

Living with Magpies

This wildlife friendly information is sourced from members of Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers, members of other groups, independent advice, and research. We hope you find the information below useful, and it helps to answer your questions on this subject. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact us by clicking this link: <http://www.tvwc.org.au/contact.php>

The Australian Magpie

The Australian Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicens*) is one of our more common and quite distinctive birds. Belonging to the same family as Butcherbirds and Currawongs, our Magpie lives in bushland, urban and rural environments. Its favoured habitat is lightly-wooded bushland, which many of our gardens resemble, using the trees for nesting and roosting, and grassy areas on which it feeds. Magpies forage on the ground, amongst leaf litter, and our lawns for insects, spiders, worms, lizards, and mice.

Magpies are territorial and social birds forming three distinct groups:

- On the top rung of the social ladder is the permanent territorial group. This group is large enough to defend its range, whilst not depleting resources.
- Second, come the marginal groups. These birds live in lower quality territories, which may not sustain the birds all year round with food and suitable nesting spots.
- On the bottom rung of the ladder comes the loose non-territorial flocks made up of immature birds, and displaced adults. These flocks are highly mobile moving in and out of other territories in search of food.

Why do Magpies sing in the morning?

Magpie society is complex, co-operative, within the group, and highly territorial. The beautiful and familiar carolling or warbling, which is so uniquely Australian, usually takes place first thing in the morning. At first light Magpie society begins its day by reaffirming territorial boundaries with song. They are simply saying, "This is our bit – keep out!"

Springtime & Nesting

Magpie pairs breed in the spring, and nesting takes place from June to December. At about this time prime real estate is sought out, and the familiar 'basket of sticks' nest is built. This nest is often lined with grass, wool, hair, string, and even bits of wire. The eggs hatch in 20 days, and the nestlings spend about 4 weeks in the nest before fledging. At this stage the fledglings are able to flutter, but not fly. The parents are feeding and teaching them, whilst on the ground.

Unfortunately, this is the time when many well-meaning people pick up the 'helpless youngster', and hand it in to the nearest wildlife rescue group. In almost all cases this is unnecessary, as baby is actually doing just fine with two devoted parents, its skills improving daily. If you see a baby Magpie out on your lawn, please resist from rushing out to grab it. As the youngsters grow and develop, the parents will begin to stop feeding them to encourage them to fend for themselves. At about this time you may hear the plaintive begging calls. Again, this is natural, and although mum does not seem to care, she never strays far from her offspring.



These young magpies were 'kidnapped' by members of the public who thought they were orphaned, but most probably mum and dad were nearby. Wildlife carers had to raise them instead and try to teach them the ways of the Magpie!!

Swooping – Just good parents

So why do our normally peaceful Magpies sometimes swoop? The answer is quite simple... Magpies are totally devoted parents. Breeding increases their natural territorial behaviour to defend against all perceived threats. This includes other birds, dogs, cats and, of course, us. This period usually only last about 8 weeks, until the young are flying. Most Magpies defend a territory of around 30 – 50 metres from the nest, and this defence takes the form of aggressive bluff, beak clacking, wing flapping, and occasionally making physical contact by pecking or scratching. It is usually the male who swoops.

Note: It is not just Magpies who sometimes swoop, but Butcherbirds, Currawongs, and Magpie-Larks sometimes do the same.

How to avoid being swooped

- Number one is – if at all possible – stay out of the swoop zone. Try walking or riding on a different route. This really is the best thing you can do.
- If you are swooped – **don't stop**. You are still in their territory, so they will keep swooping. Move quickly through the area, but don't run.
- Try to be confident, and face the Magpie. They usually only mount an attack on unsuspecting people facing away from them.
- If possible, travel in a group. Magpies usually only swoop individuals.
- If you are a cyclist, wear a helmet. Get off and walk through the area. The Magpie may lose interest if you are not riding.
- Put up a temporary sign warning other people.
- Carry a stick or branch over your head, wear a wide brimmed hat, or best of all use an open umbrella. Magpies don't like swooping large objects, and it offers protection.
- Do not stand and throw things at the Magpie – you will just encourage it, and increase its aggression next time.
- We do not normally recommend feeding native wildlife for many reasons, but if your garden is a swoop zone you may try small quantities of meat, preferably with appropriate insectivorous supplements. This often turns Magpies around, seeing you as friends rather than predators. Please do not feed Magpies bread, cake, birdseed, or McDonalds... They eat meat.

Destroying Nests, Eggs, and Relocating?

An aggressive Magpie should never be removed/relocated from an area for the following reasons:

- Eggs will not hatch, or the nestlings will die of starvation or exposure without their parents.
- If an area is vacated, other Magpies from further down the social ladder will immediately claim it, building a new nest of their own.
- If you just remove the nest, the parents will build a new one straight away, thus prolonging the swooping period.

For the above reasons, it is best to learn to live with your normally friendly Magpies, whilst taking precautions during breeding season.

National Parks, Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers, and other wildlife rescue groups do not relocate aggressive Magpies for the above reasons. We will be more than happy to advise, but cannot relocate.

Australian Magpies are native birds and, as such, are fully protected by law in all states and territories. Destroying eggs or nests is illegal, and will only serve to encourage aggressive behaviour. The adults will simply nest again, prolonging the swooping period.

The Gardener's Friend

Magpies eat an enormous amount of insects, grubs, and garden pests. They do this for free, with no charge. They also relish the scarab beetle, which does so much damage to our lawns.

Free pest control, with their beautiful song each morning! They live here too, so let's learn to live with our black and white 'most of the year friendly' Magpie.