

MAGPIE ALERT: LEARNING TO LIVE WITH A WILD NEIGHBOUR by Darryl Jones. University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2002, paperback, 179 pp., 8 pp. colour illustrations 240 mm x 176 mm, \$29.95 r.r.p.

We all consider ourselves minor authorities on magpie attacks on people, for few of us manage to avoid them for very long, but when Darryl Jones was called on to advise on this problem, he found very little mention of it among the numerous publications on the Australian Magpie.

Darryl now heads a Suburban Wildlife Research Group at Griffith University, Brisbane, to study and advise on such matters. He recommends watching a magpie-attack site for some time, to see just what the bird is doing and to whom. By this method, he has learned that birds differ in their targets and intensities of attack. Thus some prefer pedestrians, some seek cyclists and others menace mail deliverers. Attacks range from swooping, with or without pecking, to rare sustained assaults on the face, especially the eyes. Particular persons can be recognised and given special treatment, even several years after first contact.

Why certain magpies turn 'nasty' is still not fully understood, though Darryl and his researchers have done much work to clarify the matter. Attacks only happen when there are young in the nest or just out of it, they intensify over this period, and attackers are usually male. It isn't hard to teach a magpie that you are a special threat to its young, but this does not explain why most victims are attacked.

When attacks happen repeatedly, those affected often demand action to remove or kill the bird, but many people disagree with such actions. The book reports a survey of people in three groups, a 'conflict group' of those directly affected, a

'wildlife group' from nature-oriented associations, and a 'random group' with no particular leaning. Those in the conflict group more often wanted something done other than the posting of warning signs. Those in the wildlife group were much like those in the random group, except that they less often favoured relocation of the culprit; perhaps better understanding the ideas of territory occupation.

Many options for control of the problem are discussed, with reference to experiments on management techniques and with deference to wildlife protection laws, to the children who cannot be expected to take advice from signs, and to the differing opinions of people most of whom seem to like magpies generally. Methods include avoiding the attack site, using dress or behaviour to discourage an attack, feeding the bird, capturing and relocating the bird, and killing it with shotgun or drugs. Much is still to be learned.

The book is illustrated with eight pages of colour plates, some black and white photographs of typical attack-site warning signs, and a pencil sketch of the bird at the start of each chapter. It is unfortunate that the first of the sketches shows the bird's primaries in such a position that it appears to have a crest that a cockatoo or hoopoe might envy. Extensive footnotes and references to research papers are given. The copy examined was misprinted with only half of its index, which stopped ominously in the middle of 'magpie management'.

This book is recommended for those who are curious about an all-too-familiar aspect of bird behaviour, who need practical suggestions for a spring walk in the park, who want a better view of the deeper issues involved and who would add new knowledge to the subject. A copy is available in the SAOA library.

BOB WHATMOUGH