

Swooping Birds

How we can learn to live with them

Cities, suburbs and towns are not only places for humans. Our backyard and gardens, local parks, school yards, sporting fields, farms, golf courses, beaches and street trees provide native birds with places to sleep and shelter, along with an abundance and diversity of food. Some species of birds have become adept at surviving and breeding in these highly modified environments.

Some birds build nests up high in street trees along busy roads while other species build nests on the ground in open areas such as airfields and school ovals (more often than not in inconvenient places!). Competing for food, water, refuge and breeding sites can place some species in conflict situations with other bird species and with humans. *Some* nesting birds living in close proximity to humans will swoop *some* people that get too close to their nest. Some birds may also swoop to scavenge food.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) believes the type and quality of interactions people have with their local wildlife is important. DENR's "Living with Wildlife" philosophy aims to foster an understanding of wildlife behaviour and promote positive attitudes towards wildlife.

Remember, native animals are part of our environment and are a shared responsibility.

Common swooping birds and why they swoop

During their breeding season species such as the Australian Magpie, Magpie-larks and Masked Lapwings are protective parents and instinctively protect their territory, nest and young. *Some* nesting birds *may* swoop *some* people that get too close to their nest.

Not all birds become aggressive and only very few birds from the total population will show any aggression towards humans. It is important to note that only a few birds that have become aggressive have actually attacked humans. Swooping is their most common way of scaring off intruders (whether it is humans or other animals).

Noisy Miners and wattlebirds will swoop to defend their territory all year round.

Silver Gulls, ravens, Australian Pelicans and Laughing Kookaburras will swoop to scavenge food. When these species become accustomed to food handouts *some* animals can become assertive and persistent and may inflict accidental injury during their attempts to snatch food. Camping areas, picnic areas in National Parks and reserves, outdoor dining areas and beaches are typical places where these behaviours may be seen.



SPECIES THAT INSTINCTIVELY PROTECT THEIR TERRITORY, NEST AND YOUNG DURING THEIR BREEDING SEASON

	Where do they live?	When is their breeding season?	Where do they build their nest?	How many eggs do they lay?	How long do they sit on their eggs?	How do they behave during their breeding season?	Species defence strategy towards people	Strategies that may work to avoid being swooped
 <p>AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE</p>	Mainly live in open habitats. Occur in natural areas, cleared farming areas, country towns, suburbs and cities, parks and gardens, bushland remnants, street trees and other open spaces such as sporting fields and golf courses.	Usually August to October	In upright forks of gum trees towards the outer canopy of the tree. Sometimes nest on artificial structures (e.g. electrical transformers, stobie (power) poles, roofs of buildings).	Usually 3-5 eggs	20 days The young birds fledge about 30-38 days after hatching, depending on the quality of natural protein rich food available.	Family groups defend their area strongly against other magpies, to protect food resources and nest sites. Males most often defend flock and territory. The female magpie builds the nest herself and sits on the eggs. Males will swoop aggressively to defend nest.	Swooping at people from behind. Swooping may include striking the persons head or clipping their ear. May hover above the head for a prolonged period, attempting to attack the head and face.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid the nest area and take a slight detour. (Most birds will only swoop within a 50 metre range of their nest). Wear a broad-brimmed hat. (Magpies do not like to be watched. Try sticking "eyes" on the back of your hat). Wear glasses to protect your eyes. Travel in a group (swooping birds generally target individuals). Walk quickly away from the area. Do not run. Carry an open umbrella above your head. <p>If you are riding a bike or a skateboard when a magpie swoops</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get off your bike or skateboard. Wheel your bike or carry your skateboard and walk quickly away from the area. Do not run. Use you bike / skateboard as a shield to protect yourself. (NB. Your bike / skateboard helmet will protect your head). <p>Try sticking "eyes" on the back of your helmet or adding two plastic cable ties (approx. 300mm length) to the front of your helmet and place another two cable ties (approx. 150mm) to the helmet over the ears. Place warning signs outside of the swooping area to warn others.</p>
 <p>MAGPIE LARK</p>	Widespread and common in natural areas with trees and open grassland, in urban areas and farming land. Almost always seen near water. Mostly a ground-dwelling bird, usually seen searching for food (insects) on the ground.	Breeding is opportunistic, usually from August to February	Usually built on bare horizontal branch, usually placed away from the tree trunk towards end of branch. They choose nest-building locations with access to water and mud.	3-5 eggs	17-19 days The young birds fledge about three weeks after hatching.	Birds aggressively defend their permanent territories throughout the year. Birds aggressively defend nest during breeding season. Magpie-larks attack their own reflection in windows and side mirrors of cars. Note: Attacks from this species are less common; however people have reportedly been seriously injured by this species.	Generally attacks from the front flying upwards from the ground, towards a persons head and face.	<p>Some Magpie-larks will attack their reflections in windows and external side-view mirrors on cars. It is thought this obsessive behaviour causes distress, particularly during their breeding season. In addition to the suggested strategies for Australian Magpies (above)</p> <p>At home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevent access by Magpie-larks to window ledges. Eliminate reflections by temporarily covering windows affected by Magpie-lark tapping. Place a car cover over your vehicle. <p>Car (away from home)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place cloth bags over the external side-view mirrors while the vehicle is parked. <p>In public areas, avoid the area and take a slight detour. In public areas place warning signs near the affected area to warn others.</p>
 <p>MASKED LAPWING</p>	Prefer open short-grassed areas, usually near water. Found in a wide range of man-made environments (e.g. school ovals, on top of buildings with flat roofs, grassy median strips along busy roads, sporting fields, airfields).	May breed at anytime when conditions are suitable. Usually July to November	In small hollow scrapes on bare ground or on top of flat roofed buildings.	3-4 eggs	28 - 30 days Young usually fledge at 6-7 weeks after hatching, but remain with their parents until they are about ten months old.	Both male and female build the nest together. The breeding pair is loud and aggressive both before eggs are laid and after the eggs have hatched. They swoop aggressively at people and animals to defend nest, at times striking with wing spurs. Adults even behave as though they have a broken wing in an attempt to lure "intruders" away from the nest.	Beak clacking and a rapid call sounding like "Kerk, Kerk, Kerk, Kerk". Extend wing outwards and display their sharp yellow spurs. Generally attacks by flying upwards from the ground.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid the nest area and take a slight detour. Carry an open umbrella above your head. Use bunting flag and fence off an exclusion area. <p>In situations where Masked Lapwings are nesting on a flat roof and swooping at people below, consider erecting a shade sail (or equivalent) to provide a protective barrier between the birds and people and possibly obstruct the birds view of the people below. Place warning signs as close as practicable to the nest area to warn others.</p>

