

VILLAIN OR VICTIM: THE BLACK AND WHITE OF MAGPIES



Black-billed Magpie. Photo credit: Annie McLeod.

Lorne Fitch, P. Biol.
lafitch@shaw.ca

My grandparents weren't bird watchers, they were homesteaders carving out a living in a new land. When they settled west of Red Deer in 1900, even if there had been spare time and they had been observant birders, the resplendent, obvious magpie would not have made the bird list.

It's not that magpies were ever absent from the native wildlife assemblage of western Canada, but they did go missing for a while. Magpies were part of the bison ecosystem and they too all but vanished along with the bison. With the extirpation of bison from grassland, parkland and boreal landscapes, the

food they provided — dung, insects and their carcasses — disappeared. So too did many of the wildlife species associated with this food resource like coyotes, wolves, bears, ravens, crows and magpies.

In step with the collapse of the bison economy, by the late 1880s there were no magpies left in Central Alberta. The bird was unknown to early settlers (like my grandparents) in the Red Deer District according to Frank Farley, an early Camrose hunter/naturalist. A remnant population survived in the Cypress Hills of southeastern Alberta.

As my grandparents and other farmers began raising crops and livestock, some vestiges of a substitute food source for magpies was established.

With agricultural expansion magpies began to reappear, around the time of World War I. By 1939, their range had extended north to Grande Prairie, and they became a much more commonly encountered bird.

The phoenix that was the magpie did not seem to receive rave reviews for their reappearance. Fine proportions and colouration coupled with intelligence did not make magpies friends with farmers. Even Kerry Wood, the famous Red Deer naturalist, who observed reasoning ability among magpies contended the birds were "devoted to evil pursuits at all times of the year." Magpies were seen as implacable foes and if not the Devil incarnate, at least his standard bearers.

In the farming community I was

raised, it was taken as the gospel that magpies were evil. Didn't they pick out the eyes of new born calves and lambs? They competed with livestock at feed troughs, raided farm poultry yards, killing young chicks and other valuable, insect-eating birds. When I worked for one of the neighbours, he became almost apoplectic at the thought of magpies eating some of the grain put out for cattle. I was instructed that the rusty pump shotgun in the pumphouse was to be used liberally and without mercy to shoot magpies.

In an ecologically deficient age, when random observation and stories trump evidence, wildlife deemed as nuisances are persecuted. Magpies had started to develop a bad reputation even as early as the late 1920s and by the 1940s had become defined as "vermin" in popular opinion and among government agencies, hunting groups and conservation interests. The invective was based on poorly informed but well-established notions that led to a variety of "control" programs.

Bounties were established, with cash rewards for egg collections and legs of birds. One can only speculate on the stench from rotten eggs and putrefying legs turned in at collection depots. Blood thirsty and cash-poor children, myself included, raided nests for eggs, chopped off legs and destroyed nests (not realizing in the process we were eliminating the source of wealth).

Military style, armed marches with gunners lined up in formation along the four sides of a hunt area were organized to kill coyotes, crows and magpies. No records exist of any of the participants being shot as the circle of excited gunners tightened. Advice was provided on shooting magpies over bait, especially in the winter. Designs for magpie traps were provided. One of my early mentors and I built these and learned magpies were smarter than us. In 1959, the government of Alberta began to set out strychnine poison baits to control magpies.

Hunters, seeing a decline in waterfowl and upland game birds beginning in the 1930s, saw magpies as one of the array of enemies of sought after quarry.

Something had to take the blame and although overhunting, drought and changes in habitat from agriculture were the most evident causes, magpies and their ilk took it on the beak.

In this full scale war on birds like magpies, there was a split. Farmers and many hunters saw only the black side of the bird. Others on the white side, perhaps more enlightened, argued the birds created a net benefit to society by consuming more insects and weed seeds than cereal grains, poultry and game bird eggs.

Beginning in the 1960s, the ardor for bounties and control programs diminished. Rational reviews of engaging and recruiting children to kill thousands of gophers, crows and magpies deemed this was unethical and those practices stopped. Science began to provide evidence about the futility of control programs on predators and nuisance wildlife.

Bounties and other methods of population control have proven to be mostly a triumph of activity over progress. Removal of too many animals undermines population stability, the ability to self-regulate. It can and has resulted in not less, but more of the problem species. Removal of some species can cause cascading effects down the food chain, increasing populations of wildlife species that were not a problem before control programs.

The net effect of the war on magpies (and others) was the reality this was improving the lot of those remaining birds, allowing them to raise larger families. The birds were able to easily fill the void created by our feeble efforts at population control. In effect, magpies won the war.

We still harbor ill will towards magpies. If I were defending magpies in a court of law, in front of a dispassionate judge, I would turn to the plaintiffs. "If you so dislike this bird for its predatory habits and waking you up early with its raucous racket, why did you create such ideal conditions for it to live?" Because that is the case, the evidence. With our urban landscaping, fruit trees, gardens and especially our garbage, magpies

have hit the mother lode, a nirvana of habitat conditions. In country settings with livestock and cereal crop production we have done the same. We have become the new bison for magpies.

If ever there was a time for reflection on wildlife that share space with us, it is now. The magpie is an elegant, immaculately attired bird with a saucy attitude. They are smart and resourceful and will profit from living with us, no matter what we do to thwart their efforts. We might as well resign ourselves we are in this together.

The magpie had a friend in singer-songwriter Ian Tyson. He sang lyrically of "You old coyote in the sky." With a sense of insight, prescience and admiration the lines, "You know the west ain't never going to die, Just as long as you can fly," provide a fitting tribute to the bird.

Lorne Fitch is a Professional Biologist, a retired Fish and Wildlife Biologist and a former Adjunct Professor with the University of Calgary. He is the author of Streams of Consequence — Dispatches from the Conservation World. 🐦

THE NATURAL WORLD

Brian K Jeffery

5800 4th Avenue
Regina, SK S4T 0K3

The natural world is like a puzzle. It is complex but fascinating. As we learn about the various parts, we acquire knowledge. As our learning progresses, we develop understanding, as now we see how all the various parts are interconnected. The "big picture" is revealed. In time, we realize that we have developed a passion for the natural world. We enjoy the excitement of discovery and sense the wonder. We long to spend time here and so we return again and again over the seasons, to refresh and to energize. "Let's go outside!"