

No, they're not cheerleaders

Introducing the popular U of A magpies

by Andrew Watts

If, in the time you've been here, you're only remotely aware of what is going on around you, you'll have noticed them. Even with your head filled with the thoughts of upcoming assignments, you can't have missed them while walking to and from your classes.

Whether they're foraging, fighting or just plain standing around, they are as much a part of this campus as anything else.

In amongst the species of birds that inhabit the trees and grounds here, these are the biggest, smartest birds of all. The magpies.

Magpies are the large bluey-green birds that frequently dot the quads within the university. If you've ever gazed longer than a passing

glance at them you may have noticed that many of them have bands on their legs. These bands indicate that the magpies are being used as the objects of a scientific study. The man heading up that study is Ph.D. grad student Craig Scharf.

Scharf began studying magpies about two and a half years ago as part of his Ph.D. paper. He chose the bird mainly because of its abundant numbers. The study, though, is not restricted solely to this campus.

"I've banded about 600 birds around the city, from the south side to Kingsway," Scharf says.

Another reason for choosing the magpie is because it is an incredibly tame bird. Their proximity to us has afforded them very little fear of people and this allows Scharf the

opportunity to observe them closely for extended periods of time.

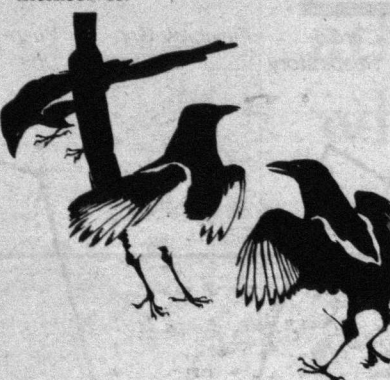
The magpie belongs to the same family as the crow and the raven. Like those two, the magpie is extremely intelligent and possesses a complex social system. Scharf is interested in their social characteristics but primarily in their dispersal pattern.

"It appears that after the young grow and leave the nest they stay away for a while and then return to nest very close to their birth site," Scharf explains.

Scharf wants to find where the birds go and what they do during this time away from their original home.

To do this he has trapped and banded as many birds as he can. But this is easier said than done. The magpie is so intelligent that it quickly

figures out most of the traps used. In many cases, an adult will walk into a trap and take the bait without ever triggering the snare. The young are easier to catch because they are, quite frankly, not as smart. But if they watch an adult beat a trap they will take only a few minutes to learn how to beat it themselves.



What Scharf does is to take a bird already caught or injured and in his care, and tether it to a tree in the territory of another adult magpie. When the adults fly down to ward the intruder off, they step into the snare Scharf has laid. But trapping the bird is one of the least important exercises of his study.

Scharf must keep track of the birds he has banded to get any kind of a return on his study. Even on this campus there are 23 nests and approximately 136 birds and tracking them is a big problem.

"What I really need is for people to help me out," says Scharf, "if anybody sees one of the banded birds it is a big help if they write down the information I need and fire it over to me."

Identifying the birds is incredibly easy: each of the birds has four bands, two on each leg. All you do is to record the colour sequence of those bands. You start with the bird's right leg first and note the colour of the top band then the next. Then you do the same with the bird's left leg. You then note the time, date and location and perhaps what the bird was doing and that's it.

Anyone recording this information is asked to please send it to Craig Scharf in room 1104 of the Biological sciences building or phone him at 432-4161.

The most successful trap devised is based on one of the more volatile aspects of the magpies nature.

Magpies are extremely territorial. They will not, save their returning young, allow any other adult magpies to nest in their defined space. When and if one does, the adult male will move in to throw the intruder out. This territoriality has led to many a magpie being caught.

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