Do not

- remove/destroy nests: Birds may re-nest which will extend the breeding season.
- remove eggs/chicks: Birds may re-nest which will extend the breeding season.
- rescue "helpless" fledgling birds found on the ground: Magpies perceive this as predation.
- harass birds: Harassment will only increase the birds stress levels and may result in a more fierce attack next time around. Harassment of wildlife is also against the law.
- feed birds: Feeding birds can make them dependent on an artificial food source and contribute to increased competition and territoriality between family groups and other species which can result in increased stress.

Australian Magpies and the law

In South Australia, Australian Magpies are a protected species under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972*. In circumstances where an Australian Magpie has attacked or is attacking any person, it is lawful for any person without any permit or other authority under the NPW Act, to kill the offending bird (refer Section 54 NPW Act).

Any person planning to kill an offending Australian Magpie must seek approval from the local Police to use a firearm in a built up area prior to undertaking the destruction. There is also a requirement to comply with animal welfare legislation and the Code of Practice for the Humane Destruction of Birds by Shooting in South Australia.

Other swooping birds and the law

Most native birds are protected in South Australia. If you feel that a swooping bird is a serious threat to human safety and it can be demonstrated that all avoidance strategies

have failed a Permit to Destroy Wildlife may be obtained by the landholder.

Remember

- It is natural for birds to protect their territory, nest and young from predators or intruders, particularly during their breeding season.
- Swooping is the most common way of scaring off intruders (humans or other animals).
- Only a very small number of birds from the total local population show any aggression towards humans during their breeding season. Only a few birds that have become aggressive have actually attacked humans.
- Native animals are part of our environment and are a shared responsibility.

DENR does not assume responsibility for swooping bird incidents that occur on land not managed by DENR. If you feel that a swooping bird is a serious threat to human safety it should in the first instance be reported to the owner/occupier of the land upon which the threat exists.

Further reading

Jones, Darryl N. (2002) *Magpie alert: learning to live with a wild neighbour*, University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Sydney.

Allen, Pamela (1996) *Waddle Giggle Gargle!* Penguin Books Ltd.

Disclaimer

This information is based on knowledge and technology available at the time of publication and may need to be varied in the light of new knowledge. While reasonable efforts have been made to ensure the contents of this publication are factually correct, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources makes no representations and accepts no responsibility for the accuracy, completeness or fitness for any particular purpose of the contents, and shall not be liable for any loss or damage that may be occasioned directly or indirectly through the use of, or reliance on, the contents of this publication. Reference to any company, product or service in this publication should not be taken as a department endorsement of the company, product or service.



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