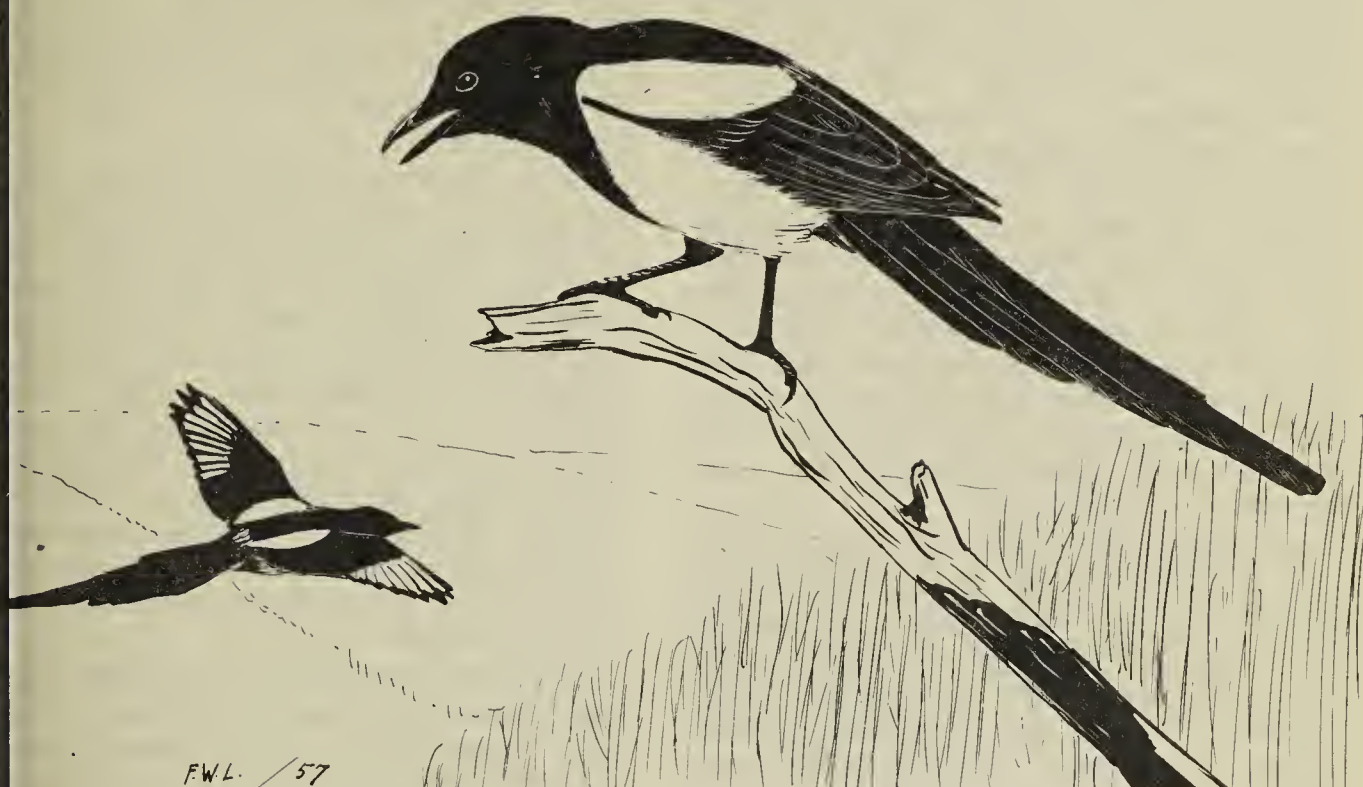


The Wily Magpie

By MARION NIXON, Wauchope

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As I write, I can see the jumbled
k of twigs, high in one of our
est poplars, constructed by a pair
magpies. It is built in the last
tch that would be firm enough
support its weight, between three
n boughs that reach in unison
ward the sun. Now it sits like a
ggy ball between ourselves and
blue of the sky beyond the tree-
, but the leaves will give it some
een from view before the young
ds hatch.

Right now, from one angle, I can
k straight through the ball of
gs, from front door through the
k escape. The roof of the nest
ess densely interwoven than the
ual platform on which the eggs
laid, but only in this one direc-
n can I see unimpeded light
ight through. The whole nest is
east three feet in height, and over
o feet in diameter, past the sup-
ting branches.

