

branch, at another a dead stick. Twice the male bird brought a dead bird in his claws and fed it to his mate when she was at the nest. But I did not once observe him with a stick. Most of the time he was absent, probably hunting. Although the nest was half built when first found it was three weeks before the nest was completed and the eggs laid.

At a Nest of the Black-backed Magpie

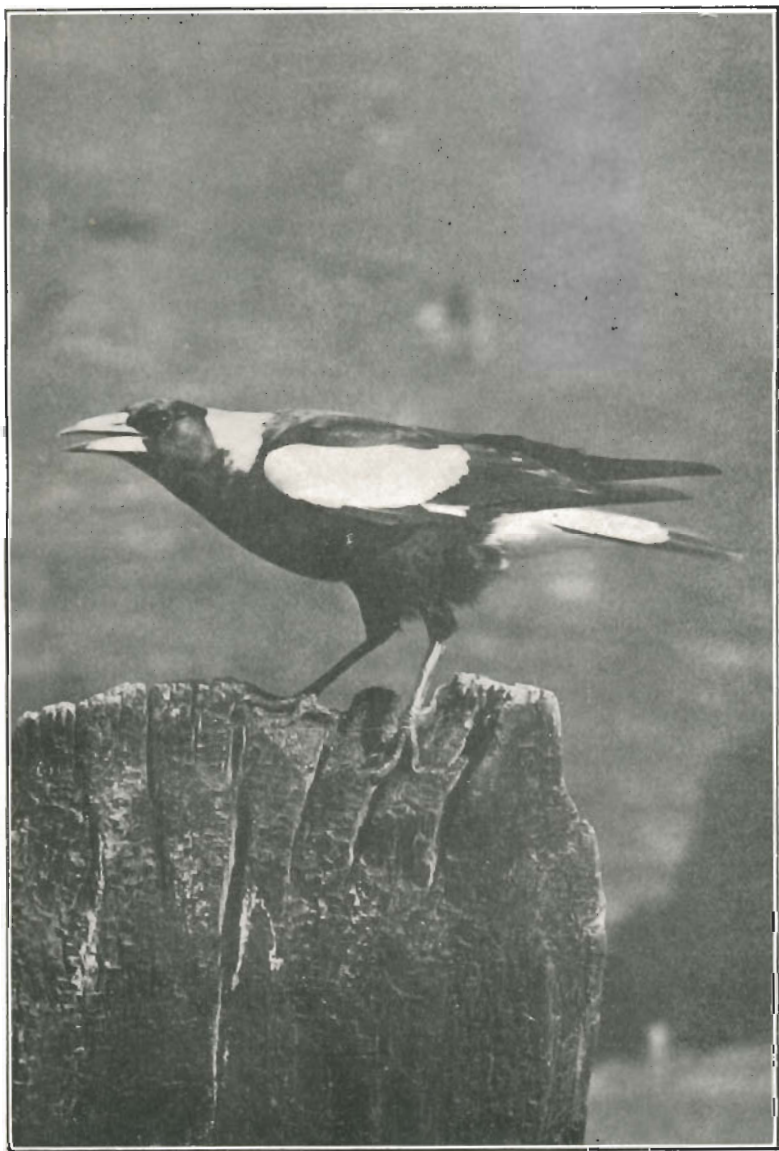
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When the country adjacent to the Cambewarra Range was opened up years ago many of the most shapely trees and those most suited for timber—for the most part turpentine and woollybutts—were left unharmed. Naturally enough many of these have since been killed, or taken for timber, but those remaining are still fairly thickly studded over the hills and farmlands. These huge, isolated trees now make ideal nesting-trees for different birds, but probably suit the Black-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) best of all. In the early spring the Magpies build their nests, generally high in one of these trees. Rarely, however, a pair will depart from the usual custom and elect to build in a dry tree. Seldom it is that a nest is built in a low position.

On August 29, 1933, a nest was found in course of construction fairly close to my home. It was unusually low—about thirty feet up—and was built in a dilapidated turpentine, some low limbs of which were a considerable help in climbing. A ladder was leaned against the tree, and, by nailing crosspieces to the trunk where the limbs were far apart, I was able to get on a level with the nest.

The female—less conspicuously marked than her mate—was very timid, and before one could get very close she would leave the nest and fly across a wide hollow to some trees about 200 yards away. The male would always come from the nearby paddocks. As this custom never varied it proved that the female alone incubated the eggs.

