



Thorndon Birdlife

June 2023

With their iridescent black and white plumage, long tail and endless curiosity, Magpies (*Pica pica*) are among our most distinctive birds.

They feature prominently in folklore and superstition throughout Europe. 'One for sorrow, two for a joy, three for a girl, four for a boy, five for silver, six for gold, seven for secrets to never be told', is a rhyme that many children learn and there are many different versions of the rhyme.

Folklore surrounds the magpie: from providing good luck when greeted, to being in league with the Devil, its ubiquitous presence has provided plenty of opportunities for stories. Many surrounds religion, including the belief that it didn't mourn with all the other birds at Christ's crucifixion, and that it refused to enter Noah's Ark, preferring to stay on the roof and 'swear' for the whole journey. In East Asian cultures, the magpie is a very popular bird and is a symbol of good luck and fortune, it is also the National bird of Korea.



Magpie (*pica pica*)

At least a third of the Magpie's 45 cm length is the long, stiff tail. In drab light, they are largely black, with white flanks, belly and wing patches.

Magpies seem to be jacks of all trades – scavengers, predators and pest destroyers. Their challenging, almost arrogant attitude has won them few friends. They are common and widespread in most of Britain & Ireland apart from north and north-west of Scotland. They are scarce vagrants on a number of Scottish islands.

With its noisy chattering, black and white plumage and long tail, there is nothing else quite like the magpie in the UK. When seen close-up its black plumage takes on an altogether more colourful hue with a purplish-blue iridescent sheen to the wing feathers and a green gloss to the tail. Their most distinctive call is a repetitive **chac-chac-chac-chac**, often made when birds are agitated. Captive birds have been shown to be capable mimics.

Magpies were formerly heavily persecuted throughout Britain, but their numbers grew through the late 20th century as this lessened. They are still controlled in many areas.

Magpies are, in fact, small crows of the Corvidae family and are omnivorous, feeding on carrion, invertebrates, chicks and eggs. They are sociable birds and are often seen 'chattering' noisily in small groups across many habitats, from gardens to parks, and heaths to hedges. During spring, the males help the females to build nests by bringing materials which they then arrange. They are famous for collecting all kinds of objects, particularly anything shiny, to decorate the nest.

Like other members of their family, they are widely considered to be intelligent creatures. The Eurasian magpie for instance, is thought to rank among the world's most intelligent birds. It is one of the few nonmammalian species able to recognise itself in a mirror test.

They are particularly well known for their songs and were once popular as cagebirds. Magpies of the genus *Pica* are generally found in temperate regions of Europe, Asia and western North America, with populations also present in Tibet and high-elevation areas of Kashmir. The birds called magpies in Australia are, however, not related to the magpies in the rest of the world.

Garden sightings: Blackbirds, Common Buzzard x 2, Mistle Thrush (heard), Green woodpecker, Great-spotted woodpecker, Goldfinch x 4, Tawny owl, Chiffchaff x 2, Blackcap x 3, Whitethroat, young Goldcrests, Jay, Magpie.