

Australian Magpies attacking the missed prey of a Peregrine Falcon

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At 1625 on Sunday 12 June 2011, my daughter and I were emerging from the back of the Noarlunga Arts Centre when a female Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*, flew past within 4 m of my left side and 2-2.5 m above the ground. It flew over a group of five Australian Magpies, *Cracticus tibicen*, foraging on the ground about 8 m in front of us. The Peregrine slightly dipped its flight so that it was about 1.5 m above the magpies and made them scatter and run for a bed of low rose bushes. The Peregrine continued its low flight for another 40 m and then rose to about 5 m above the ground and made a sharp bank to return towards the magpies. This return was presumably because a Spotted Turtle-dove, *Streptopelia chinensis*, was flying over the magpies. After banking the Peregrine made two rapid wing beats and sped directly towards the dove some 20 m in front of it. Just before the Peregrine reached it the dove dropped straight down into the rose bushes; we could hear it tearing through the thorns and it hit the ground with a thump and cloud of feathers. It was untouched by the Peregrine, which swerved away and rapidly disappeared from view.

Intriguingly, the group of magpies instantly turned on the dove, working as a coordinated group to attack it in the rose bushes. They surrounded the dove and were plunging right into the roses and pecking hard at the dove so that there were more flying feathers and three of the magpies had feathers in their bills. The dove ran out of the roses and then circled back into them attempting to gain cover in the thickest roses with the magpies in hot pursuit.

The group of magpies consisted of an adult and four juveniles and the adult was very active in attacking the dove with the young magpies in close attendance. They succeeded in driving the dove out of the roses once again and all were pecking it hard as it ran along the ground to another flowerbed where it climbed into the midst of a thick shrub. The magpies again surrounded this shrub and the adult and one the juveniles then entered the shrub and made sustained attacks on the cowering dove.

We were within 1-2 m and could clearly see all the details of these final stages of the attack. We unfortunately had to leave but I have no doubt that the magpies proceeded to kill the dove. I returned the next day and found many more feathers, some with attached skin, which appears to confirm the dove was killed and consumed.

Australian Magpies are known to feed on the eggs and fledglings of other birds, but this is for a short time of the year and I can find no record of predation of so large a bird as a Spotted Turtle-dove. There are interesting observations of magpies killing and eating House Sparrows, *Passer domesticus*, (Barr 1986). Similarly, a Pied Currawong, *Strepera graculina*, that killed a Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*, was driven from its prey by a magpie which then consumed the injured starling (Butterfield 1988). Perhaps magpies only attack larger birds when they are already injured? These observations may lend weight to the recent decision to recognize Australian Magpies as butcherbirds in the genus *Cracticus*.

REFERENCES

- Barr, J. 1986. Magpie Attack on Sparrow. *Canberra Bird Notes* 11: 133.

Butterfield, M. A. 1988. Predation of small birds by non-raptors. *Canberra Bird Notes* 13: 34.

Magpies seen apparently attacking Crested Pigeon and plucking a dead one. Birds of Australia website www.mdahlem.net/birds/22/aumagpie.php.

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