When the nest held fresh eggs the male would always come to the vicinity when anyone approached, but as yet he was not very savage. He would swoop at an intruder, but never actually touch him. As the eggs became heavily incubated, and, later, as the young grew, he became more and more savage, until, finally, he was a ferocious bird, and a nuisance when one had occasion to pass through his "territory"—a large area. As his fierceness increased he took to striking the intruder on the back of the head and the weight of these blows was surprising. On one memorable



Black-backed Magpie (male) in fighting attitude.

Photo. by A. J. Elliott.

occasion while passing through his "territory" I was closely watching some other birds when I was almost dazed by the Magpie as he struck me on the head with all his weight. He had come up without any warning. It seemed strange to me that the bird did not hurt itself severely when delivering these heavy blows. As he always attacked from the rear I could not see how he struck, but consider, from the weight of the blows, that he must have struck with his chest. He also used either his bill or his claws, or, possibly, both. In the rear of a heavy felt hat I used to wear at that time he pierced a number of "V" shaped marks, some of these cutting right through the felt, and, on a couple of occasions, he drew blood from my scalp. From the nature and position of these cuts it would appear that they were inflicted by the hind claw and not by the bill as might be supposed.

If one sat on the grass near the nesting-tree he would alight on a stump or low limb—if such were close at hand—but otherwise would alight on the ground about four or five yards off. On occasions he would follow behind, as one walked, running at a brisk pace in order to keep up with his "tormentor". If he found he was dropping behind he would make a short flight and so recover his lost ground. Sometimes he would follow in this manner for a considerable distance. When an intruder was in the vicinity of the nest he would use freely those loud, wild alarm-notes so often heard from the species, particularly in the nesting season.

Although, as he became more fierce, he would hasten to the attack when one was quite a long way from the nest, he became most excited and enraged when I climbed upwards to the nest. At such times he would throw caution to the winds, often perching about two feet from my face, and I had to admire his beautiful reddish-brown eyes, flashing, as they were, with fearlessness and rage. I wished to procure some photographs of the adults at the nest but, chiefly because of the male's ferocity, attempting to do so was rather an unpleasant occupation. It was not easy to adjust the camera, focus, and change plates—apart from climbing to and from the site of operations—while much of the time I had to hold my hat on in the face of the male's onslaughts. He had, earlier, once struck my bare head, drawing blood and raising a fair-sized lump, and I was not anxious to have the act repeated.

I particularly wished to photograph the female for I had earlier secured some photographs of the male. From his habit of alighting on objects a few yards from observers of his home and home-life the idea had struck me that it should be possible to photograph him without climbing at all. Accordingly, on September 23 I focussed on a nearby stump and laid a length of cotton, connected with the shut-

ter release, towards the tree. When all was ready I walked towards the ladder as if intending to climb to the nest. The Magpie made a few swoops at me and then, quite disregarding the presence of the camera, alighted on the stump on which I had focused. By repeating these operations I had secured four pictures in little more than as many minutes.

I eventually secured one satisfactory photograph of the female at the nest. Strangely enough, she—although so shy where humans were concerned—almost ignored the presence of the camera, and once I was inside the rough “hide” I had erected nearby, she could always be relied upon to go to and from the nest, while attending to the young, in a quite normal manner. I always tried to enter and leave the “hide” while she was out of sight searching for food.

As there was no chance of entering the “hide” unknown to the male, and as he would make no search for food, or attend to the young while anyone was within a few hundred yards of the nest—he was not to be deceived by two persons entering and only one leaving the “hide”—it soon became apparent to me that if I was to photograph him at the nest I would have to spend more time, and go to more trouble, than the circumstances warranted.

Ferocity such as was displayed by this male is unusual in the Black-backed Magpie, and in my experience I have known only a few of the birds to be so affected. Possibly it is only aged males which develop the unfortunate habit—unfortunate because when a bird living near human habitations becomes offensive in this manner it generally meets an untimely end. The male concerned in this article ceased to indulge in his attacks after the young had been on the wing a few days.

Another matter concerning this particular male which greatly surprised me was the wonderful eyesight possessed by him. On different occasions I have been for hours out of sight of his “territory” and suddenly appeared, well camouflaged by a suitable background, in view of his domain, but 400 or 500 yards away from the nest. Sometimes I appeared this distance farther up the ridge and at an appreciably greater elevation. Yet so soon as I came into view of his “territory” he could be depended upon to set off immediately towards me. I particularly remember the first occasion on which this happened; I was watching a pair of Flame Robins, and while following them came into view of the Magpie’s “territory”. Immediately I heard the latter’s alarm-calls, and, on looking, was amazed to see him, far below, hastening towards me. This was not a chance occasion for the same thing was repeated several times afterwards.



Black-backed Magpie (female) at nest.

Photo. by A. J. Elliott.