

## Tree and Bird Day Competition, 1924.

The following essay, written by Kenneth Giles, Angas Plains, was awarded the first prize in the Schools Annual Competition for the Cup presented by the South Australian Ornithological Association:—

### THE MURRAY MAGPIE.

Getting up in the early morn, as we do on a farm, I am often struck with a chorus of musical birds, and, listening, I hear the "Minah," the "Butcher-Bird," the "Magpie," and the "Peewit, qualk, peewit, qualk, peewit, qualk," of the Murray Magpie.

Going down to the swamp I see this bird, which is about 10 inches long and 7 inches high. I notice too, when it was singing that after every "qualk" it would put out its wings. This enabled me to get the wings' measurement, which were about 12 inches from tip of one wing to the tip of other. I notice that the male had a black breast, and underneath it is pure white. The wings are black with a band of white running nearly across the wing down near the end. The black continues from the breast up over the head and down to where the tail comes out, then white goes down to about half of the tail, and the rest black with white at the tip of tail feathers. There is white above and below the eyes and a strip of black running through the white, and on this strip are the soft kind-looking eyes. The female is similar, only it has more white about the head. Their legs are blackish-brown and very thin, and reminded me of stilts. Their bill is a brownish colour and tipped with black.

It is a very graceful bird, and its glossy black-and-white feathers cover one of the slenderest of bodies; but while flying their tails are spread out, their bodies appear heavy to carry, thus making their flight look heavy and clumsy, a great contrast to when they are on land.

Walking along the swamp one day, I noticed a male Murray Magpie fly down, and with a "Qualk, qualk, qualk," up came his mate, and they began to find their breakfast. First of all

they waited a little while, and when they saw a little worm come to the top of the ground, would run up, grab hold of it and pull it out of its hole, hit it on the ground until dead and swallow it down whole. They then wait again, and when they see another will do the same thing as before, but the one that did not get any would run up to its mate and sing out very shrillily "Peewee!" but the one with the worm does not give away any, but runs on ahead and waits again. Often they see insects flying across the water, and at once they fly towards them and catch some. They also catch snails, so I have heard, with "fluke" on them. This "fluke" gets on the weeds, and sheep eating the weeds, it penetrates through into their liver and kills them, proving the Murray Magpie is of great use to farmers.

One day in September I went to see if I could find the Murray Magpie's nest. I had not gone far before I heard a Fantail start chattering. On looking up where the noise came from, to my great surprise, saw on a dry limb a Murray Magpie's nest, half-finished. So I climbed up to it. While up there the Fantail darted and chattered at me and also seemed to sing out loudly as if calling for help. After a while back came the Murray Magpies and also began to dart at me. I then hid in a hollow which had been burnt out, large enough for me to get in. Waiting awhile the Murray Magpies flew off again to the river and in two or three minutes' time back they came again, one with mud in its beak and the other with a dry piece of rush which they built in with the wet mud and flew off once more. A week later I saw the nest was finished and lined with feathers. It was about 6 inches in diameter and 3 inches deep. Soon the nest contained four eggs, which had pink shells with reddish-brown spots on them, especially at the round ends, with light-blue spots just showing under the shell. They are about  $1\frac{1}{4}$  inches long and an inch in diameter.

Two weeks after I noticed the Murray Magpies were very busy flying to and fro from the nest, and on going down to the nest saw four hairy little babies waving their heads about for food.

The Murray Magpie is intelligent and usually a quiet bird, but one day a stray goat was wandering through a paddock of ours. I heard the Murray Magpie call out "Peewit! Peewit!" A lot of Minahs and Magpies came at the call, and when I heard the noise and saw the birds flying I got up on a post. I saw the Murray Magpie in great distress. He would settle on its (the goat's) head, fly off, and dart down again. When darting down I noticed it did not soar down, but moved its

wings quickly all the time. It is friendly and courageous, too, for I have seen it help a Minah to land when it fell into our swamp and stop some Minahs from pulling feathers out of a poor old Minah.

It is interesting to watch the parents teach their babies to sing and fly. One morning, when jumping from limb to limb, one of the babies tried to fly round the tree, but when it reached the limb again, it overbalanced and down fell a fluffy ball of feathers into the water. The parents at once darted down. The male, grabbing it with its feet, carried it towards land, which was about half a chain away, until he lost his grip and dropped it, but before it fell into the water the female grabbed it and carried it towards land. They did this time after time until they got it to land, where it lay until it recovered.

They, too, when grown up, will think it time to have babies of their own. I see them at mating-time, flying about with mobs numbering about seven. Then there are great rows as to which mate they will have, two or more wanting the same one. The fight begins, and the successful one flies off with his partner. Thus Nature carries on her work throughout the world.

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