



Tips
from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

During the summer of my tenth year of life, my Grandmother got a job at a ranch near Walden, Colorado. She prepared meals for the ranch hands and family who lived on the place. This ranch held around ten miles of the North Fork of the North Platte River, which provided some excellent fishing for trout.

I was granted a certain amount of freedom, being allowed to fish anywhere I wanted on that river, so long as I never left the ranch. The freedom showed that I had finally earned the respect due a young outdoorsman, being very capable of taking care of myself in the woods. It was a hard earned privilege, but one that I was proud of.

On the other hand, looking back, it may have been my grandmother’s way of getting rid of me for a while. Either way, the deal came with the requirement that I must always return home with a brace of fish for dinner. Considering the stream was full of brook trout in the 10 to 14 inch range, with an occasional three pounder, it was no problem to deliver the dinner for her frying pan.

When I returned home, at the end of each day, I stopped at a shallow spot with a small beach about a quarter mile from the house. This spot is where I would clean the fish, which was part of the deal with Grandma, before heading to the house. Heaven forbid I bring home fish that were not cleaned.

The cleaning spot was always occupied with a half dozen big black and white birds, called magpies. Locals always referred to them as “maggies” and the name seemed to fit. These crow sized birds would watch me clean the fish, each day getting a bit closer to me and shedding their fear.

Once, I threw a piece of entrails from a brookie, and missed the water, landing the piece on the bank. A swarm of black and white hit the piece, even fighting each other over it. Note to self, magpies love fish entrails.

From that day on, I would feed all the entrails to that flock of maggies. They quickly lost all fear and would come right up to me, eventually taking it from my hands. I noticed that the flock grew by a couple more each day



A magpie, or maggie, showing full color and long tail. (Special to the Montrose Press/ CPW David Hannigan)

and on slow days, would worry that I would incite a riot by not bringing enough “goodies” to the bird party.

The magpies started following me around as I worked the stream. They would offer advice, and ridicule me when the fishing was slow, and chew me out if I got a late start in the morning. The flock would really get upset whenever I released a small fish back to the stream. I tried to explain sportsmanship and bag limits to them, but they refused to listen.

The black-billed magpie, also called the American magpie, is a member of the crow family that inhabits the western half of North America. It is one of only four songbirds in the country whose tail makes up more than the total body length.

Maggies, or maggies, are black and white, with areas of iridescent blue and blue-green on their wings and tails. You will see them sitting on fence posts and road signs, and often around hayfields and cattle. They look rather unusual as they fly with the long tail following along behind them.

The adult magpie can reach 2 feet in length and weigh in around half a pound. The female usually weighs 5 or 6 ounces. The wingspan reaches over 2 feet, so in flight; they actually appear much larger than they are. Even though they look slow, magpies can reach 30 mph in flight.

The black-billed magpie is an opportunity omnivore, eating pretty much whatever it stumbles upon, like fish entrails from a small

boy. Maggies will eat insects, seeds, rodents, berries, eggs, garbage, and food from pet dishes, and carcasses from deceased mammals.

Maggies will usually forage on the ground, usually walking, hopping around and scratching with their feet to search the ground for food. They can often be seen following large predators, such as wolves and coyotes, to scavenge and steal their kills. Sometimes magpies land on large animals, like moose and cattle, to pick off the ticks that often plague these large animals.

Breeding season for magpies runs from the end of March through early July, nesting once a year. If the first nesting attempt ends in failure, maggies will sometimes give it a second attempt with a second nest.

The nest is domed shaped and found near the tops of trees. The nest is made up of twigs and can take a female 40 days to complete. The female will lay between six and nine eggs which she will incubate for up to 18 days.

Newborn maggies are able to fly after four short weeks. The young will forage for food alongside the adult birds. The young males actually appear to be dominant over the older ones. Perhaps it is just the old men being tolerant of the young kids.

Winter months will find the magpies in a communal roost. Every evening, the birds will fly, sometimes over great distances, to reach safe roosting sites. Dense trees, shrubs and conifers offer wind protection

and safety from predators. The birds do not huddle for warmth; rather they sleep with their bill tucked under their shoulder and back feathers.

Lewis and Clark reported seeing Magpies in 1804 in North Dakota. They wrote about how bold the birds were, entering tents or taking food from their hands. Magpies used to follow the great herds of bison so they could pick the ticks off the bison’s backs.

Maggies also followed around the hunting bands of Plains Indians so they could feed off the carcasses of the buffalo killed. When the bison ran out in the 1870s, magpies switched to the herds of cattle.

During the early 20th century, magpies were considered detrimental to game birds because they steal bird eggs from nests. Ranchers considered the birds pests because they will pick at open sores on the backs of cattle, such as a new brand, often times making the wound much worse. In some instances, magpies may peck out the eyes of newborn cattle and sick livestock.

Some states offered a bounty of one cent per egg, or two cents per head to try and eliminate the pests. Poisons were also used in the 1920s in an attempt to resolve serious livestock predation.

Magpie populations can cause serious damage locally to crops such as almonds, cherries, corn, peaches, wheat and others. Their damage is usually greatest where insects and wild mast are unavailable.

Usually robins and black-birds cause more damage in fruit orchards and grain fields than magpies because of their greater abundance.

In the United States magpies are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. There are also some State regulations regarding the protection and eliminating nuisance birds. Those people experiencing a problem should contact the local field office of Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

My biggest fear that summer of my tenth year of life was that the good fishing would not hold out. With the increasing number of maggies at the fish cleaning spot each day, and later the flock following me around, I feared an insurrection if I did not catch fish. That puts a lot of stress on a small boy. I pictured a scene similar to one in the Alfred Hitchcock movie The Birds. Fortunately my luck held out until summer ended and I was again incarcerated in that prison known as school. I still miss my old fishing buddies, the maggies, and that stressful summer.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a Director for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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Raise your hand...

...and give me an “Amen!” if you have ever cracked your shin on a trailer hitch. There is no pain like it. You immediately bend over with tears in your eyes and teeth clenched, thinking of all the swear words you would say if small children were not nearby. And of course, prior to the actual event, you have reminded yourself (more than once!) to not forget about the hitch, and to walk widely and carefully around that thing. Wasted effort. I have a feeling that the “Church of I Have Never Hit the Hitch with My Shin” has mighty few members!

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