

## Name:

Australian Magpie

## Genus:

*Gymnorhina tibicen*

## Description:

The Australian Magpie is among the most familiar of Australian birds. It is a medium sized songbird, and is not related to the Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica* which is part of the Crow family of Corvids. The Australian Magpie is well known for its beautiful vocalisations, and its species name derives from the Latin for “flute player”.

The Australian Magpie has a black body with white highlights. The nape of the neck, the shoulders, the rump and base of the tail are white with a black band across the end of the tail. It has rich light-brown eyes, a powerful grey bill with black edges, and strong black legs and feet to stride across open ground in search of food.

The sexes can be discerned by the intensity of the white patches, being bright with the male, and with a greyish tinge on the female.

There are plumage variations around Australia, with white-backed and black-backed sub-species. The white-backed have white running down between the wings, and while they, or hybrids, are sometimes seen in the Parklands, generally we have the black-backed variety.

## Distribution:

Australian Magpies can be found throughout Australia wherever there are trees in proximity to open spaces, generally avoiding bare deserts and dense forests. There is a sub-species found in southern New Guinea, and both white and black-backed variations have been introduced into New Zealand.

They are very territorial, with a pair, or larger group up to 24, holding a territory large enough to provide adequate feeding and nesting requirements. One breeding pair dominates the territory, while other pairs may nest in their own sections of it, and all protect the territory from other Australian Magpies or predatory intruders.

## Feeding:

While predominately feeding on insects, their larvae, worms and spiders, and sometimes small reptiles, frogs and even mice, they will also take grains, fruits and nuts. Many people will provide them with scraps in the garden, and the birds will regularly return to be fed, singing for their supper. While this can be a pleasant experience, it can often prove unhealthy for the birds if the

food is too rich in salt, fats or preservatives.

Unlike their relatives, the Butcherbirds and Currawongs which hop when on the ground, the Australian Magpie has evolved as a terrestrial hunter and can walk rapidly across the lawn, probing the ground with its bill, or tilting its head to listen for the sound of underground grubs.

The Australian Magpie breeding season usually begins from July to September, and is heralded by choruses of song by territorial groups declaring their territories from a high perch. Males sing and contest with each other for dominance and it is left to the female to build a basket shaped nest of sticks lined with grass, bark, and often human textile fibres. The nest is usually built in the outer canopy of a tall tree, but sometimes on metal towers or power poles.

The female lays three to five eggs and incubates them for about twenty days. The chicks hatch naked and blind and are cared for by the female for about four weeks while the male supplies the female with food. After fledging from the nest the young magpies will follow any adult in the group, begging for food, their calls a familiar sound in summer.

The young birds may stay with the adults for up to twelve months before being driven, sometimes severely, from the territory.

### In the Park:

Besides their reputation for song, the Australian Magpie has earned a bad reputation for aggressive attacks on passing walkers and cyclists. Contrary to popular belief, this is not regular behaviour among Australian Magpies, with only males carrying out attacks during nesting, and even then, only about one in ten males being involved. Although they are found throughout the parklands, "swooping" is not a common occurrence, and if it happens signs are posted warning visitors to be wary of the nesting birds.

