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More Than Just Black and White

by John V. Azua
San Diego Wild Animal Park, California

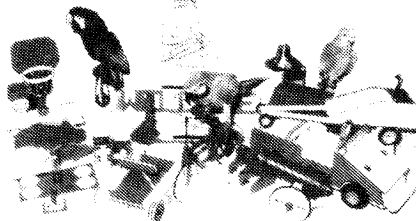
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Quite often outward appearances are misleading and the Australian magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) is a prime example. This bird appears unassuming and very drab in appearance, but upon further investigation its uniqueness can be discovered.

Upon first glance, Australian magpies with their mostly black bodies, black and white wings and varying black and white backs, might suggest a kinship with corvids. This is a common misconception. These birds are taxonomically classified in the family cracticidae comprised of the butcherbirds and currawongs. Another misconception dealing with crows is the occasional whining, cawing sound. However, during species and territorial advertisement, the Australian magpie has an extraordinary organ-like fluted caroling performed singly, paired and/or group duets (Schodde & Tidemann, 1986).

At the beginning of breeding season, males are involved in fierce song calling and aggressive confrontations for social positioning and territory obtainment (Carrick 1974, Schodde & Tidemann 1986). The greatest intensity of vocalizations are performed at dawn and dusk. In addition, they have been heard to mimic ambulance sirens with a remarkable likeness. In times of aggression, a shrieking yodel is used by the birds to ward off an unwanted presence. If the intruder persists, the magpie will aggressively defend its territory by using its icepick-type bill. A whirlwind of jabs and pokes usually persuades the intruder to flee.

The magpies are common in eucalypt woodlands throughout most of Australia. The species can also be found in southern New Guinea savannahs and has been introduced to New Zealand (Schodde & Tidemann 1986).

The variation of external appearances and distribution between the races of this species has been well studied. It was believed for some time there were two distinct species: Black-backed magpies, *G. tibicen* (Latham) and white-backed magpies, *G. hypoleuca* (Gould). Their general plumages and biology were similar. Their differences were observed in dorsal coloration. *G. tibicen* males had a white nape and black back, females had a gray nape and black back. *G. hypoleuca* males had a white nape and back and females had a gray nape and back (Burton and Martin 1975). Black-backed magpies inhabited most of Australia except in the south where the white-backed magpies were found. In the areas of overlapping populations it was known for the species to hybridize readily (Burton and Martin 1975). The result was varying degrees of hybridized magpies and this was noticeably observed in the dorsal colorations. Some birds had complete white backs to varying coverages of white and black backs to complete black backs. The most commonly used taxonomical nomenclature has these birds listed under one species and divided into two subspecies or races (Schodde & Tidemann 1986; Clements 1974). I believe the classification of varying dorsal colorations in populations under one species is the most accurate because of the frequency of hybridization.

The Australian magpie is a fairly active bird. It spends most of the day on the ground probing and walking methodically in grassy fields within its territory. Only when it rains or during heat waves will these birds roost in trees around midday (Carrick 1963). Territory sizes may vary between ten to thirty acres. Magpies are omnivorous.

feeding chiefly on surface soil invertebrates and, to a lesser extent, frogs, small birds and carrion (Carrick 1963, Schodde & Tidemann 1986).

Along with an extensive territory size, these birds have a complex social structure to uphold the population. Carrick (1963) described five social hierarchies that can be present in a magpie community:

1. *Permanent* — Made up of successful breeders maintaining a distinct territory in the optimal habitat. Often males are outnumbered by females and bigamous and possibly triagamous groups may exist.

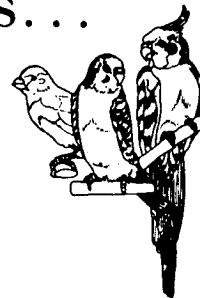
2. *Marginal* — Birds occupying territories on the periphery of the optimal areas. Most of the adult individuals are poor defenders and are rarely successful breeders.

3. *Mobile* — Commuters moving between separate feeding and roosting areas. These birds are never successful breeders and this group only exists during breeding season.

4. *Open* — Only contains non-nesting adult birds inhabiting open fields in order to provide adequate feedings.

5. *Flock* — Non-territorial, non-nesting birds of all ages and both sexes

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Australian bell magpie, female
(*Gymnorhina tibicen tibicen*)

(the leftovers) make up this group. These social levels combine to form an elaborate and fairly complex community (Carrick 1963, Schodde & Tidemann 1986).

The social organization of the magpie population is interrelated to the breeding success of any one individual. Males can breed at one year, but most

often at that age cannot out compete more experienced males for territories or mates. Females do not breed until two or three years of age. Courtship has been documented in several publications. It has been observed that males perform fluted caroling songs to attract a mate. Upon finding an interested partner, the pair commences in several choruses of dueting. Unlike courtship, the act of copulation has been documented very little. On several occasions I have witnessed a magpie pair breeding and it is quite far from being described as an elegant experience. The male forces himself upon his unwilling mate and proceeds to copulate. An onlooker must observe the behavior in this pair carefully because it can be mistaken for an aggressive brawl instead of breeding.

Female magpies perform the majority of the nesting and rearing duties. They select and build the nest made of sticks, plant stems and maybe even of wire lined with wood (Schodde & Tidemann 1986). The nest is usually situated in a eucalyptus tree about twenty to fifty feet above the ground. The breeding season in Australia is from June to December. The female can lay from one to six blue or green blotched eggs with brown streaks but usually averages three to five (Schodde & Tidemann 1986). Incubation is approximately twenty days. The role of

the male has evolved into only a minor part of feeding the female and, to a lesser degree, the nestlings.

