

Magpies – Swooping and Safety Issues

Identification and Distribution

The Australian magpie *Cracticus tibicen* (or *Gymnorhina tibicen*) is a large butcherbird with a black head, body, wing tips and tail tip with patches of white. 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.

The Australian magpie occurs throughout much of Australia, including bushland, farmland towns and other urban areas. Two of Australia's five sub-species occur in Western Australia: the western magpie *Cracticus tibicen dorsalis* occurs in the south-west and the black-backed magpie *Cracticus tibicen tibicen* is found in the central and northern regions. These two subspecies interbreed where their ranges meet. Refer to www.naturemap.dpaw.wa.gov.au to find further information on the species distribution.



Photo. P. Courtis/DBCA

Behaviour

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

Magpies breed between August and October and at least 2-3 ha (0.02-0.03km²) 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 from sticks lined with grass, roots and other fibres. Up to 6 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 within the first months of independence due to poor weather conditions, lack of food, road hazards and natural predators.

Magpies have a complex social structure and form tribes and flocks. Tribes consist of 2-10 birds of both sexes, which defend a territory of up to 8 ha (0.08km²). They vigorously defend this territory against other magpies because this is the area in which they obtain their food, build nests and rear their young. Flocks consist of birds that are young or too old to breed and are unable to form a tribe or gain access to a territory. These birds live in areas that do not contain sufficient water, feeding or nesting resources. The flock is nomadic as it moves from place to place in search of food.

Environmental Law

All fauna native to Australia, including fauna that naturally migrates to Australia, are afforded protection under both State and Commonwealth legislation.

Depending on the type of fauna-related activity, a licence issued by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions may be required. It is an offence to intentionally or recklessly kill, injure, trade, keep or move them unless authorised by a permit. To obtain a licence, the applicant needs to demonstrate that all reasonable non-lethal methods have been attempted and environmental impacts have been assessed. Further information is available on the Department's website.

Magpie-Human Interactions

Magpies swoop to protect eggs and young from potential predators during the nesting season. 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, but is usually just a bluff.

Like dogs, magpies seem to sense fear and may capitalise on this by pressing on with harassing any perceived threat. Occasionally, a magpie will actually strike an intruder on the head with its bill. While such strikes are rare, magpies can inflict serious injuries. Information collected at hospital emergency departments has shown that the eye was the most common target. Magpies are more likely to swoop cyclists and postal workers.

If you find a sick or injured magpie contact the [Wildcare Helpline](#) on (08) 9474 9055 for information on registered wildlife rehabilitators and centres who can assist you with your enquiry.

Reducing the risk from swooping magpies

If you have problems with a swooping magpie, several avenues of action are open to you. Keep in mind that the birds swoop only during the nesting and rearing period (from August to October) and each bird generally only swoops for a few weeks during this time. If we can understand the catalysts and the patterns of magpie behaviour, we can greatly reduce the risk.

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 usually makes them more defensive. Magpies have good memories and they may continuously swoop a potential aggressor.
- Avoid areas where magpies are known to swoop. Remember, magpie hostility lasts only a few weeks and they usually only defend a small area of about 100m radius around their nest.
- Locate the bird and keep watching it when entering its territory. If it swoops, don't crouch in fear or stop: move on quickly but don't run.
- If you are riding a bike make sure you wear a helmet, and dismount and walk through nesting magpie territory.
- Wear a hat and sunglasses or carry an umbrella for protection. Magpies initially attack from behind but can swoop back around.
- Adopt a confident stance as this can have a strong deterrent effect.

Remember that the magpies are just trying to protect their young. Learning to live alongside wildlife is an important step towards building a better living environment, and observing and listening to magpies can be an enjoyable experience.

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 another nesting bird to move in. It is better to avoid the area or live with the swooping bird for six to eight weeks until the chicks learn to fly and the problem ceases.

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