

Let's Talk

Magpies



LET'S TALK MAGPIES

Magpies and most other native birds in the ACT are protected under the *Animals and Birds Protection Ordinance* 1966. The Department of the Capital Territory is responsible for the protection and management of magpie populations and finds that this is no easy task. Magpie attacks can cause a great deal of distress to children, and to some adults. Nevertheless many people derive pleasure from feeding and gaining the confidence of these birds and enjoy the company of this member of Canberra's varied wildlife population.

This pamphlet has been produced to inform Canberra residents about the much-maligned magpie and to indicate how humans can live amicably with these fascinating, if at times exasperating birds.

Feeds on pests

Both species of magpie, the black-backed magpie and the white-backed magpie, occur in Canberra. They prefer to nest in tall trees but will nest in a variety of other sites if trees are scarce – even on power poles in the newer suburbs. Magpies feed on a wide variety of soil animals, especially beetles and their larvae, and will eat ants, spiders, frogs, lizards and even carrion and grain when necessary.

Their favourite food is the larvae of the scarab beetle which does a great deal of damage to lawns. They also help to control Christmas beetles and other pests which defoliate trees each year. The important point here is that they control insect pests in a natural way, thus reducing the need for man to use more dangerous techniques such as the application of chemical pesticides.

Tribes, flocks

Magpies form two main associations – tribes and flocks. Tribes consist of two to ten birds of both sexes which defend a territory of up to 8 ha. They vigorously defend their territory against other magpies because this is the area in which they obtain their food and rear their young.

Flocks consist of birds unable to form a tribe or gain access to a territory. They are composed of young adults and older non-territorial birds which do not breed.

Periodically birds from the flock attempt to oust birds from the 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 the flock when an existing tribe breaks down after losing several individuals.



Defence through attack

Magpies attack people because they have a strong innate drive to defend their territory, particularly at nesting time. They are protecting their nests, eggs or young from potential intruders, irrespective of whether they are other magpies, predators or people.

The reason for attacks on humans is not fully understood, but it is probably because the birds were molested by man in the past and see man as a threat. If we teach our children not to molest magpies, and refrain from doing so ourselves, we may reduce the number of attacks.

Rangers have noted that the problem of magpie attacks is not spread evenly throughout Canberra but is concentrated in particular areas. Attacks are far more frequent in newer suburbs than in older and more developed areas. This may be because the birds are not used to people, or that the people have not yet adjusted to the birds. Few attacks are reported in the older suburbs, except in some areas having large trees and parks.

Attack techniques

If people, particularly children, understand the attack techniques of the magpie a great deal of upset can be avoided.

Swooping is the most common attack method. The bird is threatening or bluffing. It is unlikely to attack if you walk confidently on, keeping an eye on it.

Beak clacking as a bird swoops overhead is another threat or bluff. If you stand your ground and glare defiantly at the bird it will usually retreat to a nearby tree.

This is certainly better than an undignified scramble to safety with the magpie in hot pursuit. Like dogs, magpies seem to sense fear and will capitalise on it by pressing an attack.

In a **strike attack**, a magpie swoops, hovers momentarily and then strikes. The fluttering of wings as the bird hovers is usually sufficient warning for adults and older children to duck their heads and avoid the attack. A threatening gesture with a hat, stick or umbrella will usually cause the bird to retreat.

What to do if you have a problem bird

Several avenues of action are open to you. The Department hopes, of course, that having read this brochure most

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Residents will have gained a better understanding of magpie behaviour and a reassurance that the problem is not really as bad as it looks.

Keep in mind that the birds attack only during the nesting and rearing period, that most of the supposed attacks are really bluff and that the bird rarely has any intention of actually striking. Wearing a hat while working or playing in the backyard and garden is one of the simplest and most effective means of protection, especially for children. The hat deters much of the magpie activity and also deflects any accidental or intentional strike by the bird should this occur.

Somewhat surprisingly, adopting a confident or threatening stance towards the bird also has a strong deterrent effect. This response is most commonly used by adults but can easily be taught to children.

Feeding is by far the most effective and the most pleasant way of avoiding attack problems. Birds fed regularly with household scraps, particularly bread and meat, soon get to know you and will accept you without fear right through the breeding season.

If you find that none of these solutions are sufficient and you cannot tolerate severe attacks, you can contact the Department on 46 2308 and have the complaint investigated by a ranger from the Conservation and Agriculture Branch. If the ranger finds that you do have a problem he may decide to remove the bird or the nest and where necessary, destroy eggs or nestlings. This commonly deters the magpie from its attacking activities. However, it is not uncommon for the magpie to start rebuilding immediately and the problem starts all over again. Often it is better to learn to live with the problem bird for six to eight weeks until the chicks are learning to fly and the problem ceases.

Birds will be destroyed by departmental rangers only in the most extreme circumstances and only where it can be shown that all other tactics have failed. The Department is reluctant to have its rangers involved in a dispute between neighbours. Therefore, where it appears likely that the bird has to be killed, this action will be undertaken only when the Department is satisfied that the surrounding residents are in complete agreement. The Department has found all too often that what is an annoying problem for one household may be the pride and joy of neighbours who are pleased to have a family of nestlings in their tree.

Because the magpie is a protected bird no person is permitted to take the law into his own hands and destroy one. When the Department exercises its responsibility and destroys the magpie it is conscious of the fact that this action may cause nestlings to starve or freeze to death or may result in breakdown of the magpie tribe with further repercussions on surrounding territories and flocks.

