

Focus on the Magpie

Magpies are better at finding nests than even our most experienced nest recorders, but sadly their interest is decidedly non-scientific! These intelligent and versatile birds can do very well in suburban areas where human activities provide many extra resources.

Most people find Magpies easy enough to identify, although Pied Wagtails have been reported to the BTO as “baby Magpies” in the past! Less commonly recognised is that they are actually crows, related to Jays and Jackdaws and sharing the characteristic intelligence and versatility of this family. They are very territorial, breeding pairs defending the area around their conspicuous domed nest vigorously against the surplus of juveniles produced each year. Magpies which fail to obtain a territory cannot breed, so whenever adult birds are killed their precious vacant territory is usually reoccupied quickly. The nest is very strong and lasts for several years but the birds usually build a new one each season so a productive territory often has three or four nests visible.

The population of Magpies has certainly increased significantly, by about threefold over the last 30 years and this has coincided with a decline in gamekeeping and traditional persecution of crows in the countryside. In my home area of Norfolk there are plenty of active gamekeepers and still very few Magpies, but generally the birds have become bolder and less wary of humans. This increase in confidence may well have enabled them to move into suburban areas, a habitat which is more or less Magpie heaven!

With their powerful bills and keen sight, scavenging Magpies are effective “dustmen” in the wild, but in towns and suburbs they can really clean up! Dog litter is a favourite snack, as are takeaway food leftovers and refuse left lying around in fragile plastic sacks. Cars leave countless thousands of slower-moving creatures dead on suburban roads every night, but rarely harm the alert and agile Magpies who are out at dawn busily feeding on squashed rats, frogs and hedgehogs in between the speeding traffic. Without this excellent food resource it is possible that many Magpies would starve at the end of winter. Scraps and bird food provided in gardens may also be important for winter survival in some areas although these are still shy birds, generally reluctant to feed close to houses. It's no wonder suburban Magpies make it through the winter in good condition, fit and ready to add the seasonal luxury of songbird eggs and nestlings to their wide repertoire.

Raiding nests comes naturally to Magpies who have been exploiting this resource for millions of years as a short-term boost during their own breeding season. When songbird habitat was rich and varied in the countryside, many broods well-hidden in bramble thickets and dense ancient hedgerows survived. A surplus of fledglings could then repopulate less favourable habitats such as gardens where predators will always be more successful among the thornless decorative shrubs and neatly-trimmed hedges.

A BTO research project, funded by the RSPB, recently examined our volunteer's data for Magpies in relation to populations of 23 other common birds on 100 study plots in rural habitats. Analysing the results of over 100,000 hours of volunteer fieldwork could not produce any correlation between increasing Magpies and songbird declines. Many suburban gardeners have observed more Magpies recently and understandably find this important result hard to believe despite the quality and reliability of the data collected by BTO

volunteers. But in fact it is very likely that changes in human activities are at the root of both the increase in Magpies and the coincidental declines in some smaller birds. **Chris Mead**



Magpie by Tommy Holden © BTO

Magpie

Fascinating Facts

Outlaws!

Contrary to misleading letters sometimes published in newspapers, Magpies are not fully protected by law. Under a 'general licence' which partially exempts them from the EU Birds Directive they can be destroyed by a landowner or other authorised person at any time of year if it can be shown that they are causing certain types of damage, including threatening other wild bird populations. Some control methods are prohibited and those used in the countryside (mainly Larsen traps and shooting) are not really suitable for gardens. Their nest can be tricky to break into. It is often armoured with enough mud to resist even a keeper's shotgun!

Colourful Characters

Appearing simply black and white at a distance, the plumage of the Magpie is strikingly beautiful at close quarters with iridescent sheens of blue, purple and an extraordinary green in the tail. Unusual plumages are rare but regularly noticed by keen observers. Garden BirdWatch participant Mrs Adamson of Dorset kindly rang to report a brown and white Magpie visiting her garden. This is one of the more frequent aberrations, but white albinos also turn up occasionally.

Parliamentary Privilege

For centuries people have been intrigued by the complex behavioural repertoire of the Magpie and a rich folklore has arisen, including traditional poems such as 'One for sorrow, two for joy ...'. Particularly striking are the 'Magpie Parliaments' which are initiated by non-breeding birds in late winter. About one third of breeding territories are acquired in these argumentative gatherings, each involving about nine birds on average. The privilege of initiating a 'parliament' seems reserved for birds who have already attained high status within the non-breeding flock which itself has a sophisticated social structure.