

A guide to relocating problem magpies



The purpose of this guideline is to provide general information and advice on the Department of Environment and Science (DES) procedural requirements and the subsequent options for managing issues relating to relocating problem magpies.

Why magpies swoop

Magpies usually live in small groups and actively defend their territory from other birds, and other magpies, throughout the year. Between July and November magpies breed and raise their young. The male from a breeding pair takes on the specific role of defending its eggs and young while they are in the nest and will swoop at a predator or competing magpie if it believes it's a threat to the safety of its offspring. To be seen as a threat, an animal must come within a certain distance of the nest (the defence zone). This defensive behaviour lasts for a period of around six to eight weeks: the time from when the eggs are laid up to when the young leave the nest.

A learned behaviour

While this defensive behaviour is largely instinctive in magpies, as it is in other animals, a few magpies also recognise people as threats to their young. Those magpies that do see humans as a threat may have learned this behaviour in response to some past experience where a person has done something threatening to their young. Evidence that this is a learned behaviour rather than an instinct can be seen in the way some magpies only target pedestrians, while others target cyclists—or even exclusively postal workers on motorcycles.

Defending their young

Research also clearly shows that this defensive behaviour is directed toward protecting the young and not a particular territory as male magpies become increasingly defensive as the chicks grow. As soon as the young birds leave the nest all defensive behaviour stops.

Staying safe around magpies

The department recommends the following actions are taken to protect yourself from magpies when they are breeding:

- Avoid the zone defended by the male magpie if you can (stay more than 110 metres from the nest if you're on foot; or 150 metres away if you're on a bike).
- Get to know where magpies breed in your area. If you find out there is a swooping magpie, talk to EHP or your council about putting up warning signs to let others know.
- If you have to go through the defence zone you can stay safe by:
 - Wearing a hat and sunglasses or just holding something like a school bag above your head.
 - Some magpies only attack bike riders and will swoop on them even if they are outside the defence zone. If you get off your bike and walk, the magpie should leave you alone. 'Spike up' your bike helmet with a few cable ties to scare magpies away or draw large eyes on the back of your helmet to confuse them.
 - Magpies are less likely to swoop if you walk in a group. Team up with others if you walk through a nesting area on your way to or from school.
 - Watch magpies. If they know they're being watched they are less likely to swoop.
 - Don't retaliate to avoid increasing defensive behaviour.
 - Never approach a young magpie that's out of the nest. The parents may think you're trying to harm it. Rescuing baby magpies is best left for wildlife rescue groups to carry out after dark.

If a magpie becomes dangerous

In most cases swooping magpies pose little physical threat to a person and by taking a few simple precautions the risk becomes negligible.



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Being prepared will also reduce the risk of indirect injury (e.g. falling from a bicycle when a magpie swoops overhead).

It is now accepted that in a very small number of male magpies something triggers overly-defensive responses to people when they enter a nesting area. This response can result in serious injury, creating a safety hazard from direct contact with a magpie (e.g. eye injuries).

The department licenses commercial bird relocators to assess and remove dangerous magpies and may charge a fee to this service.

A magpie may also be regarded as dangerous if it is swooping in areas where there are large numbers of people (e.g. schools, day care centres, shopping centres) or where there are individuals who may not be able to adequately protect themselves (e.g. aged care facilities, hospitals).

Removing a dangerous magpie: the last resort

Where a magpie is potentially dangerous it can be assessed by a bird relocator to determine whether it should be removed. These relocators operate under a permit issued by DES and remove and relocate magpies, often as a commercial service. The cost of having a magpie removed is generally incurred by the owner of the property on which the nest is located. In some instances, local councils may have a policy in place where they cover the costs of magpie removal as many nests in urban areas are found on council-owned parklands and landowners have a duty of care to ensure the safety of anyone on land they manage.

How are magpies removed?

Magpie relocators use a DES approved trap with a decoy bird triggering a territorial response. The decoy lures the target bird in, allowing it to be captured. This humane trapping process usually happens quite quickly.

What happens to the magpie?

The problem magpie is transported at least 50 kilometres away (in a straight line) and, where possible, at least 10 kilometres from the nearest human settlement. Research has shown that it is unlikely to return to its point of capture. As the male bird's young have now left the nest and are relatively independent, they are not exposed to any additional risks from having the male bird removed. Observations have also shown that the female parent will quickly pair up with a new male and that this male will 'adopt' the young as his own.

What about other swooping birds?

Other native birds such as spur-winged plovers (now known as masked lapwings), butcherbirds, crows and crows and magpie larks (peewee) will swoop at people.

Masked lapwings nest in open areas and are highly visible and can be easily avoided. Even though these birds have spurs protruding from the fronts of their wings, their noisy 'attacks' rarely if ever result in actual contact and the removal of a bird is unnecessary.

Butcherbirds rarely swoop at people but given that they are smaller and more agile than a magpie those that do can inflict injuries with their sharp beaks. This means that greater precautions need to be taken to protect yourself from a swooping butcherbird.

Butcherbirds are also extremely difficult to trap. Landholders can either obtain a damage mitigation permit or engage a commercial bird relocator to deal with these other types of swooping birds where they are impacting human health and safety.

