

MAGPIES ATTACKING BLACKBIRDS

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During April and May 1974 and 1975, I have on several occasions seen White-backed Magpies *Gymnorhina tibicen* chasing Blackbirds *Turdus merula*, flying over my garden at Beaumont, near Adelaide. Each chase lasted only a few seconds, with the blackbird escaping by dropping to the ground or diving into hedges, often amidst a cloud of its feathers. During the chases the magpie (usually a male) pecked at the tail, back or head of the blackbird, often making contact. In May 1975, I watched a magpie dive on a blackbird flying above the vegetation, hit it on the back of the head and kill it. The magpie showed no further interest, and returned to the pine tree whence it came. The blackbird was an immature male (black feathers, but brown and orange bill, instead of the complete orange bill of adults) and had a fractured skull. J. B. Paton and I often find dead blackbirds in our garden, several of these have had fractured skulls with holes approximately one cm in diameter, almost matching the bill of a magpie. The magpie did not collect its victim, suggesting that it was not interested in the bird for food.

Blackbirds and magpies do forage in similar places, and this aggression could arise over competition for food. However blackbirds feeding on our lawns and garden were not chased. Moreover, only blackbirds flying over the garden were attacked.

The season of these chases corresponds to the period (March to May) when immature blackbirds disperse (pers. obs.). Many fly high over our garden, and we also catch many new immatures. Most of the chases do not correspond to the breeding season of magpies, when magpies are much more aggressive, and occur a little

earlier than the time when magpies may drive off their young of the previous year, from July onwards (Carrick 1963). However this inter-specific aggression may be related to this latter behaviour, and recent observations of a magpie chasing a blackbird in August 1976 at Monash University support this hypothesis.

The chases do not only involve Blackbirds, as I have seen Magpies chase Starlings *Stúrna vulgaris*, Grey Shrike-Thrushes *Colluricincla harmonica*, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes *Coracina novaehollandiae* and Goldfinches *Chloris chloris* elsewhere in South Australia and Victoria, usually between March and May. Hanna (1975) reports magpies chasing pipits, though he gives no dates.

REFERENCES

- Carrick, R. 1963. Ecological significance of territory in the Australian Magpie, *Gymnorhina tibicen*. Proc. XIII Intern. Ornithol. Congr. : 740-753.
 Hanna 1975 in Bird Observer, December, 1975 issue.
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