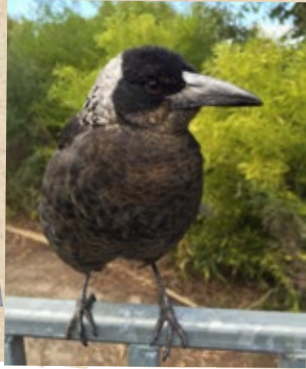


AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE

CRACTICUS TIBICEN (GYMNORHINA TIBICEN)



Taxonomic Classification

Animalia: Chordata: Vertebrata: Aves: Passeriformes ("perching songbirds"): Artamidae (magpies, butcherbirds, currawongs, and woodswallows).

Description

Magpies have black and white, variable pied plumage. A number of races and subspecies have been identified (currently nine subspecies are generally recognised, yet some authorities recognise three distinct species), differing in size, shape, plumage patterns, and behaviours like song, and social organisation; to further complicate matters, hybridisation may occur between different races/subspecies/species where ranges overlap.

Magpies are relatively large birds (37-44cm), especially for passerines. All magpies have a black throat and breast, white undertail coverts and a white underside, and black wings with a bold white bar, black-outlined, black-tipped, and black underwings with a prominent white leading edge to the forewing. Whilst the crown is black and nape is white in all races, the amount of white on the back and rump varies between different races, from all white to all black.

In the Western Australian Magpie *Cracticus tibicen dorsalis*, sexes differ in plumage patterns in that whilst the male has a white nape, mantle and back, the female has a scalloped black or brownish-black mantle and back, with the dark feathers being edged with white. Magpies have deep red-brown irises. They have a multi-purpose white/grey-coloured long dagger-like beak that ends in a sharp black tip.

Their beak functions in fighting, feeding, breaking-open hard soil for subterranean invertebrates, and for crushing hard-shelled prey like beetles. They have thin grey-black legs tipped with claws. Juvenile magpies have fluffy, grey plumage and relatively shorter beaks.

Distribution

An extremely widespread species, Magpies occur over most of Australia, including Tasmania. They are only absent from the very north, and a region inland of northern WA. Magpies also occur in parts of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, and are an introduced species in Fiji and New Zealand.

Habitat

Magpies are extremely adaptable, inhabiting a diverse range of habitats, including suburban backyards and rural properties. They prefer open grassy areas with trees, and are

common in both bushland and urban environments.

Occurring anywhere where there is open areas with trees, the only places they are scarce are in coastal treeless, sandy areas, dense rainforest, and very arid habitats.

Diet

Magpies walk along the ground using their bill to probe for insects, larvae and other invertebrates. They are fairly generalist in their diet, also eating frogs, small lizards, meat scraps and grain, and will scavenge on carrion.

Conservation status

Not Threatened (IUCN Red List of Threatened Species).

Population size and trends

Whilst the total population size of magpies has not been quantified, they are common and abundant over a vast geographical area, and there is no indication that they number <10,000 individuals (the threshold for being listed as threatened). Moreover, human modifications to the landscape, and food litter, appears to have favoured magpies, such that their population trend appears to be of an increase in numbers.



Life history and reproduction

Magpie nests are platforms of sticks constructed about 15m up in the outer-branches of a tree, with the interior bowl lined with grass and hairs. Females produce a single clutch per year of 2-6 blue-green eggs. It takes about 8 months from when eggs are laid for a magpie to reach independence. In groups, usually only the dominant male and female breed. In some subspecies, the female performs all parental care (nest construction, incubation, and feeding chicks). Some subspecies exhibit cooperative breeding, where juveniles of a previous clutch remain with their parents, or subordinate magpies in a group, assist in territorial defence and caring for the chicks. In the absence of helpers, only one or two chicks can be successfully raised, yet when there are helpers, the number of chicks surviving increases. Life expectancy is 25-30 years.

Behaviour

Magpies are diurnal. Belying their harsh appearance, and revealing they belong within the bird order Passeriformes ("song birds"). Magpies emit some of the most beautiful of all vocalisations. Magpies have a renowned rich fluting yodel, and can produce a range of complex vocalisations. Pairs and groups carol to advertise or defend their territories. When carolling they adopt a distinctive posture, holding their beak erect, tilting their head and wings back, and puffing out their chest. These songsters are also masters at mimicry! In fact, Magpies can mimic over 35 species of native and introduced birds, as well as dogs and horses, and have even been reported to mimic humans when they live in close proximity! Alarmed Magpies emit harsh shrieks, and produce distinct rallying calls in response to eagles (arboreal predators) vs. monitor lizards (terrestrial predators). Young Magpies emit a distinctive high-pitched begging call.

Magpies live in groups that defend fixed territories where they feed, water, roost and nest year-round. Magpies live in groups ranging from two, to sometimes 24, birds. There tends to be more females than males in a group. The sharp beak of Magpies function as weapons and can inflict serious injuries. Parents are highly protective of their nests and offspring during the spring-summer breeding season, and will valiantly defend their nests against any animal approaching, including humans. It is advisable to wear a hat and sunglasses to avoid being injured from defensive Magpie parents "dive-bombing" unassuming humans passing in the vicinity of nests. Outside of the breeding season, Magpies are friendly towards humans and show tameability. Magpies are bold, highly-intelligent birds, which may explain their success in diverse environments, even those where human disturbances are common.

Threats

- Predation, by cats, large predatory birds, and ravens. Unattended nestling and recently fledged young are most vulnerable.
- Being hit by vehicles.
- Poisoning from ingesting rabbits and rats that have consumed poison pesticide baits.

Support conservation of this species by:

- Keeping pet cats indoors at all times.
- Keeping pet dogs on leashes at all times when walking in areas of native bushland.
- Keeping a look-out for Magpies whilst driving.
- Responsibly dispose of rubbish to prevent fatal ingestion.
- Quit smoking to prevent fires, and birds ingesting the toxic butts.
- Providing fresh, cool water daily in bird baths, especially in summer.
- Do NOT poison rats or rabbits, or use insecticides or pesticides: this depletes Magpies food sources, and can lead to secondary poisoning if a Magpie ingests poisoned prey.
- Please do not evict Magpies from your property. Not only are Magpies fascinating, sound beautiful and are tame outside of the breeding season, they help control insect pests; in particular, one of their favourite prey is the scarab beetle: a major pest of garden lawns.

Fun Fact

Australian Magpies *Cracticus tibicen* (Artamidae) are not closely-related the European Magpie *Pica pica* (Corvidae).

