



MENACING OR MISUNDERSTOOD?

Understanding swooping magpies

Each spring magpies lay their eggs in nests that they may vigorously defend. This can make a stroll around the neighbourhood or a trip to the park a fraught undertaking, reminiscent of an Alfred Hitchcock movie. But are magpies random assailants? Or is there more to their behaviour? And what can we do to avoid their aggression?

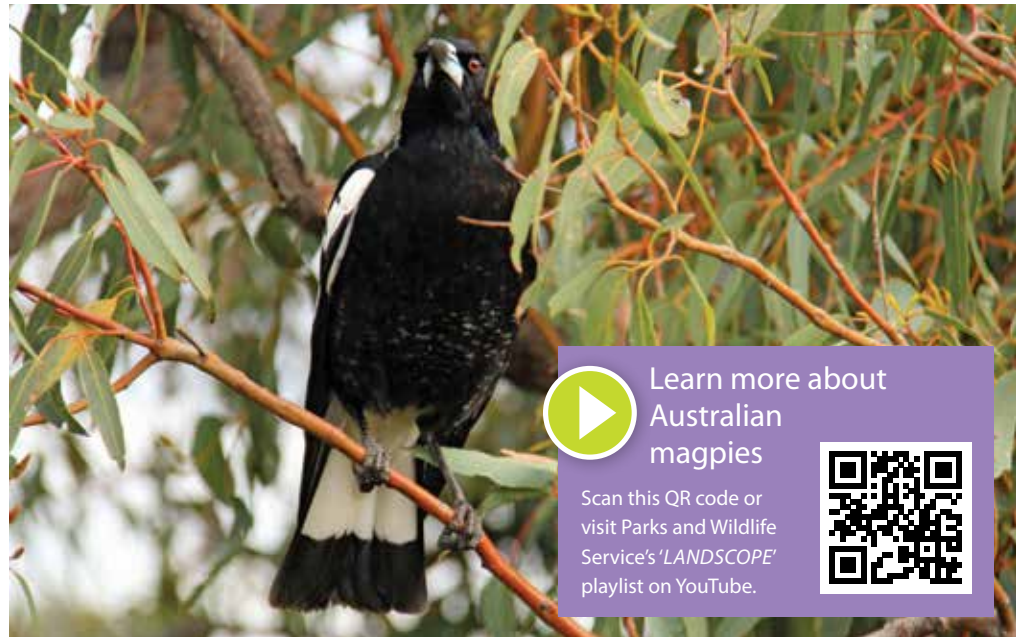
by Karen Smith, Allan Burbidge and Rhianna King
photos by Simon Cherriman

Australian springtime – it’s the glorious time of year when the shroud of winter clears and the days get longer and warmer. Winter coats are no longer needed for morning walks, the smell of blossom fills the air and plants hum with the sound of bees. But there’s another noise, synonymous with Australian springtime, that can instil fear in even the most valiant of us: the snapping beak and the whoosh of the wings of a swooping Australian magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*).

Most of us have at least one story of encountering a swooping magpie. Some have childhood memories of walking between classrooms wearing ice-cream containers on their heads for protection, while others have tales of needing to re-route their daily walk just to avoid being attacked. During spring, it’s not uncommon to see people donning bike helmets adorned with pipe-cleaners or cable-ties, or kids with big cut-out eyes stuck to the back of their hats. And you’d be hard-pressed to find an Aussie postie who doesn’t dread the period, particularly between the AFL Grand Final and Melbourne Cup, when their rounds can become particularly treacherous. For some, the impact of a magpie swoop, which can occasionally cause serious injury and bike accidents, can be catastrophic. But for most of us, it’s just an unpleasant, short-lived annual nuisance that comes with living amongst Australia’s iconic wildlife.

WHEN AND WHY

Magpies are a common sight across most urban areas of Australia throughout the year. Although they have become accustomed to sharing their living space with people, a very small percentage of these birds can become highly aggressive during their breeding season. In late winter or early spring, female magpies usually lay three to four eggs in nests that are generally built in tall eucalypt trees. After about 20 days, the eggs hatch and pink, blind, hairless chicks emerge. Then, in an act of protective parenting, a small percentage of adults begin vigorously defending their nestlings.



Learn more about Australian magpies

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's 'LANDSCOPE' playlist on YouTube.



These birds rely largely on intimidating passersby by demonstrating a number of threatening behaviours, including a harsh alarm call, distance swoops (used as a type of ‘warning shot’) and, occasionally, swooping with intended contact. During this time, magpies are often seen as a collective menace. However, only about 10 per cent of magpies actually swoop, and, of those, 98 per cent are males. Being strongly family-oriented, these birds are not acting in aggression or anger but as defenders of their young. These birds will continue to defend their young, increasing in aggression as the chicks grow, until they fledge, six to eight weeks after they hatch – making the appearance of juvenile magpies on the ground, as they learn to fly, a welcome sight indeed.