While it was being built, I heard
ch magpie racket in the shelter-
t, as though the pair did nothing
argue where and how it should
done. Now, I seldom hear a
awk from either of them, and
n only far away from the nesting
. They take care not to draw any
ice to themselves near it.

Ordinarily, they are noisy birds,
ping up a continuous chatter in

hoarse guttural, raucous croakings,
or a sort of plaintive and rasping
squeak with a lift at its end. This
they sometimes repeat over and over
till it gets on one's nerves. I think
it is most used when there are young,
and may be a note of warning or
instruction to them.

But while eggs are brooding, or if
one is intent on mischief, the magpie
is as silent as a wraith. Then it will
lurk behind any cover that offers,
slipping between bluffs in a swift
and sinuous flight till it can dart
down upon its prey; and away in an
instant.

The magpie is a handsome scala-
wag, in its slim lines and bold con-
trast of jet black and milk white
coloring. Its long tail adds a dece-
ptive impression of size, which one
has to remember when trying to
shoot the bird. Its flight is distinctive
as it proceeds through the air on one
level, with no dips and rises or heavy
flapping of wings. This is not to
say that it does not dodge, but it
prefers to dodge behind the cover of
the bluff, to throw a pursuer off
its trail.

It has plenty of wily tricks to help
it in an escape. I have shot at a
perched magpie in the trees, sure I
had hit it because it tumbled straight
down; a few minutes later it could
be seen strutting about the pasture

a couple of hundred yards away, and soon came back into the shelterbelt. A later shot triggered the same tactics on its part, but that time I saw the bird drop . . . down to almost ground level, where it suddenly veered at right angles and slid away between a corridor of trees.

We always try to discourage them from nesting nearby, for they are death to fledgling birds, and destructive of eggs of our nesting songbirds. In the Old Country magpies are said to attack sheep, sitting on their backs and pecking at any open sore; they are even accused of opening new wounds that allow them to pierce the sheep's kidneys and thus cause loss in farm flocks. We have no proof of that here.

We do know that a pair of magpies came, turn about, for just on one mile, to carry off baby chicks for their young to feast on. They were the most silent pair of magpies imaginable, while on their nefarious errand, but what a squalling pair after the nest was located and destroyed!

We often wonder if the drop in nighthawk population is directly due to the increase in magpies. The nighthawk eggs, laid in such exposed locations as they are, must have been easy prey. I have seen more nighthawks, of late years, inside cities or in towns than out in rural areas.

I sometimes think that magpies get a lot of sport from their eluding of a pursuer, in any way they can make a fool of him. It would almost seem they have a sense of humour. I remember one winter morning watching a magpie lead our half-grown pup a merry chase.

There were three bits of offal in

the yard, that the pup had hauled to worry and feed upon. The magpie would light on one, to get his share of the meal. The pup would charge and the magpie would flip over to the second piece of meat, whereupon the pup would charge again. Then the magpie flew to the third piece and so it continued round and round the triangle.

The poor puppy would stalk his tormenter, creeping up till he was within easy leap of the bird stealing his tid-bit. But when he leaped the darn thing was already sitting on the next one. The pup would sit down on his tail and study the situation . . . the magpie meanwhile with a beady eye cocked his way. His frustrated yippings had no effect at all on the bird . . . so the pup would not be able to resist just one more attempt to beat that miserable bird. He never did.

Until the poplar bluffs grew across our landscape, we never saw a magpie. Apparently they have gradually spread eastward from the Rockies, though their population has fluctuated over a long period of time.

Naturalists who travelled the prairie provinces around the turn of the century found it only west of the Great Lakes, and only rarely in Manitoba. Taverner describes it occurring from Middle Yukon to New Mexico; in Canada, common on the southern prairie, in the bluffy country adjacent, and in the southern B.C. except the coast district; and ratically north and eastward.

The magpie is common all over Europe, and northern Asia, but the Old Country bird has a different manner of calling to our American sub-species, although their plumage pattern is almost the same.

Seen By a Seer

By BOSWELL BELCHER, Dilke

Here I am again — this time to report the "seeing" of a bird rarely seen in Saskatchewan. We were going for one of the Sunday drives we frequently take. My mother and dad enjoy these outings for the drive, my sister Margaret is an enthusiastic bird watcher and observer of wild

flowers so enjoys them also, and find myself going along to drive the car and see how the neighbors near and far are getting along with their farming.

It was mid-afternoon, June 2, 1919, and we had just started down the road leaving the farm I noticed a b