



No. 35 Swooping magpies

Australian magpie

The Australian magpie is a widespread, conspicuous bird that is found in bushland and is common in farmland, towns and urban areas. During the breeding season, magpies defend their nest from potential predators, which results in swooping of humans by a small proportion of birds.

The Australian magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) is actually a large butcherbird 37-44 centimetres in length and weighs around 320 grams. It has a black head, underparts, wing tips and tail tip. The bill is blue-grey in colour, the legs are black and the eyes are brown. Males have a white nape, whereas females have a grey nape. Magpies are characterised by strong, rich and varied carolling.

Distribution and habitat

The Australian magpie occurs throughout much of Australia. Two of Australia's five subspecies occur in Western Australia: the western magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen dorsalis*) occurs in the south-west of the state and the black-backed magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen tibicen*) in the central and northern regions. These two subspecies interbreed where their ranges meet.

Diet

The diet of the Australian magpie includes some plant material but consists mainly of animals that are found on the ground. Examples include beetles, ants, spiders, lizards, frogs and carrion. They have very good hearing which enables them to locate lawn beetle larvae. They also eat other garden and farm pests and are valued as natural pest control agents.

Breeding

Magpies breed between August and October and at least two to three hectares of territory is needed for pairs to successfully raise young. The female selects the nest site, which is usually in a tall tree, and constructs the nest of sticks lined with grass, roots and other fibres. Up to six eggs are laid and a new clutch may be laid if the first brood fails. The female incubates the eggs for about three weeks and feeds the chicks for about four weeks.

Young magpies are forced to leave the territory by their parents within two years. They then join another group or take over a territory as part of an adult breeding pair. The young are vulnerable and many die in the first months of independence due to poor weather conditions, lack of food, road hazards and natural predators.



Figure 1 Australian magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) (Image: Digital image collection, National Library of Australia).

Behaviour

Magpies have a complex social structure and form into tribes and flocks. Tribes consist of two to 10 birds of both sexes, which defend a territory of up to eight hectares. They vigorously defend this territory against other Magpies because this is the area in which they obtain their food and rear their young. The territory contains the resources needed for feeding, nesting and shelter.

Flocks consist of birds unable to form a tribe or gain access to a territory. Flocks contain young adults and older non-territorial birds that do not breed. These birds live in areas that are unsuitable as a territory because they do not contain sufficient water, feeding or nesting resources. The flock is nomadic as it is forced to move from place to place in search of food.

Periodically, birds from flocks attempt to take over the territory occupied by a tribe but they are usually unsuccessful. A bird from a flock may join a tribe when a tribe member dies, or a new tribe may

form from a flock when an existing tribe breaks down, after losing several individuals.



Figure 2 A magpie swooping a postal worker (Photo Mick Richards, Magpies Behaving Badly, ABC Online).

Swooping

Magpies swoop to protect eggs and young from attack during the nesting season from August to October. They rely largely on intimidation to deter human intruders by flying low and fast, often clacking their bill as they pass overhead. The sound of their wings whistling past and the movement of air can be alarming. However, by confidently continuing on your way, the bird will often retreat to the safety of a tree and watch you until you leave the territory.

Like dogs, magpies seem to sense fear and may capitalise on this by pressing on with an attack. A threatening gesture with a hat, stick or umbrella will usually make the bird retreat. Occasionally, a magpie will strike an intruder on the head with its bill but such strikes are rare. Magpies only swoop during the relatively short period of the nesting season and for the majority of birds, it is merely bluff.

Magpies can inflict serious injuries. Information collected at hospital emergency departments have shown that of 59 attacks, the eye was the most common target. Nearly half those attacked were riding a bicycle at the time, nearly two-thirds of those injured were male and half were between 10-30 years of age.

Research at Griffith University has shown that despite the bad experience, 90 per cent of those injured in an attack did not want the magpie destroyed. If we can understand the catalysts for the attack and the patterns of magpie behaviour, we can greatly reduce the risk.

Studies have shown that only about 12 per cent of male Magpies will attack people. Of these, about half attack pedestrians, 10 per cent exclusively attack postal delivery workers, eight per cent attack cyclists and the remaining birds will attack any of these.

Reducing the risk

If you have problems with a swooping magpie, several avenues of action are open to you. Keep in mind that the birds attack only during the nesting and rearing period (from August to October), that most of the supposed attacks are really bluff and that the bird rarely has any intention of actually striking.

Never provoke a magpie by drawing attention to yourself or throwing stones, because Magpies have a good memory and may continuously attack a potential aggressor. If the bird is in an area on the way to and from school or work, it would be a good idea to use a different route during the short period the magpie is aggressive.

Living safely with magpies

The following steps can be followed to avoid or reduce the impact of a swooping magpie:

- Never deliberately provoke or harass a magpie. Throwing sticks or stones at magpies usually makes them more defensive.
- Avoid areas where magpies are known to swoop. Remember, magpie aggression lasts only a few weeks and they usually only defend a small area of about 100 metre radius around their nest.
- Locate the bird and keep watching it when entering a magpie territory. If it swoops, don't crouch in fear or stop, move on quickly but don't run.
- If you are riding a bike dismount and walk through nesting magpie territory, wear a helmet and fit an orange traffic flag to the bike.
- Wear a hat and sunglasses or carry a stick or umbrella to protect yourself. A magpie will attack from behind initially. When a Magpie is tricked into believing the target is alert, the attack may stop or may not even get started.
- Adopt a confident stance towards the bird as this can have a strong deterrent effect. This response is most commonly used by adults but can easily be taught to children.

Learning to live with magpies can be rewarding. You can observe local magpies, study their behaviour, and listen to their songs. We share the same living space. Learning to live together is an important step towards building a better living environment.

Taking a bird or nest from the wild is illegal without a permit and while such actions may temporarily stop attacks, it is not uncommon for the nest to be re-built immediately and the problem starts all over again. Often, it is better to avoid the area or live with the swooping bird for six to eight weeks until the chicks are learning to fly and the problem ceases.

In extreme cases, a particularly aggressive magpie may have to be removed from a site either by shooting or trapping and relocation. Individual cases must be assessed by a Department of Environment

and Conservation (DEC) wildlife officer, before further action can be taken.

Further reading

[Swoop!](#) Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria.

[Magpies Behaving Badly](#). ABC Online.

References

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Kreisfeld, R. (1997) Injuries involving magpies. Research Centre for Injury Studies, Flinders University.

Further information

Contact your local DEC office.

See the department's website for the latest information:

www.dec.wa.gov.au.

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Further Information

Contact your local office of the Department of Environment and Conservation.

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