



Black-billed magpie

Pica hudsonia

By Ryan L. Rauscher

The opening day of deer season was a memorable one. For the 18th year, my family and I returned to central Montana for our annual prairie deer hunt opener. This year, my daughter joined the tradition. While scouting with her from a butte, another hunter joined us. It was a black-billed magpie, a crow-sized bird that flew up and landed on a sandstone outcrop just a few yards away. We had been trying to remain quiet and hidden while watching several deer, but the magpie would have none of that. It gave us a loud scolding—blowing our cover—then glided down the rise, landing on a fencepost a short distance from the deer.

APPEARANCE That magpie seemed large for the species. Typically about 18 inches long, this one appeared to be just shy of 2 feet in length. Like all magpies, it was striking in appearance. The head, breast, tail, and underparts were black, with a blue-green iridescence on the wings and long tail. The white belly and shoulders were prominent in

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the early morning sun as it flew from the fencepost out of sight, continuing its foray.

NESTING Later that day during our deer hunt, my daughter and I found a magpie nest in a wooded ravine the locals call Tree Coulee. The nest was huge compared to those of other birds in the area. Built with twigs and branches and covered with a large dome, it had two entrances. We couldn't see inside, but I knew from previous experience that the nest was a packed mud bowl lined with grasses. It takes about six weeks for the female and male to construct this complex and sturdy nesting structure, and the pair may use it for several years. Raptors often build a nest on top of the magpie nest dome.

Like crows and jays, both close relatives, magpies pick up shiny objects and place them in the nest. This nest was too high in the tree for us to check for trinkets.

REPRODUCTION The female lays from six to nine greenish brown eggs. Over the next few weeks, the male feeds his mate while she incubates the eggs. When the eggs hatch, both parents feed the young. The young

fledge after about 25 days. They soon leave the nest and join other magpie broods. The parents feed their own fledglings in these often-raucous groups of a dozen or more birds for another few weeks.

FOOD Magpies are intelligent and resourceful omnivores. They eat insects, carrion, eggs, nestlings, and rodents, as well as berries, seeds, and nuts. Magpies often follow predators to steal morsels from a kill or clean up the leavings. They also pick ticks and other insects from the backs of elk and deer, and will flip over sticks and cow pies to get at the insects underneath.

Near human habitation, they search garbage containers for food and eat from pet dishes left outside. Extremely bold, magpies will enter campsites or even unguarded tents to steal food.

HABITAT Though found in many mountainous areas as high as timberline, black-billed magpies prefer open areas with short vegetation and patches of trees and shrubs similar to the prairie environment where my daughter and I were hunting. These birds also live year-round along rivers and streams and in urban areas and forest edges across the West. Black-billed magpies are found in nearly every county in Montana.

HISTORY Perhaps because of their boldness, year-round residency, and handsome coloration, magpies have long been admired. In some early Indian cultures, a warrior who wore two magpie feathers in his hair was considered fearless. The magpie also plays prominently in Indian myth and legend as both a mischief-maker and a doer of good deeds.

On the way back to the truck, I told my daughter that magpies often followed Indian hunters to feed on any carcasses left behind. I said perhaps the one that landed near us had been doing what the species has done for thousands of years. Nonetheless, she was still upset with the bird for making a racket. I reassured her that the magpie had little to do with our unsuccessful hunt. (And even if it had, I thought to myself, that meant she and I would get to hunt together yet another day—a good deed in any father's book.) 🐾