

Nature Notes

Junior Ranger

THE MAGPIE LARK

The Magpie Lark, *Grallina cyanoleuca* is probably Australia's most common and widespread bird. Nevertheless, this little guy has a number of amazing features, so let's get to know them a bit better.

Common
but cool!



The black and white Magpie Lark is about 28 cm from beak to tail.

DID YOU KNOW?

Early European settlers named the Magpie Lark after two groups of Northern Hemisphere birds that they were familiar with: the Magpies and the Larks. However, they aren't actually related to either of them! Scientists now believe that they are most closely related to a group of birds from the east coast of Australia called the Monarchs.

AS COMMON AS MUD?

Magpie Larks are known by a number of different names. Maybe you know them as the Peewee or Mudlark or Little Magpie? Whatever you call them, they're pretty adaptable and they'll live just about anywhere. As long as there is open space for them to look for their insect food, and the occasional bit of water for them to construct their mud nests, they're happy. Dense forests and the driest of deserts are about the only places that you won't find them.

Humans have actually helped them become more common by clearing dense forests for farming. What's more, we've supplied water by drilling wells and bores for cattle and sheep in areas that used to have no water. Windmills even provide a good place for them to build a nest on!

Many animals don't like to live in cities or around people, but not the Magpie Lark! Parks, ovals, road verges and backyards make great habitats for them.

BACKSTREET BRAWLERS

When a male and female Magpie Lark pair up, it's usually for life. They will then become territorial and attack and fight with any other animal in their patch that they see as a threat. This can include other Magpie Lark pairs, other birds (even eagles!), cats and the occasional unlucky human! The males get particularly cranky. You may see them attacking their own reflection on the side mirrors or windscreens of cars. It's pretty funny...until they start pooing all over your car! Singing, calling and displaying are all part of protecting their patch. They will perch somewhere prominent and perform a duet. The male sings one part of the song and the female sings the other while they both spread their wings and fan out their tails. This lets other birds

know that this is their turf, so back off unless you want a fight!!

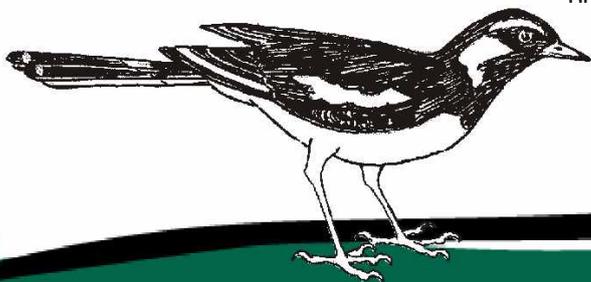
Although they look the same at first glance, it is easy to tell the boys from the girls. Look closely at their faces. The male is on top, the female on the bottom.



The boys look like they have a 'Zoro' mask over their eyes.

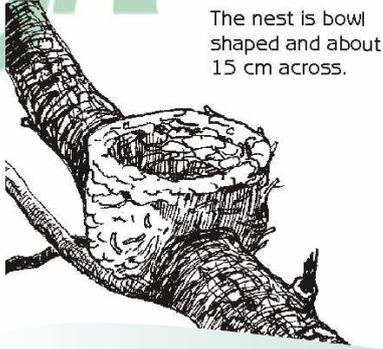


The girls have a pretty white face and chin.



Northern
Territory
Government





The nest is bowl shaped and about 15 cm across.

MUD BRICK HOMES

Both parents are pretty handy builders. They both construct their nest late in the dry season in the Top End and any time after rain further south. They gather plant material like bark and straw and bind it together with mud to form a bowl shaped nest. It is lined with grass, fur and feathers before mum lays 3-5 eggs. They are both good parents as they share the family chores of sitting on the eggs and collecting food.

DAREDEVIL ACROBATICS

Magpie Larks have short, rounded wings. This means that they're not really very fast flying in a straight line, but they are extremely agile. Handy for harassing big, clumsy birds like eagles! They will usually let you get very close to them before they take off. They know that they can rapidly become airborne to avoid you if need be. You'll often see them darting in and out of busy traffic as they scavenge 'road kill' insects. Yummy!



HIGH ON THE HATE LIST!

The Common Koel, *Eudynamys scolopacea* is one bird that Magpie Larks are particularly aggressive towards. This is because Koels often parasitise Magpie Larks. That is, the Magpie Larks are tricked into raising Common Koel chicks while the real parents leave town! Work through this puzzle to discover how the Koels manage this deception.

G	E	R	I	E	H	T	D	F
G	F	W	Z	J	F	Y	U	Q
S	I	N	W	U	W	A	L	Y
D	F	M	A	Z	U	Q	D	L
W	U	Q	G	D	C	R	E	T
L	E	I	P	J	E	Z	Q	U
A	F	J	U	W	S	S	L	J
R	J	W	Q	U	Z	D	E	O
K	N	E	S	T	S	D	F	K

STEP 1

Cross out every box that contains one of these 7 letters:
D F J Q U W Z.

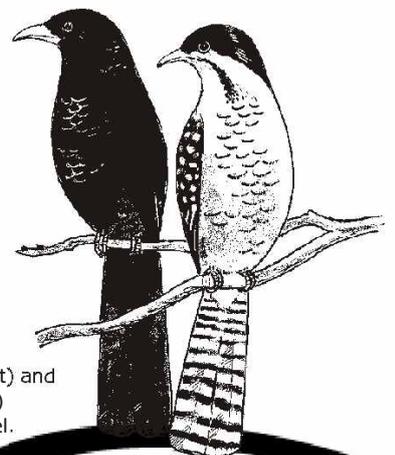
STEP 2

Start at the arrow and weave your way through the letters that are left over to unravel the answer.

STEP 3

Write the answer in the boxes below.

START ↗



The male (left) and female (right) Common Koel.

Want to learn more about birds?

Check out the affordable field guides *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* by either *Simpson & Day* or the one by *Pizzey & Knight*. Another good book is the *Readers Digest Complete Book of Australian Birds*.