For as much work as the female contributes, the results are frustrating. While in the nest, the eggs and chicks suffer high predation and the outcome is usually just one fledgling (Carrick 1963, Schodde & Tidemann 1986). It takes about four weeks for a chick to leave the nest after which it is still fed and overseen by its parents. The chicks gain independence over the span of months and eventually become part of a social group within the population.

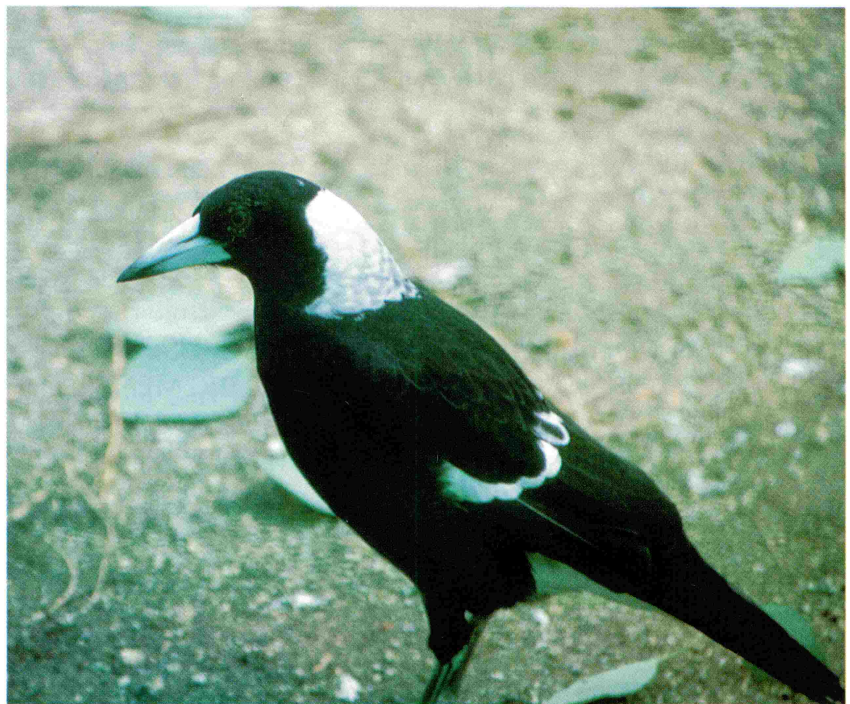
The juvenile bird, over the course of its lifetime, strives to become part of a very unique community and, if successful, will leave its personal contributions to a greater saga. One that is more than just black and white.

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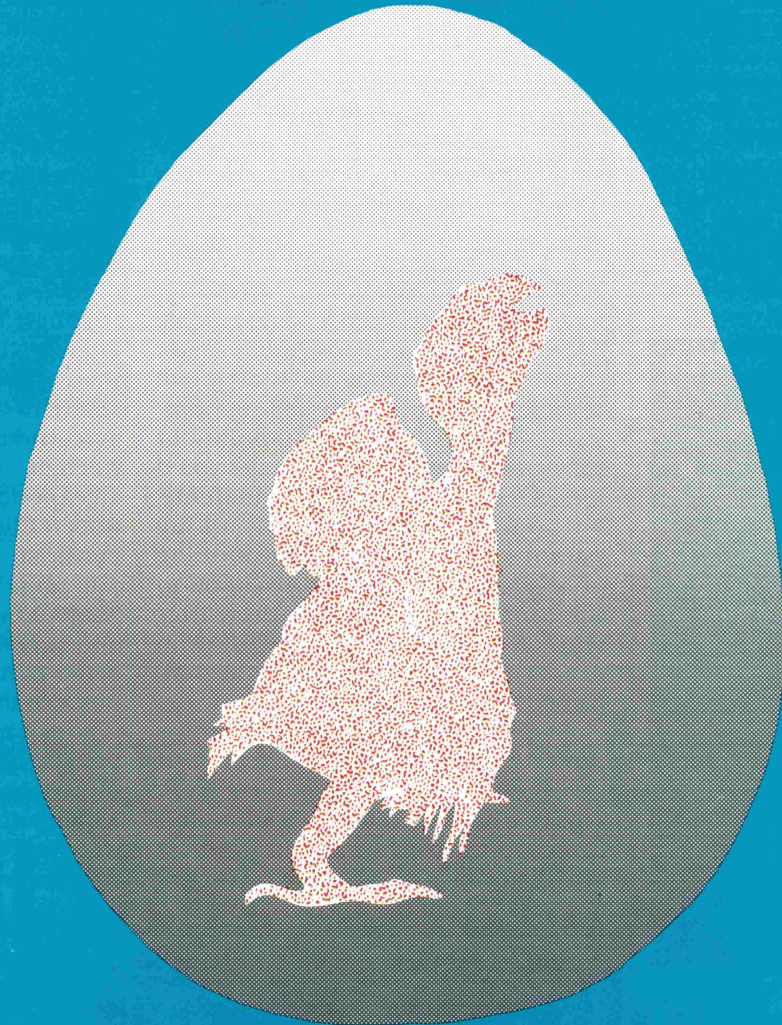


Australian bell magpie, female
(*G.t. hypoleuca*)



Australian bell magpie, male (*G.t. tibicen*)

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