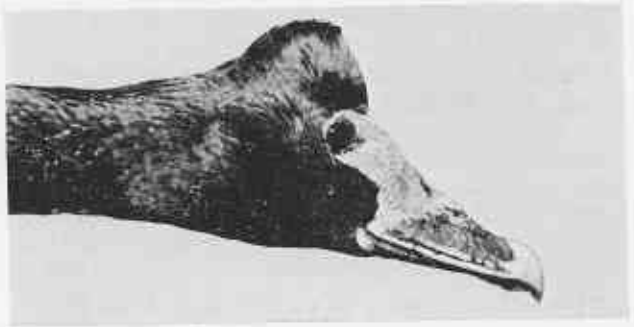
Our Diminishing Heritage

THE MAGPIE GOOSE is a unique member of the world's wildlife. It differs considerably from a true goose as is borne out by its scientific name *Anseranas,* which means "duck-goose", and has evolved in such a way that it is specially equipped to live in a tropical swamp, whereas all other geese breed in the Arctic or at high altitudes. This alone makes the magpie goose scientifically interesting and, in addition, it has several peculiar characteristics which overall make it different from other waterfowl. Its most noticeable features are the unique knob on its head and the striking black and white plumage. Also it does not have fully-webbed feet, the primary feathers moult successively rather than simultaneously, and many of the males regularly take two female mates, both of whom lay in the same nest.

The range of the Magpie Goose is at present restricted to a small area in Northern Australia and Southern New Guinea. The bird has long since disappeared from the eastern and south-eastern parts of Australia following increasing land utilisation which led to the draining of the swamps which provide the natural habitat. The great droughts at the turn of the century gave greater access to breeding areas by shooters, and birds were also extensively poisoned on the wheat-fields. The number of magpie geese remaining in Australia was estimated (Frith and Davies) as half-a-million in 1961, and it is thought that this population has subsequently remained fairly constant.

However, the magpie goose population is extremely susceptible to interference and any noticeable reduction in numbers is liable to eradicate whole colonies since, once the population begins to decrease, predation becomes an important survival factor. The goose depends on fairly large colonies for effective breeding, and therefore predation will not normally have a harmful effect on populations when there are many goslings and eggs available. In addition, the goose has a low breeding success; only about 30% of the eggs hatch out and possibly only 20% of the goslings survive. Since the mean clutch size for each nest is roughly 9 eggs (regardless of whether one or two geese lay in it), a simple calculation will show that three geese produce half a gosling!

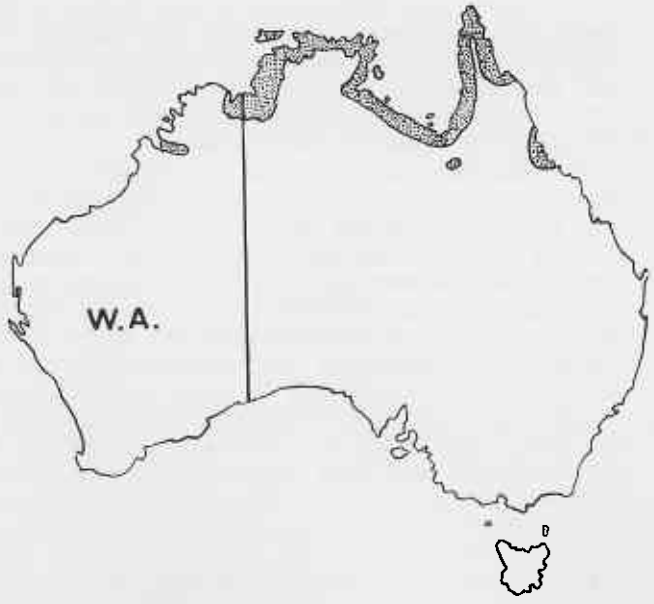


This does not mean that the population must eventually decline, for the figures above were derived from one season's study only, and there are certain to be good and bad years for breeding. Also the magpie goose has a long life span—banded birds have been recovered after 14 years, and they are thought to live even longer. It does mean, however, that the magpie goose population cannot withstand any interference by human agents which might upset the delicate balance of nature. The goose has problems enough with the unavailability of food at critical times of the year and inadequate depths of water for breeding. Young birds cannot fly for ten weeks and therefore have to find food within walking distance, and the goose will not breed at all unless there is water between twelve and twenty four inches in depth. If there is no water at all then ground predators have disastrously easy access to the nests.

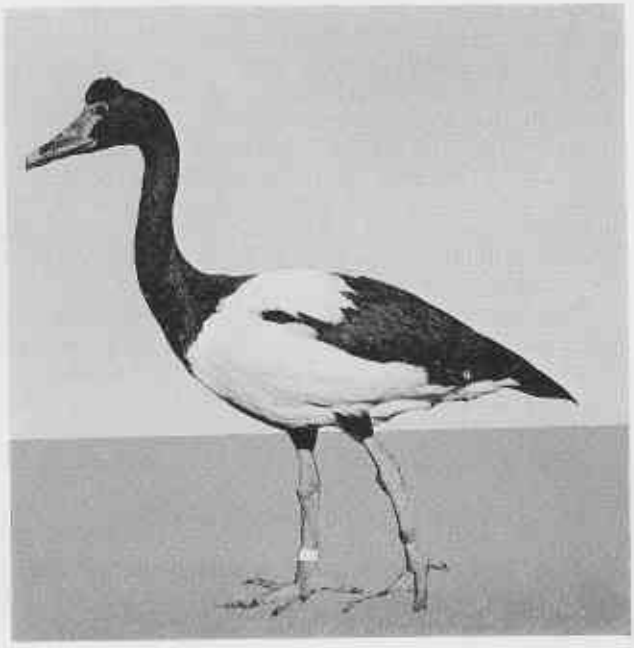
In order to preserve the delicate balance which at present maintains the overall population, there must be no interference with the existing colonies. Despite the protected status of the magpie goose, uncorroborated reports have been received of the poisoning of colonies in Western Australia. If these reports are true, Western Australia could join the growing list of states that over the years have failed to protect this unique species from extinction, and the magpie goose will indeed become a part of our diminishing heritage.

MAGPIE GOOSE

Anseranas semipalmata



Shaded area shows Australian distribution of Magpie Goose



DISTRIBUTION:

Northern Australia—from the Kimberleys to the East Coast of Queensland. Almost completely confined to a very narrow coastal strip and seldom seen more than 40 miles from the coast.

LOOKS:

A large distinctive black and white bird. Sexes are similar in appearance.

Head, neck, back, wings and tail—blackish brown.

Upper wing coverts—white and linking with a white saddle over the mantle.

Rump-white.

Iris—brown.

Beak—reddish brown.

Legs—yellow.

WING SPAN:

Male—1,549 mm. (61 in. approx.).

Female—1,430 mm. (56 in. approx.).

LENGTH:

Male—864 mm. (34 in. approx.).

Female—755 mm. (30 in. approx.).

WEIGHT:

Male—2,766 grms. (6 lb. approx.).

Female—2,071 grms. (4½ lb. approx.).

NESTING:

Nest building and egg laying begin after the main rains of the wet season. The timing depends on the water depth and the composition, density and height of the swamp vegetation. Large open nests are built in swamps right down to the mud below the water and a good deal of grass and water weeds are used to form the foundation which is about two feet in diameter. Eggs average nine per nest and are white and pitted.

DIET:

Grass blades, seeds of swamp grasses and underground bulbs of spike rush.