MAGPIE GEESE VS AGRICULTURE

During 1975, the Conservator of Wildlife in Western Australia provided his official views in the following statement to the Agriculture Protection Board of W.A., concerning the destruction of Magpie Geese when they conflict with the interests of primary producers in the Kimberly.

Legal Situation

These birds, known scientifically as *Anseranus semipalmata*, are "protected fauna" within the meaning of the Wildlife Conservation Act. This means that, in law, the birds may not be "taken" i.e., killed or captured by any means or disturbed or molested or hunted, except under the authority of a current license issued by the Conservator of Wildlife. The regulations prescribe a number of licenses which can be issued to authorise the taking of protected fauna. One of these is a damage license which can be issued to allow the taking of protected fauna causing damage to property.

Some years ago, magpie geese were treated as game birds and were allowed to be taken for sport during open seasons. However, in more recent times they have been given complete protection and are not included in any open season.

Distribution

Before the advent of white men, magpie geese were likely to occur almost anywhere throughout Australia. Due to changes in the environment, they now no longer, or only very seldom occur in Western Australia outside the Kimberly Land Division. Magpie Geese have been recorded in Papua/New Guinea but these occurrences are probably caused by a few abherrent wanderers.

Reasons for Protection

The species is endemic to Australia and is unique to the sub-family level, that is, it has no near relatives. Views on its taxonomic position differ and the species is held to be of very great scientific interest.

It is an aesthetically pleasing bird of unusual appearance. Although it might be regarded by some as having less than classically attractive features, it has that special appeal which all waterfowl have to a very wide section of the public. Indeed, to many, it has a most appealing appearance.

The species is a vulnerable one described as being sensitive to environmental changes and liable to rapid reductions and local extermination in the face of inroads by settlement or other interference to its habitat. It is slow breeding with an average success barely adequate to maintain existing populations.

Conflict with Agriculture

The ecology of the magpie geese has been studied and documented by a number of workers including H. J. Frith and S. S. J. Davies in the Northern Territory. Mr. R. J. Beeton, of the University of New England, has also studied the species at Kununurra, but the department has not yet seen his doctoral thesis or heard of it being completed. These geese have been reported as occurring in large numbers (greater than 50 000) in Kununurra, but although many complaints of damage caused by them were made, detailed evidence was not well documented. In the period December 14, 1973, to January 31, 1974, a total of 265 geese were destroyed under a damage license in association with efforts to frighten them away from sorghum crops. The greatest number shot on any one day was 60. The birds dispersed on the onset of the wet and were only reported as troublesome in the second half of the year.

Departmental attitude to controls

Frith, in 1959, wrote that the original picture that this bird was a very serious threat to the development and success of rice cultivation was "exaggerated and inaccurate". The climate of opinion today is opposed to the solving of wildlife agricultural conflicts by eradicating wildlife. There would be a very strong public reaction

A flock of Magpie Geese in the air and on the ground at the Ord River.

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against destruction of a protected and vunerable species and some other means of overcoming the conflict would be expected. A cost benefit study which took account of the loss of the birds intrinsic, scientific and tourist or aesthetic values and of the ecological effects to be suffered through the reduction in bird numbers, together with likely benefits from the agricultural development would have to be undertaken.

In considering the desirability of undertaking various forms of agricultural activities, their susceptibility to damage by wildlife must be one of the factors for deciding what crops should be planted. Costs of exclusion by fencing or other acceptable control or remedial measures need to be added to the economic cost of the crop. Where wildlife occurs in pest proportions, it is reasonably safe to say that ecological control should desirably be aimed at the situation which allows a species to reach such numbers rather than trying to control those numbers once they have occurred. In other words, we need to attack the cause rather than the effect.

Departmental experience suggests that predations by wildlife are usually associated with poor agricultural practices and there has been a strong tendency in unsuccessful ventures to blame the wildlife for failures that were really attributable to other causes. The Departments holds the view that it is not reasonable to expect the State to undertake large scale research into population control measures in these circumstances. Attention is drawn to the findings of an interdepartmental group which met at the Western Australian Wildlife Research Centre on January 15, 1974, to consider the alleged problem of magpie geese on the Ord River plains. It is recorded that the group agreed that :—

"To more fully understand the magpie geese population would require a biological research programme costing of the order of $50 000 per year for several years. Before undertaking research of this order of magnitude, the economic justification would have to be clearly demonstrated and, therefore, the group considered that research into the actual value of crop damage sustained under the present conditions was essential.

"The biological research programme would be aimed at providing information on:—

"(i) The relationship of the Ord River Magpie geese to the general northern population.

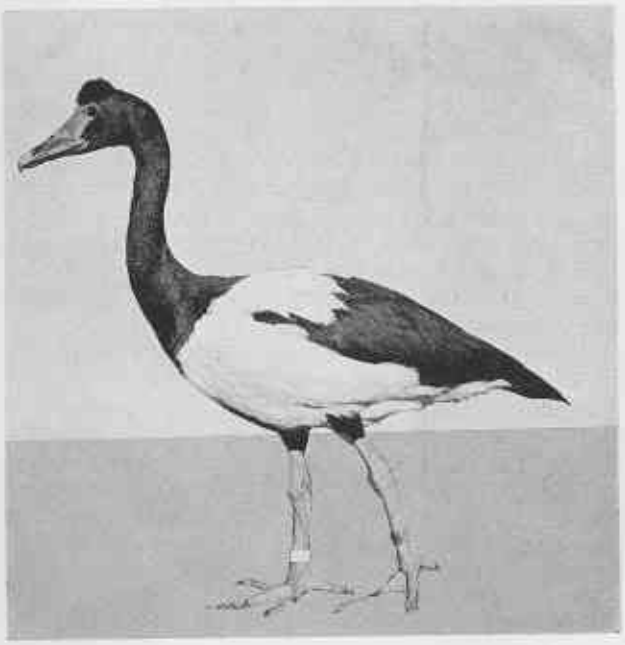
"(ii) The relationship of the Magpie geese population to the overall weather pattern (next year the weather pattern may be such that few Magpie geese appear in the Ord River area).

"(iii) The potential for providing alternative feeding areas, to divert the geese from the commercial crops, which could also be developed as a superb tourist attraction.

"(iv) The potential of Lake Argyle for Magpie geese breeding, and including a monitoring of local breeding at the present time.

"The above comments relate mainly to gross environmental changes that, together, might make the Kununurra area less attractive to geese. The possibility of population control, either by limiting the population to its present size or reducing it, must also be considered. In this context Dr. Davies made the point that given sufficient finance and desire, the population could be reduced drastically or perhaps even eliminated as occurred in the Murray/Darling Catchment area between 1880 and 1920 by the use of poisons and drainage of swamps. The group held the view that such action in the Northern Territory would not be acceptable today but methods of population control should be considered as well as the provision of alternative feeding sites. These might include water level manipulation in breeding areas and selectively applied pesticides."

As a member of the group which reached that concensus, the Conservator of Wildlife supports its findings and re-iterates the need for a cost benefit analyses to show clearly that such a programme would be justified economically, and further stress that it would need to be shown to be politically acceptable.



Magpie Goose (*Anseranus semipalmata*).

APPOINTMENTS

The Hon. Minister for Fisheries and Wildlife has appointed:—

Alan Geoffrey Breeden—*Government Gazette* 17/1/75

Nigel Maxwell Tyler—*Government Gazette* 17/1/75

Ronald Edward Sokolowski—*Government Gazette* 27/3/75

as Wildlife Officers pursuant to Section 19 of the Wildlife Conservation Act 1950–1975.