

An unusual interaction with Australian Magpies

ANDREW ROBERTSON

In September 2010, while living on Sheoak Road adjacent to Belair National Park, I had a very unusual interaction with two Australian Magpies, *Cracticus tibicen*. An almost tame family of magpies lived in the area and fed on food scraps which we provided in our back garden. I would regularly see them on my 300 m walk to and from Belair Railway Station from which I commuted to school. I often encountered the magpies on the walk and regularly fed them with soya chips I carried as a snack. Over the course of a few weeks I fed the magpies when I encountered them and this made them even tamer so that they approached whenever they saw me. I came to recognise an adult male who often approached me to be fed and would tolerate my hands being within a few centimetres of its bill, before looking directly into my eyes and backing away.

On Monday 13 September 2010 while walking back from the railway station, the familiar male saw me and approached. An immature bird, with dark grey on its back, flew over squawking to join the mature male. The mature bird picked up a soya chip from the pile I had placed on the ground and passed it to the younger bird, which ate the tit-bit. As the adult passed each piece from the pile to the younger bird, it kept a more watchful eye on me than usual, but did not eat anything itself. Once the soya chips were finished both magpies left.

On Wednesday 15 September 2010 I was running late for school, and noticed the familiar male catching worms on the other side of the road under a row of pine trees. He saw me, walked to the edge of the road, stopped, looked both ways, and then flew across to me as I got

the soya chips out of my schoolbag. I placed a handful of chips on the ground and he landed a metre or so away from me. I then noticed he had a worm in his bill, and as I was standing up, ready to continue my walk to catch my train, he walked up to me and dropped the worm about 20 cm from my foot, looked at me for a moment, and then began to feed on the soya chips. It seemed quite clear to me that he had just offered me the worm, and to test this I picked it up and let the bird see I had taken it. He continued feeding without any noticeable change in behaviour. I had to leave to get to school, so I just put the worm down with the soya chips, and left him still feeding while I hurried to my train (Editorial note: in the interest of science we feel the observer should have eaten the worm to test whether the magpie would have offered another gift).

I believe this is a very unusual observation of magpie behaviour in which the mature male appeared to be trading its worm for my soya chips. Of course it might simply be my misinterpretation of the magpie just temporarily putting down the worm while he ate the soya chips. However, this seems unlikely because he approached me more closely than usual and seemed unperturbed by my picking up the worm even though he could clearly see it. It is also very likely that he could have rapidly

swallowed the worm as I had often seen before with other foods. It appeared he deliberately placed the worm near my foot and then approached the soya chips. No behaviour of this type has been recorded in the monograph on magpies (Kaplan 2004) nor any other source (Higgins, Peter and Cowling 2006).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to my father, Jeremy Robertson, for discussion and advice on writing this bird note.

REFERENCES

- Higgins, P. J., Peter J.M. and Cowling, S. J. 2006. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Volume 7: Boatbills to Starlings*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Kaplan, G. 2004. *Biology and Behaviour of an Unusual Songbird: Australian Magpie*. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.

Andrew Robertson
19 Jerilderie Drive
Happy Valley, South Australia 5159
fluffeater@hotmail.com