

The Magpie



The Magpie

Scientific name: Pica Pica

Irish Name: Snag Breac

Males: The Magpie is a species of crow but has a distinctive black and white colour. The head, breast and back are black, the shoulders patches, belly and flanks are white. The black wings and tail, however, are a beautiful glossy, blue, green and purple. They have a short, stout, black bill and longish black legs which are used for both walking and jumping.

Female: The female has the same colourings as the male.

Juveniles: Juvenile birds are very similar to adults but lack the long tail, which takes a while to grow. The white of the plumage is dirtier, and the black is less glossy.

Song: Magpies are very vocal birds. The harsh cry of the Magpie is unmistakable.

Length: 44-46cm

Diet: They have quite a varied diet. They will eat insects, rodents, carrion, eggs and nestlings, grain, berries and fruit. In a garden they will also eat kitchen scraps and bird foods. In my own garden they appear to also be quite fond of dog nuts.



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Breeding: Magpies will begin breeding in early April. The hen lays and incubates eggs that are smooth, glossy and pale blue with olive-brown or grey spots. During the breeding season, the female can often be identified because she will have bent or damaged tail feathers. Both parents feed the young after they have hatched.

Nesting: Both male and female Magpies will build the nest which is quite large. It can take several weeks to complete and is made from small branches and twigs. It is lined with mud and vegetation. The nest is usually build in tall trees (and sometimes even in electricity pylons) and is domed to prevent attack by other crows.

Interesting Fact: The Magpies tail accounts for over half the total length of the bird and is an indication of the bird's status in its society. In the springtime large numbers of Magpies often gather to resolve territorial conflicts and social standing. These gatherings are called parliaments.

There are also many nursery rhymes and poems about Magpies of which the most famous is probably;

One for sorrow, two for joy;
Three for a girl, four for a boy;
Five for silver, six for gold;
Seven for a secret, never to be told;
Eight for a wish, nine for a kiss;
Ten for a bird that's best to miss.

There are many other legends and superstitions associated with the Magpie from all over the world.