



Fact Sheet

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891 ABC
Adelaide

The Australian magpie: an introduction

The Australian magpie is a medium-sized bird with distinctive black and white colouration, native to Australia and Papua New Guinea. Magpies live for up to 30 years and are social and territorial. They are well known for their tuneful songs.

Description

Adult magpies are between 35 and 45 cm. Magpie eyes have a red-brown eye-ringing. Their bills are large, pointed, triangular and black-tipped. Their colouration varies around Australia. Their crowns and foreheads are black, as are their flight feathers (the tips of their wings) and the band at the tip of their tail. The colour of their nape and back can be white, black or grey. Typically, males have greatest contrast of colours, females have a mottled grey back or nape, and juveniles are smaller with a mottled grey all-over.

Social structure

Magpies usually live in groups of between 3 and 20 individuals. These groups are organised in a social hierarchy with one dominant adult male and female, some subordinate adult males and females and numerous juveniles. The group will concentrate its resources on supporting and defending the young of the dominant pair. Lone individuals may be old birds or young males seeking to establish themselves within a new territory.

Territoriality

The size of a group's territory can vary from 3 to 20 hectares depending on the availability of resources, particularly food and nest sites. Territory is heavily defended. Magpies use song to monitor the location of their group members and proclaim their territory. When magpies intrude into the territory of an established group they are confronted forced to leave.

Breeding

In Adelaide, most breeding takes place during August, September and October. Nests are bowl-shaped, constructed of sticks and lined with feathers and other soft materials. Females incubate eggs for around 20 days. Young magpies are fledged (they leave the nest) after around 38 days. Some magpies will "swoop" people who come close to their nests during the breeding season (which should only last a few weeks each year). It is best to avoid areas where there are swooping magpies.

Habitat

Magpies are solely ground feeders and therefore prefer open grassed areas with trees available for roosting and nesting. Ideal habitat is found along creeks and roads, around farmland, and in urban parks and gardens.

Diet and feeding

Magpies feed mainly on invertebrates but will also eat frogs, lizards and grain. They will often be seen foraging on lawns, heads tilted to listen for invertebrates in the grass. When they detect a food item they will go running or bounding to it, stabbing their bill into the ground to catch it.

