

## News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 89):

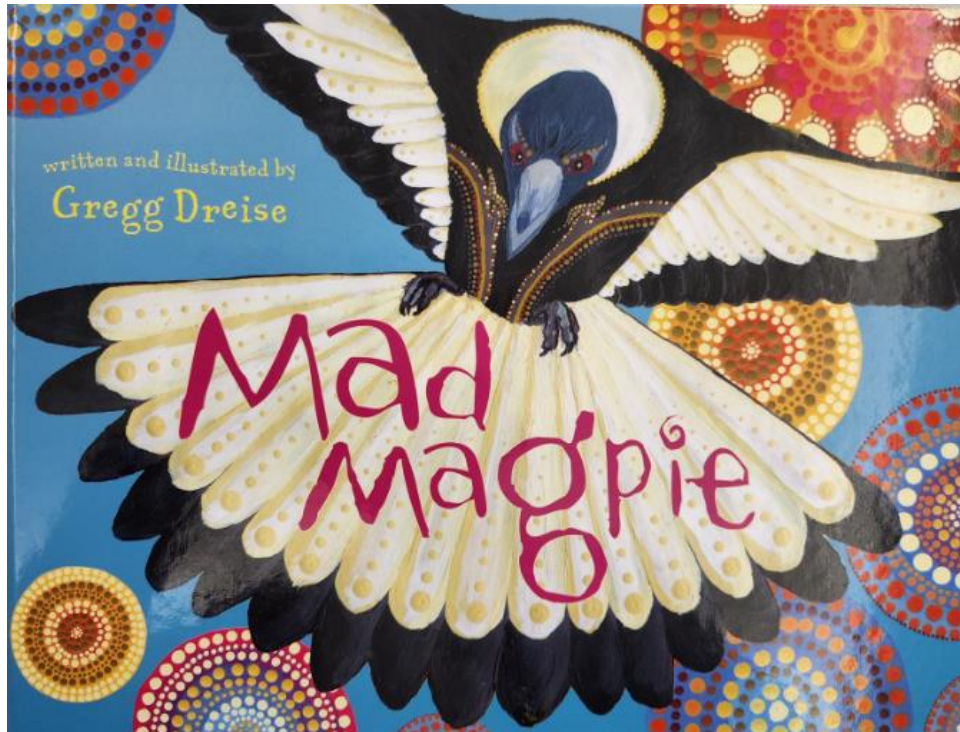
### The Spring Truce

15 September 2022

The long winter is over and spring has at last arrived in Canberra. The golden wattle flowers are in full bloom, and now we eagerly await the cherry blossoms and jacaranda. But in the midst of this bright spring sunshine, fear lurks in the shadows.

#### 1. 'The Bird of Terror' Part II

That's right, I am talking about that 'bird of terror'. Last year, in Editions [30](#) and [38](#) of my News From Under the Southern Cross, I introduced readers to Australia's fearsome magpie. The arrival of spring brings with it the threat of male magpies defending their young by mercilessly attacking anyone who walks or cycles too close to their nests.



The magpie's aggression is skilfully depicted on the cover of this picture book.

## 2. A bone-chilling experience

Last spring, upon our arrival here, my wife and I were greeted by a thorough initiation into Australian life. We were told by many of our Aussie friends, “you just have to feed them”, and so my wife adopted this policy of appeasement.

Nevertheless, while she managed to conciliate with the magpies in our own garden, it was during a cycle around the lake that she encountered the magpie’s characteristic speedy descent and tenacious pursuit. It aimed its sharp beak at her right ear uncovered by the helmet, drawing blood. After the incident, she could barely even hold onto the handles of her beloved e-bike for a while.

As for me, I categorically refused to feed the magpies, deciding instead to try a policy of ‘dignified Japanese diplomacy’. However, one day as I was walking through the garden of the residence to the Embassy – believe it or not – a magpie decided to use my head as an airstrip! Perhaps I can paint a clearer picture by asking you to imagine an F-35B landing vertically on an Izumo-class destroyer (the pride of our Self-Defense Force)?

Defenceless as I was without a helmet, I could only shout in a feeble voice, “Oi! Get off!” Yet the magpie remained perched there for a few seconds. What a long few seconds they were! I am still pondering to this day whether its intention was to punish me for my cold demeanour in refusing to feed them, or to extend an olive branch of friendship.

## 3. ‘Operation Chopstick’

And so, one year has passed – and learning from last year’s experiences is in keeping with the Japanese spirit of ‘kaizen’ or ‘continuous improvement’.

If you listen to Aussies’ own stories, they are divided as to whether you should feed the magpies or not. That’s a two-party system for you!

But the piece of advice that stood out to me was, “when magpies attack, they focus their attacks on the highest point



off the ground – so it is a good idea to have a stick or a flag to divert them”. Come to think of it, I had seen quite a few cyclists speeding around the lake with flags attached to the backs of their bikes, or cable ties sticking out of their helmets.


A family meeting was convened. The result was the decision to distract attacking magpies using leftover wooden chopsticks stuck into our bicycle helmets. In light of the tremendous popularity of Japanese food, we even decided to use chopsticks scented with wagyu beef and sushi as an added incentive! Certainly, this was the earnest plea of an older man hoping that those letter opener-like beaks would refrain from snapping at his skin just beginning to sag with age. The key to this game is deterrence!

#### 4. A strong attachment to magpies

I then took a photo of myself in my cycling gear before a weekend ride – wearing my new, customised helmet and a sweater emblazoned with the logo of the Collingwood Magpies AFL team – and posted it on social media. After all, everyone knows that news of a truce must be widely publicised and – at the very least – made known to one’s opponent.

By the way, that sweater was gifted to me in a playful gesture by one of the Embassy’s Australian staff members. Looking back, there was likely a hidden agenda to recruit me as a ‘Pies (as the team are nicknamed) supporter.

As soon as I had posted this photo, I received an incredible reaction from Australians. What’s more, I received a few interview requests from media

 **Ambassador YAMAGAMI Shingo** @YamagamiShingo · 8月27日  
Dear magpies, how about we call it a truce this swooping season? Look, I'm even trying to blend in more. If the urge to go after my helmet proves too tempting, have a complimentary chopstick. They're scented with sushi and Wagyu beef 🍴 Yours in res-peck-t, YS



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My tweet declaring a truce with the magpies, wearing my chopstick-adorned helmet and Collingwood sweater. The tweet received over 6,200 likes.

outlets curious about the uproar. (You can find recordings of my interviews [here](#).)

Once again, I have come to understand the love and interest Australians have for their magpies. Although they can be dangerous, they are extremely smart, and – with their contrasting black and white plumage – are quite a beautiful bird. The magpie’s level of popularity makes me feel sorry for the crow – which is not a dissimilar bird, but one that is widely despised in Japan.

##### 5. “You need to talk to them”

At the same time as I was going viral, I received a lot of new advice about magpie diplomacy.

One valuable tip came from an ABC radio presenter, who advised me to look them in the eyes and talk to them. I imagine this is the same strategy employed by teachers dealing with a classroom thug! But if I tried to chat to every magpie I came across while cycling, I am certain I would lose my footing and end up in the lake.



Featuring in an ABC radio interview with presenter Anna Vidot

Luckily, no matter how half-baked Operation Chopstick might seem to readers, it appears to be successful so far in that I have not yet been swooped this season. As to whether it continues this way – you will have to stay tuned.

YAMAGAMI Shingo