



Living with Australian magpies

Intelligent and curious songbirds



Parks and gardens with lawn and some tall trees make an ideal place for Australian magpies to call home. While magpies tend to nest high for a good view, they forage in open grassed areas, sometimes stopping to turn their head and listen for insects, worms and other small animals that may be hidden or just beneath the soil.

Magpies mostly live in territorial groups. A pair may stay together in the same territory for up to 20 years. They are sociable songbirds and use flute-like calls, known as carolling, and bill-clicking to communicate. A group may sing a repeated short song at dawn to welcome the day or at dusk in winter and spring to broadcast news about the breeding season.

When is breeding season?

Breeding season generally occurs between June and December, but it is only for a few weeks each year that nesting magpies defend their young.

During nesting, some males may swoop low to try to divert pedestrians and cyclists away from their nesting tree. Although only around ten percent of male magpies are known to swoop and clack their bill, it is best to avoid nesting trees until the chicks have left the nest. Once the fledglings can fly short distances and start foraging on the ground the warning swoops usually stop.



How to live with magpies during breeding season

There are a few simple things we can all do to reduce the chance of conflict with a protective magpie parent. These include:

- Watch the magpies in your local area and get to know what trees they prefer. They are intelligent and can recognise and remember a human face.
- Erect a sign near a nesting tree to let others know, so they can choose to safely go around it or avoid the area altogether.
- Wear a hat and sunglasses for eye protection or carry an umbrella as you walk at a steady pace through the nesting area. Do not stop and do not run. If you can, move through the area in a group.
- Dismount and walk past the tree if you are on a bicycle or skateboard. Never speed past. Try attaching cable ties on your bike helmet so they spike outwards like an echidna, to keep a swooping magpie at a safe distance.
- Choose to walk an alternate route if you have a dog with you. Some magpies will swoop at a dog regardless of how well behaved it is.

Get to know the locals

Male and female magpies can be difficult to tell apart. Both have reddish-brown eyes and similar black and white patches, except a subtle difference on the white patch on the back of their neck. On the male the neck patch is all-over white, while the female's neck patch looks grey-white towards the bottom of the patch.

Juveniles pay close attention to their parents to learn to survive. It is fascinating to watch the antics

of juvenile magpies exploring their world while being tutored by their patient parent.

Within a year or two the juvenile magpie is moved on by its parents to join another group or start a new territory.

Australian magpies are protected under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*. For more information go to environment.nsw.gov.au

Podcast on Australian magpies

Professor Darryl Jones with Richard Fidler on ABC

<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2016/05/30/4471784.htm>

News stories on Australian magpies

Penguin the magpie takes a shower

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-11/penguin-the-magpie-takes-a-shower/6295836>

The boy, the magpie and the daily dash

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-12/the-boy-the-magpie-and-the-daily-dash/10235662>

Make friends with magpies to avoid swooping

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-31/make-friends-with-magpies-to-avoid-swooping-expert-says/8856438>

Magpies: how to avoid their attacks

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-01/magpies-how-to-avoid-their-attacks/6740448>

Cover photo: Australian magpie in a banksia, K Cooper/DPIE.

Above left to right: Magpie feeding chicks J Cooper/ DPIE, Juvenile magpie learning new skills K Cooper /DPIE, Female magpie investigating shiny objects on a beach K Cooper /DPIE.. Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, Locked Bag 5022, Parramatta NSW 2124. Phone: 1300 361 967 (environment and national parks enquiries); email: info@environment.nsw.gov.au; website: www.environment.nsw.gov.au. EES 2020 August 2020