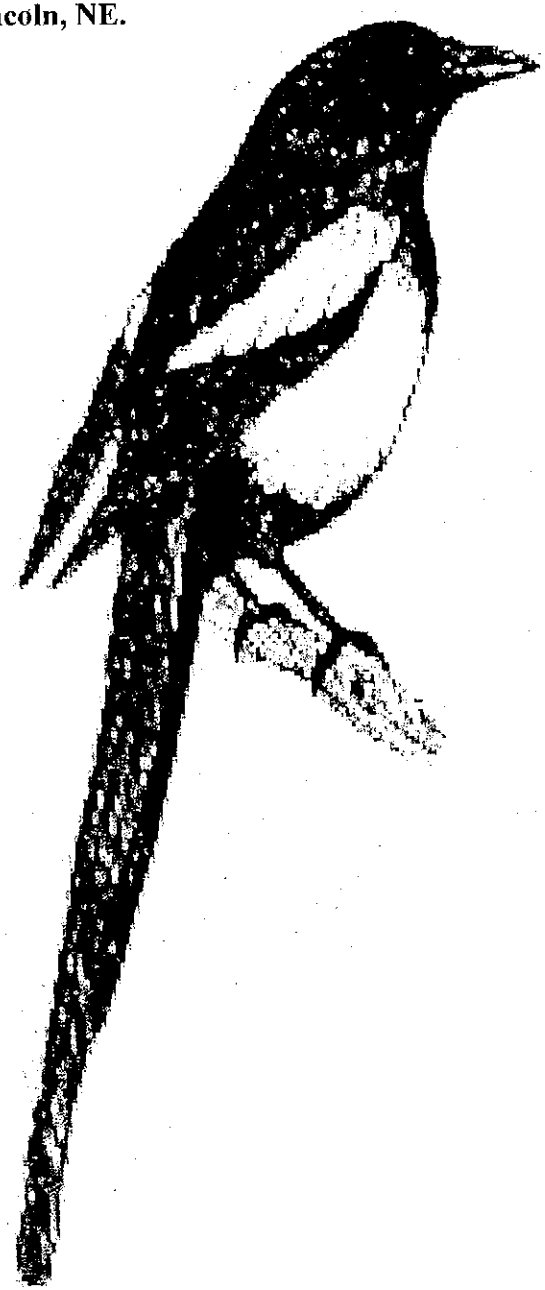
For Further Information

Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage. 1994. Cooperative Extension Division. Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources. University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE.



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
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Living With Magpies

Black-billed Magpies are in the family Covidae which also includes the ravens, crows and jays. They are the birds that everyone loves to hate. It seems a contradiction that one of the most intelligent and beautiful of Montana birds has such a bad reputation. Magpies have a long history of conflict with humans and were extensively exterminated in the 1920s and 30s. However, magpie populations have increased, with problems occurring in localized areas where loose colonies have concentrated close to humans.

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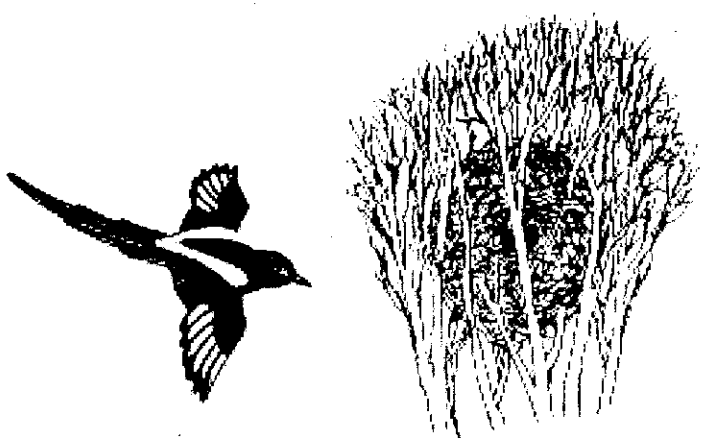
Since the most important items in their diet seem to be insects and small rodents, they are more beneficial than destructive to agriculture. Magpies have readily adapted to the presence of humans and have taken advantage of the new food sources.

Magpies are omnivorous and very opportunistic, which is characteristic of all the corvids. Most commonly they feed on insects, fruit, baby birds, and road-kills. Preferring animal matter, they typically eat insects, but will take anything or what is most available. Animal matter is most important when rearing the young, and predation on other bird nests and poultry often increases during magpie breeding season.

Magpies are protected as migratory nongame birds under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which decreed that all migratory birds and their parts (including eggs, nests, and feathers) were fully protected. The Act is the domestic law that establishes and implements the United States commitment to four international conventions (with Canada, Japan, Mexico, and Russia) for the protection of a shared migratory bird resource. Although protected there are provisions to control "*...magpies, when found committing or about to commit depredations upon ornamental or shade trees, agricultural crops, livestock, or wildlife, or when concentrated in such numbers as to constitute a health hazard or other nuisance...*"

Magpies are very territorial and protective of their nests. During the nesting season they will mob and attacks humans, pets and other birds near their nests. There will also bully other birds at feeders. Magpies tend to live in colonies. Large aggregations of these birds, usually in winter, can be very noisy and increases fecal droppings at roosts. The presence of magpies can increase local predation of beneficial wildlife. During nesting magpies become aggressive and the mobbing of pets and people is common, but usually harmless for people. In addition, as magpie numbers increase there is increased foraging in your gardens, fruit trees and garbage. Magpies will easily tear open plastic trash bags to get at the garbage, spreading trash around and attracting other nuisances like dogs, raccoons, skunks, etc.



Magpies have large nesting structures, sometimes 48" high by 40" wide, which are built of sticks in low bushes or trees fairly low to the ground, rarely being over 25 feet high. These large nests can be unsightly and damage plant structures.

PREVENTION

- **Keep your property free of waste, food materials, carrion, animal matter, pet food, debris, open garbage, etc. will discourage magpies using your property as a permanent feeding ground.**
- **Putting nylon or plastic netting over any fruit trees or vegetables that are being predated will protect them.**
- **Non-lethal harassment and scare devices can be effective before magpie numbers increase, such as shooting them with water, chasing them, loud noises, throwing tennis balls, etc.**
- **Disperse or harass magpies off of roosts.**
- **Remove old nests to prevent re-nesting.**
- **Destroy and/or remove nests during nest construction or as nesting begins to encourage magpies to re-nest somewhere else. Remember these are protected birds and you cannot destroy their eggs or young.**
- **Protect poultry nests and young with fenced coops and feeding areas. Use mesh no larger than 1 ½ inches.**
- **Clear low brush to reduce nesting habitat.**
- **Removing or thinning roost trees will force magpies to new roosts. Usually the removal of only a few trees will discourage magpies.**
- **Frightening devices such as scarecrow, big eye balloons, hawk kites, reflective mylar tape, can be used in gardens, fruit trees, and potential nesting or roosting structures.**
- **Trapping is effective in reducing local magpie populations and limiting damage. However, permits for trapping must be obtained from Fish, Wildlife & Parks.**
- **There are no effective chemical repellents available for magpies.**