



Many superstitions have surrounded magpies through history. They were often regarded as a sign of evil and an ill omen. Today, this pied bird has friends and enemies, with opinions as polarised as ever.

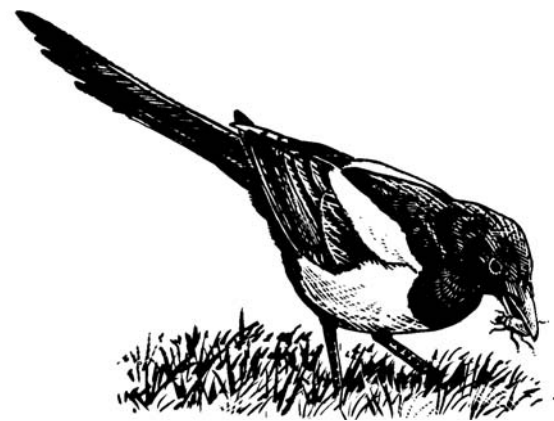
Magpies are highly intelligent and very adaptable. They are omnivorous, and will nest in most places where there are trees, large shrubs, or even artificial structures such as pylons. Breeding magpies hold a territory all year round. Because nest sites are limited, and because most magpies first breed in their second year, between 25% and 60% of magpies in an area do not breed. These non-breeding birds often form flocks. Magpies build large, domed nests in thorny bushes or high up in tall trees. The female lays a clutch of six eggs in April, and incubates them for 18 to 19 days; the male feeds her on the nest. Since incubation starts in the middle of the laying period, the earliest eggs hatch first. Both parents feed the young. If the food supply is poor, the stronger, older nestlings will get all of it. This helps to ensure that at least some of them survive. They fledge when four weeks old, and are fed by the parents for a further four weeks.

The young birds stay in the parents' territory until September or October, when they form loose flocks, feeding and roosting together. During the winter, flocks may join to form large winter roosts. Some breeding birds may also join these roosts.

The months following fledging are a dangerous time for young magpies, with around a half failing to make it through the first year. A typical lifespan for those that survive to breed is around five years. Some live much longer than this, with the oldest recorded being over 21 years old.

Young magpies

Fledgling magpies should always be left with their parents. Hand-reared birds become very tame and, when released back into the wild, they often seek human company. Some people, especially children and the elderly, may be seriously frightened by a magpie suddenly landing on their head or shoulder. Trying to drive off the bird will cause it to 'grab', so the person believes that the bird is attacking. Such 'dangerous' birds may then have to be killed.



Feeding

A magpie's bill is strong with a sharp cutting edge, ideal tool for cutting flesh, digging up invertebrates, or picking fruit. Their main diet in summer is grassland invertebrates, such as beetles, flies, caterpillars, spiders, worms and leatherjackets. In winter, they eat more plant material, such as wild fruits, berries and grains, and household scraps and food scavenged from bird tables or chicken runs, petfood etc. They will eat carrion at all times and catch small mammals and birds. When food is abundant, magpies hoard the surplus for later use in caches spread around their territory.

Magpies will take eggs and young of other birds during the breeding season. Estimates vary, but it is thought that these comprise only around 10% of the summer diet of urban and suburban magpies. Studies of urban magpies in Manchester showed a summer diet mostly of invertebrates with some field voles and house sparrows.

Population changes

Magpies used to be common in Britain until mid-19th century, favoured by farmers because they eat harmful insects and rodents. The following decades of heavy persecution by gamekeepers caused their numbers to plummet until the World War II, after which they started to recover. Urban and suburban magpies increased much faster than rural populations. In towns they are not persecuted, there is more food available, and they can breed earlier because towns are warmer than the surrounding countryside.

Magpie populations are limited by availability of nesting territories and high mortality of young birds. The relatively stable population since 1990 suggests that magpies have reached an ecological equilibrium.

Do magpies have an effect on songbirds?

Most British members of the crow family (including magpies) will take eggs and nestlings. This can be upsetting to witness but it is completely natural. However, some people are concerned that there may be a long-term effect on songbird populations.

Many of the UK's commonest songbirds have declined since the 1970s, at a time when populations of magpies increased. The RSPB commissioned the British Trust for Ornithology to analyse its 35 years of bird monitoring records to discover whether magpies could be to blame for the decline. The study found that songbird numbers were no different in places where there were many magpies from where there were few. It found no evidence to support claims that increased numbers of magpies have caused declines in songbirds.

The RSPB has undertaken intensive research to find out why songbirds are in trouble. We discovered that the loss of food and habitats caused by intensive farming have played a major role in songbird declines. The change from spring to autumn sowing and the increase in the use of agricultural chemicals have reduced the amount of insects and weed seeds available for songbirds to eat. These and other habitat changes, including the removal of hedgerows which are used for nesting, roosting and feeding sites by some birds, have been major reasons for the severe declines in many of our farmland species.

Songbirds need dense vegetation to nest in, to help protect their eggs and young from predators. This is not usually available in suburban gardens. You can help the birds in your garden by planting climbers such as ivy and honeysuckle, and dense shrubs such as hawthorn.

The legal status of magpies

Magpies, like all other species, are protected under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 and the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. This makes it illegal to intentionally or, in Scotland, recklessly take, injure or kill a magpie, or to take, damage or destroy an active nest or its contents. In Northern Ireland, it is illegal to disturb birds at an active nest.

However, the law recognises that in some circumstances control may be necessary. Killing can only be done if specific conditions are met, and only where non-lethal methods of control are ineffective or impractical. The UK Governments issue annually general licences (for which it is not necessary to apply individually) under the Wildlife and Countryside Act and the Wildlife Order, some of which allow magpies to be killed or taken by 'authorised persons', using permitted methods, for the purposes of:

- preventing serious damage to agricultural crops or livestock
- preserving public health
- conserving wild birds
- preserving air safety.

An 'authorised person' is a landowner or occupier, or someone acting with the landowner's or occupier's permission. Since general licences are reviewed annually and can be withdrawn or altered at any time, it is recommended that anyone wanting to exercise the licence should first check details on the relevant government department website or contact them for up to date legal advice and the exact terms of the licence.

Legal control methods involve trapping or shooting. Larsen trap, a type of cage trap, is designed to catch birds alive and unharmed. It can be baited with food, or with a live decoy magpie, provided all welfare regulations are met. In Scotland, a cage trap must have an identifying tag obtainable from the police Wildlife Crime Officer. If you suspect that a trap has been set illegally to catch birds of prey, please report

this to your local WCO. Gun laws prevent shooting of magpies close to public roads and houses.

The RSPB is not opposed to legal, site-specific control of magpies, nor to the legal use of Larsen or other cage traps, as long as the general licence conditions are strictly adhered to. The RSPB opposes illegal magpie control, including poisoning, which has a high risk of accidentally poisoning other birds, including rare birds of prey.

Many people wish to control magpies in gardens because they take eggs and chicks of other birds. Since research indicates that magpies do not pose a conservation problem to garden birds, the use of general licence in this context is at best debateable. It must be remembered that if challenged, anyone killing magpies in their garden may have to prove to a court of law that they had acted lawfully. This may be difficult given the lack of scientific evidence that magpies affect the conservation of garden bird species.

The RSPB speaks for all wildlife in the UK - big or small, predator or the eaten. If you want to join us in celebration of the variety of wildlife in our country, you can find out more on www.rspb.org.uk

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The RSPB speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing - help us keep it that way. We belong to BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654

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INFORMATION

Magpies - menace or misunderstood?



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