

## News from under the Southern Cross (Edition 38):

### “The Bird of Terror” – A postscript

5 October

“The Bird of Terror” – the magpie – that I raised in [Edition 30](#) of my News from under the Southern Cross newsletter has, thanks to my readers, created quite a stir. Today I’d like to introduce a postscript, while going deeper into my discussion of magpies.



A magpie takes to the air

#### **1. The response from Australia and Japan**

Actually, the truth is that I initially write these newsletters in Japanese. An excellent staff member in the Embassy (an alumnus of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme) then translates it into English. Thereafter we share these newsletters with both Japanese and Australians, and people from other countries as well.

One of the fascinating things about this topic of “the Bird of Terror” is we have garnered reactions from so many readers irrespective of national borders. Thankfully, Japan’s TBS Television Sydney correspondent, IJIMA Hiroki, immediately picked it up after publication and made a fascinating report

on “the Bird of Terror”. The [footage on YouTube](#) has been viewed (as at 27 of September) over 400,000 times and has certainly caught people’s attention.

In Australia, the popular “Strewth!” column in The Australian introduced readers to the original newsletter, and many readers also sent me heartfelt responses. I myself was able to learn a lot about magpies, for which I again offer my sincere thanks.

## **2. Endless affection**

A notable thing about the reaction among Australians to the newsletter was, generally speaking, that while acknowledging that magpies have a habit of attacking people and the need to stay alert, most of them still expressed an affection for the bird. There were even people who claimed to treat them as cute pets. As pets, I assume that they are certainly more friendly than rattlesnakes or iguanas.

Another interesting thing was that in relation to the question of whether one should feed them or not, debate in Australia was split right down the middle! A friend of mine in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) sent me some footage of himself feeding magpies in his garden. On the other hand, there were also people who, after reading my newsletter, agreed with me, saying “I never feed them either”.

## **3. A Japanese diplomat urged to find a realistic solution**

Something that caught my eye among all this was the advice of people who feed them, claiming “magpies remember the people who have offered them food, and don’t attack them.” For me, given I have broken out in a cold sweat after being on the receiving end of a magpie ‘scramble’ more than once on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin, this is an attractive prospect. However, as I have lived my diplomatic life by the motto “never go back on my word”, the sight of me feeding them would be a full concession and so I felt strongly opposed to doing so.



The “Bird of Terror”, treated with caution but beloved



A magpie staring with its longing eyes

So I have made a compromise. Previously, I had drunk a vial of Yakult (made in Australia!) every morning while casting a sidelong glance at magpies with their longing eyes begging for food. I now refrain from such provocations, and have instead decided to appear supportive by quietly standing behind my wife who is in favour of appeasement and actually feeds the birds. Perhaps as a result of this, at the very least I haven't been attacked while in the gardens of my Residence, and have been able to spend spring in peace.

#### **4. An incident**

This happened while I was on my way to work. At this time of the year, I often catch sight of ducks marching with their chicks through the garden. However on this occasion, I saw a magpie chase a family of ducks out of one section of the garden. I don't know what the cause of the dispute was, whether it was a retaliatory measure for a "violation of territory", or an objection to the environmental degradation that the ducks have caused by spreading their droppings all over the place. However I was taken aback by the magpie's furious attitude.



Even the family of ducks marching in the garden have been victims of magpies...

A couple of days later, I caught sight of a magpie lying in an unnatural position in a corner of the garden. Upon closer inspection, I saw that it was deceased. Was this the result of a no-holds-barred fight between fellow magpies, or had it been attacked by another type of bird? There is an order within

the bird kingdom about which humans are unaware, I thought, while also reflecting on how tough it is to survive and the importance of the capacity to defend oneself.

### **5. And even if there are no magpies around...**

Having written thus far, there may be people in Japan thinking “he’s talking about magpies and so it’s got nothing to do with us”. That is not the case.

A former senior British intelligence officer who read “The Bird of Terror” told me “there are birds of terror in Tokyo, too”. According to this precious piece of intelligence, cyclists and pedestrians who pass in front of the British Embassy in Tokyo have on occasion been attacked by ravens. Come to think of it, I do recall one of my subordinates in the Intelligence and Analysis Service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs falling off his bike and badly injuring himself after being attacked by ravens.



For the British, the ravens of Tokyo are a “Bird of Terror”

Of course, according to the said officer, these ravens aren’t “under the control of MI6”. Indeed, it seems that James Bond, unlike Batman, is not taming birds.

### **6. “Don’t forget me” - the cockatoo!**

In addition to magpies, the other bird which I cannot get off my mind since arriving in Australia is the cockatoo. Its dazzling pure whiteness evokes an image of the noble Mt Fuji covered in snow, while its yellow crest manifests pride as if it were saying “I’m in a completely different league to other birds”.

An image of this bird would pop into my head were I to sing “Bird of Birds” in addition to the chorus of “King of Kings” and “Lord of Lords” in Handel’s Messiah.

The call of this bird is extraordinarily shrill. Its dignity would greatly improve if it were a bit quieter... Nevertheless, I’ve already gone ahead and spent a fortune on an ornament!

There are not only kangaroos and koalas, but indeed no end to the many attractions of Australia.



The cockatoo ornament in my Residence

YAMAGAMI Shingo