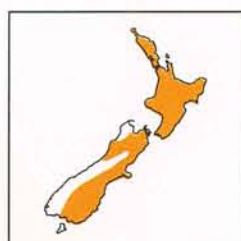


Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g. crows). They show great diversity of form, behaviour and breeding biology.

**AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE** *Gymnorhina tibicen* **Abundant Australian introduction**

41 cm, 350 g. Large black and white bird with pale blue black-tipped bill. White-backed form has hind neck and back white in male, finely barred grey in female. Black-backed form (mostly in Hawke's Bay), has black back; hind neck white in male, finely barred grey in female. Juvenile like female, but underparts brownish grey and bill dark. Hybrids have variable black on back. Flight direct, with pointed wings and rapid shallow wingbeats. Feeds on the ground, sometimes in loose flocks. Song distinctive flute-like carolling, especially at dawn and dusk, rendered 'quardle oodle arde wardle doodle'. **Habitat:** Open farmland with tall shelterbelts and scattered trees or forest, parks and gardens. **Breeding:** Jul-Dec. [Sp 326]



**BELL MAGPIES**

**Cracticidae**

10 species in Australasia; 1 introduced to New Zealand.

large, powerful, straight bills. They are omnivorous and feed mainly on the ground in open or lightly wooded country. They have loud, often tuneful calls.

Medium-to-large crow-like songbirds. They are mostly black, grey and white, and have

**326. AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE** *Gymnorhina tibicen* **Plate 73**

**Size:** 41 cm, 350 g  
**Geographical variation:** Two subspecies were brought to New Zealand: the White-backed Magpie *hypoleuca* of southeastern Australia and Tasmania, and the Black-backed Magpie *tibicen* of northern Australia and New Guinea. The two subspecies interbreed where they meet in Australia. In New Zealand, they also interbreed, but the White-backed Magpie clearly predominates except in Hawke's Bay and in North Canterbury, where up to 95% of birds are of the Black-backed form.

territorial flocks of up to 80 birds, mainly yearlings and subadults. In each defended territory, there is normally only one breeding pair, but sometimes two females have separate nests within the territory, each attended by a different male. The breeding birds do not receive help at the nest from the other birds in the territory, and breeding success of groups is no better than for pairs. Nest-building begins in June. The nest is a platform of twigs with a cup lined with small twigs, leaves, grass and wool. It is usually high in tall trees such as pines, macrocarpas or eucalypts, but sometimes on powerpoles and in low hedges if tall trees are absent. Laying is in July–November; later nests are mostly replacement clutches but some are true second clutches.

**Distribution:** Natural range is Australia and southern New Guinea. Over 1000 Magpies were introduced into New Zealand by Acclimatisation Societies in 1864–74, with the main releases being on Kawau Island and in Hawke's Bay, Wellington, Canterbury and Otago. The Otago liberation failed, but the others were successful, and Magpies spread slowly so that by 1945 there were three discrete populations: from the Bay of Islands to South Auckland, the southern North Island, and the eastern South Island from Kaikoura to near Dunedin. The spread has continued, and Magpies are now in open pasture, forest patches and suburban areas throughout the North Island and on suitable offshore islands, and through the eastern South Island from Blenheim to Southland, and on the West Coast around Hokitika, the Grey and Inangahua Valleys. Magpies are scarce but increasing in inland Marlborough, Nelson, Buller and South Westland.

They lay 2–3–4–5 pale bluish-green eggs (39 x 28 mm) with olive blotches. The female alone incubates for 20–21 days. Chicks are fed by both parents and fledge at c. 28 days old. A few females breed at 1 year old, but most Magpies are at least 3 years old when they start breeding. In the Manawatu, survivorship of adults averaged 85%, giving a life expectancy of 6 years. In Australia, the oldest banded Magpie lived 19+ years.

**Population:** Locally common in hill country and arable farmland with shelterbelts of pines, macrocarpas or gums.

**Behaviour:** Many Magpies are territorial all year, some in pairs but others in groups of related or unrelated birds. During the breeding season, some individuals become fiercely territorial and attack people and other animals approaching the nest. Many yearlings and some subadults remain in non-territorial flocks throughout the year, and, although sometimes termed 'nomadic', these flocks are usually found in the same area year after year. The territorial song is a beautiful, flute-like carolling, described by the poet Denis Glover as 'quardle oodle arde wardle doodle', and is most often heard in the early morning and

at dusk when birds are going to roost.  
**Feeding:** Diet is mainly invertebrates, supplemented with some seeds and occasional vertebrates and carrion. Magpies were introduced to New Zealand to control pasture pests and were protected until 1951. They eat many harmful pests including grass grubs, weevils, porina and army worm caterpillars, but probably do not keep these pests under control. They also eat worms, spiders, ants, flies, crickets and snails. Plant material

includes seeds and grain. Occasional small birds, eggs, chicks, lizards, mice and sick or dead sheep and lambs are also eaten. Magpies usually feed in open pasture or on ploughed paddocks, and peck prey from the surface, although they can probe quite deeply.

**Reading:** McCaskill, L.W. 1945. *Notornis* 1: 86–104. Veltman, C.J. 1989. *Ibis* 131: 601–608. Veltman, C.J. & Hickson, R.E. 1989. *Aust J Ecol* 14: 319–326.