Almost immediately they are joined by four mudlarks, all prodding, poking and digging. The 'maggies', all with feet spread, thrust huge formidable beaks into the soil, while the larks, in line abreast, traditionally bob their heads in time to their steps and dart after the odd flying insect. Two wagtails join the 'armada' and flit from spot to spot swaying their tails and bodies as if to antagonise the military operation.

The sounds made by all three birds are exceptional and, together, encompass nearly the whole orchestra - except for bass and drums.

Magpies, sometimes called the flute bird, have a variety of sounds from harsh aggressive warning squawks to loud territorial carolling and soft delightful chortles on midnight serenades. Wagtails also serenade at night, but during the day have a metallic rattle as a defence call and a light beautiful whistle that resembles the

words "sweet pretty little creature". Mudlarks, or peewits as local children call them, have a variety of loud nervous piping calls resembling their nickname.

The three species in a group provide a never ending saga of sounds, sights and scenarios. In the coming season, appreciate their midnight songs, respect their aggression at nest sites and enjoy their various urban antics.

JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- Willy wagtails have two conspicuous, white eyebrows, which are expanded to show aggression, particularly during the breeding season. A dispute is settled when one bird acts submissively, by hiding its eyebrow completely.
- Mudlarks, also known as magpie larks, puddle in shallow rainwater pools or ponds to gather clay and fibrous materials for building a very small nest. These can be seen on horizontal tree branches, light poles, bridges and sheds.
- There are two forms of magpie in Western Australia: black-backed and white-backed. Where their ranges overlap, they freely interbreed. This can result in some birds having pure white saddlebacks, while others have a variety of black and white patching.