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Adelaide



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Government of South Australia
Department for Environment
and Heritage

Fact Sheet 3

Australian magpies: what's in a name?

Animal names often refer to a feature of their appearance or behaviour, or a similarity with another animal. Australian magpies have been known by many names and their naming has revolved around these attributes.

Before European settlement of Australia there were over 250 Indigenous Australian languages and it is likely that each of these had a name for the magpie. For example, the Kurna people, who traditionally inhabited areas around Adelaide, call them “kurraka”. This name was probably derived from the song of the magpie.

Since European settlement the common name, “magpie” has been used because these birds have similar colouration to the European magpie, but they are not closely related. Another common name still used for the Australian magpie is the “piping shrike”. In fact, South Australia’s state badge includes a magpie that is described as a piping shrike. Other common names have included “piping roller” and “flute-bird”.

Scientists use a “binomial” system to name animals (and other forms of life). Under this system each species has a name with two words. The first word refers to the “genus” which may include a number of animals with similar characteristics. The second word refers to the “species” and is meant to be distinct for each species. These names are typically written in italics (or underlined when handwriting) and the genus name is capitalised.

The Australian magpie was first described scientifically in 1802 by John Latham. The species name “*tibicen*” is a Latin word that means “piper” or “flute player”, and it has been used to describe the birds’ delightful song. For some time the binomial name *Gymnorhina tibicen* has been used. This name determines that Australian magpies comprise their own genus and species. However, they are closely related to butcherbirds, and many authors believe they belong in the butcherbird genus, *Cracticus*, and thus they are now sometimes referred to as *Cracticus tibicen*.

The many names that have been used to describe Australian magpies can be confusing. Names have been chosen to describe the bird according to its most striking attributes (its colouration and its singing) or to group it with birds with characteristics that are similar. Clearly, there is more to the name than the name alone!



Photo: Michael Artis



Photo: Michaela Heinsen