

News from under the Southern Cross – Edition 30. The Bird of Terror

7 September

I'd like to use this issue of my newsletter to talk about magpies. Now, there may be some people asking... “when you say ‘terror’, do you mean because of the danger of developing diabetes?”

No, that's a mudpie. ‘Magpies’ are native birds that are found in great numbers in Australia.



Not a mudpie. This is the feared magpie. Doesn't it have a sharp beak?

1. Unique forms of life

Something that I have strongly felt since coming to Australia and the Southern Hemisphere is just how different the flora and fauna are from the Northern Hemisphere. Some examples of unique animals are the famous kangaroo and koala. Others include the emu and wombat.

The same goes for birds. The White Cockatoo has such a loud call that when the late Duke of Edinburgh visited Australia, he rebuked them as ‘noisy buggers’. In my home we've taken to calling them “Gyaos birds” (after a fictional flying monster with a distinctive roar).



A White Cockatoo, which my family are fond of and have given the nickname “Gyaos birds”

Then on the other hand, there is the magpie. It has an attractive white stripe running through its mostly black-coloured body, and has a beak that is as sharply honed as a letter opener. It also has a unique call.

There is a masterful television series called 'Secret City' which uses Canberra as its stage. In one scene, a female Australian activist who has been detained by Chinese authorities and thinks that she is in China is taken outside while wearing a blindfold. She hears the call of a magpie and realises "Hey, I'm actually in Australia". That's how nostalgic the magpie's call is to Australians.

2. A tragic accident

A tragedy has occurred. And it happened only a few weeks ago. A mother was out taking a walk with her baby when she was attacked by a magpie and fell over. She fell badly, and the baby died.

Spring is a particularly scary time (in the Southern Hemisphere, this runs approximately from September to November) because it is the breeding season.

The magpie's natural instinct to protect its nest grows stronger, and so it attacks pedestrians and cyclists that pass close to the tree where its nest is located.

Magpies even scramble in response to me riding an E-bike along the shores of one of Canberra's lakes on the weekend. In order to remain safe while under attack, cyclists must wear sunglasses and put on a helmet that covers the entire head. If they don't, they can end up being badly injured after being pecked by the magpie's sharp beak.



A helmet that covers the entire head

3. A resourceful bird

In addition to all this, the magpie is actually a clever bird. One theory goes that it can remember which humans have been hostile to it in the past and so attacks them.

Their doggedness in searching for food is unbelievable. Some magpies live at the Ambassador's Residence, and every morning they gather around the window frame of the kitchen and cast longing looks in our direction. According to a local staff member who has worked for many years at the Residence, the magpies' sense of expectation is high because one of my predecessors used to feed them. This is a blind spot that wasn't touched upon in my "handover documentation".

Some may ask "are you also giving them food?" No, no, no. No matter how often they gaze at me with pleading eyes, I will not break. If they start to think of me as a generous old bloke then they'll gather

one after another and there'll be no end to it. And I can't get Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds" out of my head.

4. **Penguin Bloom**

There is a famous movie in Australia that depicts the magpie. Its name is 'Penguin Bloom'. It's the story of a magpie that attaches itself to the Bloom family, is given the nickname 'Penguin' by its colour and becomes treated like a family member. It stars actress Naomi Watts, who is also popular in Japan.



An Australian human drama depicting the trials and triumphs of the Bloom family and a magpie that has lost its parents

While it's a tear-jerker of a story of the love of a family for one another, no matter how many times I've seen it, it still hasn't extinguished my fear of magpies. I actually touched upon this topic during my speech at the National Press Club (the speech and video for which can be found [here](#) and [here](#)).

5. **Protector of the Nation**

In the worlds of diplomacy and the military, animals for which a country has a particular affiliation are sometimes used as an image (or mascot or totem). Lions, bears, elephants, tigers, dragons etc., many people would immediately recognise which animal stands for which country.

The kangaroo and the emu are depicted on Australia's Commonwealth Coat of Arms. The kangaroo, with its doe-like eyes, is ordinarily an adorable animal, but possesses a "martial-like spirit" when boxing or chest-thumping.



The Commonwealth Coat of Arms. As the kangaroo and emu can only move forwards, they signify that the nation too is moving forward (Source: 1912 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Australian Government)

If the kangaroo and emu are protectors of the land, then taking this imagery further, the protector of the sea would be the shark while the protector of the air would probably be the magpie, wouldn't it? The truth is it's a formidable country.

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