

Order Passeriformes, Family Laniidae,
Genus *Gymnorhina*.

Gymnorhina hypoleuca leuconota.—The White-backed Magpie.

Upper Surface—Head, black; back, white; upper tail coverts, white.

Under Surface—From chin to vent, black; vent, white; under tail coverts, white; thighs, black, with more or less white upon the inner sides.

Wing—Spurious wing—outer feather, black; inner feathers, black, with a white base to the outer webbs; primaries, black; secondaries, black; scapularies, black. Major primary coverts—Outer webbs, black; inner webbs, white, tips, black. Secondary coverts, white, the outer ones tipped with black; rest of the wing coverts, white.

Tail—Outer webbs of two outer feathers, black; inner webbs, white; bases of the other feathers, white; the terminal third of all, black; quills, black.

Bill—Bluish white at base, black at tip.

Legs and Feet—Black.

Iris—Reddish brown.

The female resembles the male except that the back is light grey, and the average length of the bill is less.

The young have the back dark mottled grey, and the feather of the under surface and thighs margined with brown. The bill is black, and the irides dull black.

Measurements:—

Total length	37.00 c.m.
Wing	26.50 c.m.
Tail	15.50 c.m.
Tarsus	5.65 c.m.
Bill	5.60 c.m.

In old birds the notch near the point of the upper mandible becomes deeper, and the tip has a tendency to hook over the lower mandible.

Distribution—All the southern portions of South Australia and Victoria wherever there is a cleared or open country. They never frequent thick scrub. Up to about 150 miles north of Adelaide it is the only species, but at about this point a few individuals of *G. tibicen intermissa* begin to appear. At Port Augusta the two species are found in about equal numbers. At Mount Gunson, on the west side of Lake Torrens, only the black-backed birds occur, and at Kallioota, on the east side of the lake, there are only white backs. In the Gawler Ranges white backs are the only species.

Food—All their food is taken on the ground. It consists of insects, spiders, worms, seeds, frogs, mice, small reptiles, young birds, soft fruit, and any small birds it can catch. It may often be seen in hot pursuit of small birds, but rarely, if ever, catches one. In captivity they will eat cooked or raw meat, bread, almond kernels, grass, and other plants. They are also fond of fat or butter. At daybreak they fly from their roosting trees to a neighbouring field, where they turn over flat stones, pieces of bark or dung, in search of insects. They seem to detect the whereabouts of worms by their sense of hearing when they dig into the ground with their sharp beaks, and draw the worm out whole. It is always placed on the ground and inspected before being eaten. They remain in the field fairly late in search of nocturnal insects which come from their

hiding places with the dusk. Lizards, mice, and large beetles are always hammered on the ground or on a stone before being swallowed. When searching for food on the ground they always walk unless they are in a hurry, when they hop. They also give two or three short hops before rising in flight.

Flight—The flight is rather slow, but straight and powerful, with a strong, even, fairly fast wing movement, the swish of the wings can be heard for a considerable distance. When alighting on the ground they sail 20 or 30 yards close to the ground, usually taking a sharp turn as they settle. When alighting on a tree they fly along three or four feet below the proposed perch, sailing upward till they practically stop before settling.

Nest—This is usually placed in a fork near the top of a tree (40 to 60 feet from the ground), but in treeless country, they will build in bushes. A nest at St. Kilda was only about three feet from the ground in the top of a boxthorn bush. The nest is built outwardly of small dry twigs, and is lined with strips of bark and grasses, with a final lining of wool, cow hair, fur, or other soft material; near homesteads scraps of fencing wire are often used in the foundation. About the end of May the old birds drive off the last season's young birds, and repair to the vicinity of last year's nests, each pair having a little territory of its own, which it never leaves, and drives all others from. The first pairs begin building about the end of June, and by the beginning of August they are all building. The eggs are three to five in number, the usual clutch being four; they vary very much in colour and disposition of marking. A common type has a ground colour of light bluish green, spotted and streaked with bright red brown, but some clutches are found to be light brown, spotted with darker brown; others again have a pale blue ground, spotted with black, almost like an English thrush's egg; some again are streaked all over with fine hairlike lines, but the eggs of any individual bird do not vary from year to year. Average measurement of 26 eggs:—4.07 c.m. x 2.90 c.m.

Largest egg, 4.35 c.m. x 3.05 c.m.

Smallest egg, 3.70 c.m. x 2.70 c.m.

Incubation occupies about three weeks, and the young leave the nest about three weeks later, returning to it for a week or so to sleep, the mother sitting on them, after which they perch on the sides of the nest for a week or two before

taking to roosting on the branches. If the pair are successful in rearing the first brood they do not rear a second, but if the young are taken they lay again in the same nest, or if the old nest is destroyed they build another near by, often in the same spot.

The young remain with the parents, being fed by them for several months, during which time they continue to make the baby cry; after this they live together, forming a small company, till April or May, when they are driven off by the old birds about to make preparation for the following nesting. As soon as the young birds are driven away they flock; some pick up mates and breed, but most of them remain in the flock, not breeding till the second year.

A tame pair in the Children's Hospital garden built a nest on a garden seat in August, 1911. The nest was built of pepper tree twigs, a piece of wire clothes line, several pieces of fine iron wire, and some string; it was lined with hair and wooly material, apparently from carpet sweepings. The first egg was laid on September 1, the second on September 3, the third on September 4. The female began to sit as soon as the first egg was laid, and did practically all the brooding; she was fed on the nest by the male. The first egg was hatched on September 21, and the other two upon the two following days, both birds fed the young and cleaned the nest by swallowing the droppings. In a quite wild state they do not defend the nest from men, but attack fiercely any other birds which come near the nesting tree, even wedge-tailed, and whistling eagles are driven off. When nesting near settlements they attack anyone who comes near them, and have been known to inflict serious scalp wounds.

When the intruder has been driven off they fly to a tree and pour forth a song to proclaim their victory.

Song—A gurgling flute-like note, which is decidedly musical. In the early spring they often begin shortly after midnight, continuing at intervals till morning; they also sing in the evening, but not frequently during the day. They also make a loud challenge or alarm call.

Magpies are very playful. Two may often be seen lying on the ground on their sides, wrestling with their claws, but if one of them gets hurt the game develops into a fight, each trying to grasp the other across the bill with his claws, while he punishes with his powerful beak, accompanied by the loud challenge cry.

Magpies are very commonly pinioned, and kept in captivity in gardens, making very useful, though mischievous, pets. They seldom get really tame and often become very vicious, and will always attack a stranger. When planting bulbs or seedlings the tame magpie is always carefully watching proceedings, and as soon as the back is turned they are all speedily uprooted.

They get very expert at catching in their beaks worms, small stones, or grubs when thrown to them. If taken young they can be taught to whistle and talk, but the enunciation is never very distinct. In recent years they have greatly increased in numbers, owing to more land being cleared for the plough, and to their being totally protected. Several pairs have nested in the Park Lands surrounding Adelaide.