SELECTIVE TARGETING

Magpies are not just random assailants, they are actually highly intelligent birds with long memories. Studies have shown that magpies can actually remember peoples’ faces and will not swoop humans who are in the area when they build their nests and whom they deem not to be a risk. Unfortunately, in public places and parks, many passersbys would be unrecognisable to a magpie and would therefore be considered a threat. Magpies are known to target people, who they perceive to be a threat, year after year. This phenomenon has

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Main Nestling magpies.

Above An adult female magpie watches walkers near her nest.

been experienced first-hand when one magpie only ever swooped Allan Burbidge, choosing to ignore everyone else, after he caught and banded its offspring.

PROTECT YOURSELF

So, what can you do to protect yourself against a swooping magpie? If you’re encountering one on your daily walk, then the most pragmatic approach is to change your route. Magpies will only defend their young within a small area (usually within a radius of 100 metres from the nest) so you may not need to adjust your course too much to avoid them. Curiously, they will attack cyclists over a larger area, perhaps because they are moving more quickly (and are therefore perceived to be a greater risk). And it will only be a six-to-eight-week period, usually between late August and November, before you can resume your normal habits.

Parks and Wildlife Service recommends people always wear a hat and sunglasses to protect their eyes. This is particularly encouraged for kids, who may turn to look at swooping magpies

Magpies

Magpies are medium-sized birds that are easily recognised by their black and white feathers. Adult males in Western Australia have an all-white back and adult females have a mottled black and white back while juveniles are like females but greyer, and have darker bills.

They are common and widespread throughout most of Australia, preferring to nest in tall eucalypts and requiring open areas for feeding on small insects and other animals that live in or just under the ground, such as worms, beetles, ants, spiders, frogs, lizards and even carrion. They have adapted well to agricultural and urban landscapes where suitable nesting trees occur.

Magpies have a complex social structure in which groups of up to about 12 birds, sometimes including more than one breeding pair, together with progeny from the previous two breeding seasons, will defend a permanent territory. Territory size depends on the quality of habitat and the number of birds in the group, but can be up to about 40 hectares.

The beautiful carolling of the magpie is commonly featured in the soundtrack of the Australian bush and can sometimes be heard on bright moonlit nights.



and risk sustaining damage to their eyes. Sheltering under an umbrella while passing through areas where magpies are known to swoop may also help. Magpies feel particularly threatened by fast-moving presences, so pedestrians are encouraged not to run through known magpie territories and cyclists should consider dismounting from their bikes.

Magpies should never be deliberately provoked or harassed. Throwing sticks or stones at swooping birds simply confirms to them that you are a danger to their young and will only increase their aggression and make them even more defensive. Instead, adopt a confident, but non-aggressive, stance and move on purposefully.

If you have the time, try making 'friends' with the magpie. If you are swooped, you could try slowly moving away a little, but allowing the male to study your face and general appearance so that he gets to know you.

Concerned members of the community can report particularly troublesome birds to Parks and Wildlife Service. In extreme circumstances, wildlife officers may visit the area to assess the situation and then, if a particular bird is found to be dangerous, a Dangerous Fauna Licence may be issued for a registered animal control agent to remove it. In Western Australia, magpies are

protected and actions such as unlawfully taking, harming or possessing magpies are offences under the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950* and penalties of up to \$4000 can be imposed. From 1 January 2019 the new *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* will see the penalties for these offences increase significantly to a maximum penalty of \$50,000 (see also 'New future for biodiversity conservation' on page 28).

Magpies are not the only birds that may become a nuisance during spring – Parks and Wildlife Service receives many reports each year of menacing butcherbirds, wattlebirds and willy wagtails. But, be assured, this behaviour occurs for a very short period of the year. For most of the year, magpies and other swooping birds are friendly, sociable birds that live comfortably in our urban landscape. Magpies quickly ascertain if their environment is safe and will not threaten humans unless they feel vulnerable, and, even then,

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Above Newly fledgled magpies are often 'kidnapped' by humans who mistakenly think they are injured, which exacerbates swooping issues.

Above right A dominant male magpie.

Right Typical magpie nest in a marri tree.

only a small percentage will actually swoop. By learning to live with magpies, observing their behaviour and listening to their melodious calls, we can come to appreciate them for the charismatic, iconic birds that they are.



Karen Smith is a DBCA wildlife officer and can be contacted on (08) 9219 9843 or by email (karen.smith@dbca.wa.gov.au).

Allan Burbidge is a DBCA principal research scientist and can be contacted on (08) 9405 5109 or by email (allan.burbidge@dbca.wa.gov.au).

Rhianna King is a LANDSCOPE editor and can be contacted by email (rhianna.king@dbca.wa.gov.au).

The Wildcare Helpline provides advice to the public who find sick or injured native wildlife and can be contacted on (08) 9474 9055. Or download the Wildcare Helpline app from iTunes and Google Play.