

MAGPIES ROOST AT SASKATOON IN RECORD NUMBERS

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We report a Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*) roost within the city of Saskatoon, SK at Sutherland Beach along the South Saskatchewan River.

The roost, which drew more than 800 magpies on winter nights in 2021-22, is believed to be the largest roost recorded for the species. The next highest count in the eBird database is 673 at a summer roost in the Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area, Oregon.¹ Near Saskatoon, 525 magpies were reported in the summer of 1962.² The highest winter counts in eBird occurred at Springfield Lake, Idaho (378) and Calgary, Alberta (373).^{3,4} Magpies have roosted at several sites along the North Saskatchewan River near Edmonton in dense thickets of trees and scrub, the largest hosting 180 birds.⁵

The Sutherland Beach off-leash dog park in Saskatoon is bordered on the west and north by the river, on the east by the former University of Saskatchewan Beef Research Station and on the south by Circle Drive. The roost is on a north-facing slope, leading down to the river in a broad expanse of deciduous trees (Manitoba maple, green ash, and further down the slope, cottonwood) and tall shrubs (red-osier dogwood, Saskatoon, choke cherry, caragana, European buckthorn and willow) (Figure 1).⁶ During the winter, the weather conditions are harsh. In the three coldest months — December, January and February of winter

2021-22 — the average daily mean and daily minimum temperatures were -16.7°C and -22.3°C. The extreme low temperature was -40.4°C.

The park is an eBird hotspot and 44 checklists, some of them historical, have been posted since 1967. The only magpie roost previously reported was on 22 November 2020, when Paul Riome saw 38 within a 50 m circle after

sunset.⁷ For more than 10 years, users of the off-leash park — near sunrise and sunset — have noticed the arrival and departure of flocks of magpies in increasing numbers over that time, but otherwise the existence of this major roost has gone unreported.

Carol Blenkin, a Saskatoon Nature Society member and long-time regular at the park, recently alerted Ron Jensen who was counting in the area for the Saskatoon Christmas bird



FIGURE 1: Location of Sutherland Beach roost site and main magpie approach path.

count. From the parking lot at the southeast corner of the park between 16:10 and 17:18 h (sunset was 17:03 h) on 27 December 2021, Ron counted an astonishing 768 magpies flying into the park. This was more than double the magpie count from all other sectors combined. From the same location on 27 January 2022, John Patterson counted 785 magpies between 16:40 and 18:15 h (sunset was 17:45 h), recording their arrival in five-minute intervals. The peak arrival rate was an average of 34 birds per minute between five and 10 minutes after sunset (Figure 2).

In contrast to the extended evening gathering, dispersal from the roost in the morning is more compressed. On 27 March 2022 (sunrise at 06:53 h), an overcast morning, the dispersal of 689 magpies began at 06:23 h and was complete by 06:50 h (Figure 2). The majority left in periodic waves, as many as 300 birds at a time. On clear days, the dispersal seems to be shifted a few minutes earlier relative to sunrise.

Magpies do not enter the roost from all directions; rather, most birds approach the park along a narrow corridor, flying north on the tree-lined west side of Preston Avenue and the

nearby part of the adjacent field. Some fly straight north into the park, while others proceed west along trees on the south side of Circle Drive before turning north (Figure 1). There are small flights of birds from the residential areas across the river, west and north of the park and from down the river valley to the northeast, but these represent less than 10 per cent of the total and are not included in the counts from the parking lot. Part of the northward movement along Preston Avenue begins on the west side of the river, crosses near the CPR Bridge and follows a loose line of shrubs along a diagonal northeast trail across the cultivated field before turning north close to the road.

During approach, many birds proceed individually and in small groups, taking short flights along their path. Short-duration gatherings of 10-15 birds in a tree or on the ground are not uncommon before they jump Circle Drive and fly over the park to the roost. Leaving the roost in the morning, some birds first gather in the tallest trees, but once airborne they depart south in flocks, generally reversing the morning approach, but with fewer stopovers.

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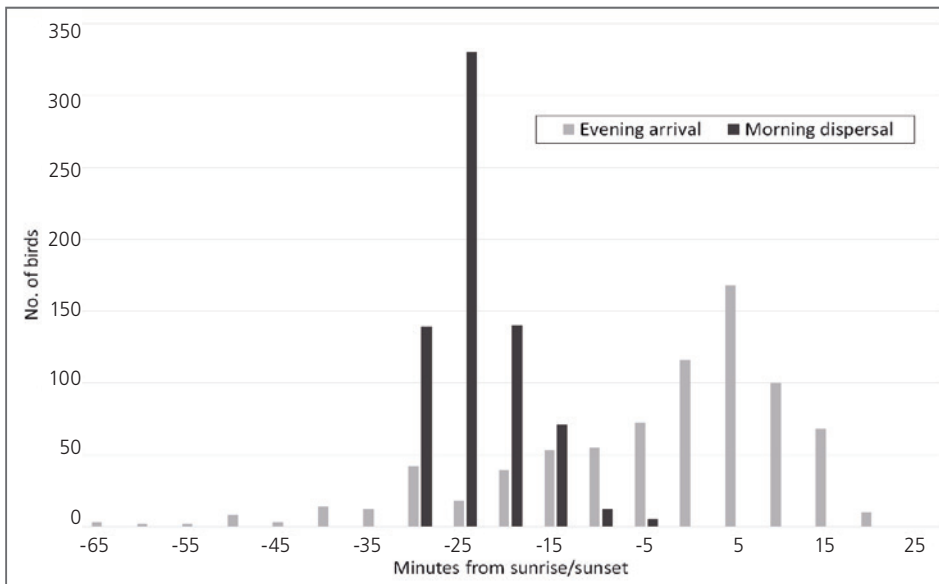


FIGURE 2: Count of magpies in five-minute intervals at Sutherland Beach, arriving near sunset (17:45 h) on 27 January 2022, and leaving near sunrise (06:53 h) on 27 March 2022.

POETRY

I'm a hitch hiker
 My body teeming with life
 I long for a ride

 With many sharp hooks I wait
 A free ride I need
 In order to spread my seed

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