

Magpie

Gymnorhina tibicen

What does it look like?

This familiar large songbird is similar in size to a crow or a New Zealand pigeon. The white-backed form *tyrannica* is the largest of the sub-species. The male has a white hind-neck, mantle, rump and shoulder patches. The upper two-thirds of the tail and under-tail coverts are also white. The rest of the plumage is black, with a blue iridescence. The female is similar, but the mantle is grey, and the black parts of the plumage are less iridescent.

Both sexes have a blue-grey bill with a dark tip, and red eyes. The male takes several years to attain full adult plumage; after the second moult it resembles an adult female. Some white appears on the mantle after the third moult, and the remainder after the fourth moult. The juvenile is mottled grey on the under-surface.

The black-backed magpie is similar to the white-backed forms, but with a black mantle. The female can be identified by the presence of some grey on the lower hind-neck. The two subspecies interbreed, resulting in offspring with a varying amount of black on the mantle, ranging from a few feathers to a narrow band.

Why is it a problem?

Magpies have a complex social system in which they form territorial groups. Magpies defend their territory by singing, aggressive posturing and fighting.

They can be a considerable nuisance during the breeding season (Aug/Sept), swooping on and occasionally attacking people/cyclists who come too close to breeding territories.

Magpies may affect native birds by excluding and disturbing them from breeding territories. They may also prey on chicks and eggs to feed to their young. Magpie control may have some benefits to the native bird population under these circumstances but research in NZ suggest this is limited.

Control methods

Trapping

- Many traps are commercially available, including Larsen traps, the Arcane™ magpie triptrap, letterbox traps and adapted possum cage traps. These are all live capture traps that allow other birds to be released unharmed therefore traps need to be regularly checked.

Any person using a live capture trap must check the trap, or have a competent person to check the trap every day, within 12 hours after sunrise on each day the trap remains set.

Shooting

- Random shooting of magpies is unlikely to achieve any significant control of the local population. For effective shooting, use a magpie distress recording. Sound files of distress calls can easily be found online.
- Playing the recording of distressed magpies will attract magpies from up to one kilometre away. Use this method sparingly, as surviving birds quickly become 'gun shy' and wary of the distress call recording.
- Abide by the firearms code and be aware of the risks of shooting to your neighbours or animals etc.

Poisoning

- For control of large populations there is a narcotic poison alphachloralose. This product, when used in concentrations of 2.5 % or below, will anaesthetise birds rather than kill them. Comatose birds can then be collected and humanely killed. Non-target species can be revived by placing them in a warm dark place. Always follow instructions for use on the product label.



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Related links

NZ Birds Online <https://www.nzbirdsonline.org.nz/species/australian-magpie>

Management programme

Organisms of interest

Request info

<https://eservices.es.govt.nz/online-services/new/BiosecurityRFS/step/1?Subject=AnimalPests&Species=3>