

## Book Review

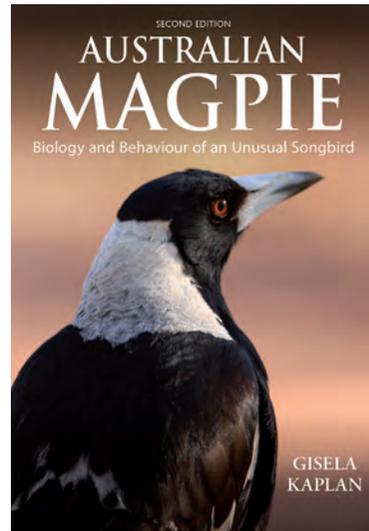
# Australian Magpie: biology and behaviour of an unusual songbird Second edition

**GISELA KAPLAN, 2019**

CSIRO Publishing, Clayton South, Vic. \$45

Paperback, 280 pages

Diagrams and photographs



Kaplan draws attention to the fact that the Australian Magpie, *Gymnorhina tibicen* enjoys the status of a culturally important icon in her introduction. A significant number of people form strong personal attachments to Magpies, given that the Magpie life span is 25-30 years, which is longer than most domestic pets. This second edition, 15 years after the first, refers to research that details birds are a good deal more clever than was at first thought and Magpies are eminently suited for comparative work on the evolution of language and cognition.

Chapter 1, 'Origins' describes the avian presence in Australia as evidenced by 105 million-year-old fossilised footprints and feathers. Claims that songbirds originated in Australia are briefly covered. Research has also demonstrated that the Magpie song features in Aboriginal Dreaming, and that they are classified under a superfamily. Clarity of classification is aided with diagrammatical explanation. Remarkably Australian Magpies are grouped with a vast diversity of shrike-like songbirds widespread in Africa.

The relatedness of the Magpie to other birds is supported with DNA findings. Magpies occur almost right across Australia and because of their size and colour, are highly visible. Taxonomic

discussions differ on its genus and relatedness with descriptions of plumage patterns. Territorial groups and size have been studied extensively along with social behaviour, with a possible link to food resources.

Anatomy details such as skin, feathers, skeleton, bill and claws are discussed, and clear diagrammatical detail and photographs support the discussion.

Kaplan gives interesting commentary on the capacity and functionality of a small brain and the ability of vocal learning: 'Magpies have large brains relative to body size. Both female and male Magpies sing.'

There is the suggested hypothesis that bird behaviour may be on a par with primates in relation to cognitive capacities.

Research is included on the visual and auditory sensory abilities of the Magpie as extractive foragers particularly on the scarab larvae, as well as caching, and food sources.

Explanation is given of 'Managing a territory' and the importance of suitable territory for Magpies to breed directly relates to Magpie groups' social

composition. Breeding is also impacted by the low number of Magpies that reproduce and the survival rate of their offspring.

Chapter 8, 'Caring for the young' well documents this cycle, including Australia-wide data on dispersal.

The social life of the Magpie explains the need of this bird for social connections, even if that is with humans, and the importance of 'Warbling' to both males and females. 'Play behaviour' and 'friction' explain the commonly seen Magpie behaviours.

Diagrams and sonograms support the explanation of song production and vocal development, whilst communication can be vocal, carolling or duetting, or body posture display.

Chapter 12, 'Magpies and humans' gives statistics on Magpie attacks and evidence that Magpies recognise faces and individuals, and whether they were nice, bad or dangerous.

Numerous coloured photographs of adult and juvenile Magpies conclude this informative, interesting research on a bird that is recognisable by everyone, along with 33 pages of references.

**Kate Buckley**