

SHORT NOTE

Opportunistic scavenging or active predation of a blackbird (*Turdus merula*) by an Australian magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*)?

KEVIN A. PARKER

Institute of Natural Resources, Massey University, Private Bag 102904, North Shore Mail Centre, Auckland
k.parker@massey.ac.nz

As I crossed a car park at 0740, 13 Apr 2006, on the Massey University grounds, Albany, Auckland, I observed a subadult Australian magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) with an adult female blackbird (*Turdus merula*) in its bill. The blackbird appeared freshly dead, so I approached to check the bird. The magpie dropped the blackbird as I approached and then backed off c.4 m. The blackbird was still warm and had clearly died only recently. I left the blackbird on the ground, and retreated 10 m. The magpie quickly returned to the blackbird, and proceeded to feed on the body. Several times it picked up the blackbird and carried it up to 2 m, sometimes dragging it along the ground. Each time it stopped, the magpie turned the blackbird on to its belly, and removed feathers and pecked at its back and the back of its head. The magpie vigorously defended the blackbird when a different subadult magpie approached, and then continued to feed on the blackbird.

The magpie fed on the blackbird until 0800 h. After the magpie flew away, I inspected the blackbird. One eye had been pecked out, many body feathers had been removed from the dorsal area, and the skin had been opened from the back of the head to the middle of the back. The exposed body fat, and some flesh, had been pecked off, but fat was visible where the skin was intact. The blackbird had just moulted, was in good condition, and had no sign of any other external injury. It weighed 96 g, above the average weight of 90 g reported by Heather & Robertson (1996). When I returned at 0820 h and again at 1530 the blackbird's body was in the same place where the magpie had left it.

About 9 m from where I first saw the blackbird was a recessed (0.5 m) glass door separated from

another glass door by a 6 m passage way. There was a large fresh bird dropping c.0.8 m up the door, another 2 fresh droppings (1 on the door mat below the door, and another c.2 m from the door, along with c.20 body feathers. There were another 40-60 body feathers between the door and where I first observed the magpie.

One explanation is that the magpie had trapped the blackbird in the doorway and then killed it. However, it is possible that the blackbird flew into the glass and either died on impact or was stunned, and then scavenged by the magpie. Magpies are opportunistic feeders, taking carrion and occasionally killing small vertebrates, including blackbirds, although active predation seems to be relatively rare (Heather & Robertson 1996; Morgan *et al.* 2005; Morgan *et al.* 2006). Whether it killed the blackbird or just took advantage of a recent death, this juvenile magpie clearly recognised the blackbird as potential prey.

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LITERATURE CITED

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