

# Black-billed Magpie

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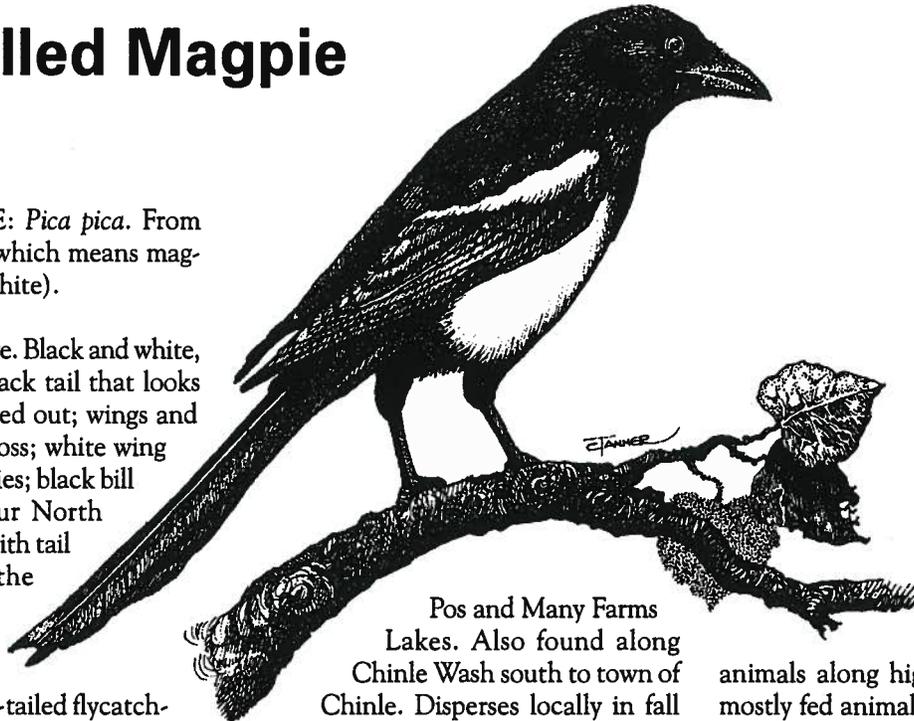
**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Pica pica*. From the Latin word *pica*, which means magpie (pied black and white).

**DESCRIPTION:** Large. Black and white, with long greenish black tail that looks graduated when fanned out; wings and tail with iridescent gloss; white wing patches flash as bird flies; black bill and legs. One of four North American landbirds with tail longer than body (the other three are the yellow-billed magpie, and the scissor-tailed and fork-tailed flycatchers). Eighteen to 22 inches long, 5 to 7 ounces in weight. Males and females look alike. Juveniles similar to adults, except body feathers loosely textured, black parts of body plumage browner, white parts creamier, wings and tail less brilliant. Usually seen gliding short distances or hopping and foraging on ground. Loud call is an ascending whine or a rapid series of harsh cries; can mimic human speech in captivity.

Common in folklore. First discovered in North America by Lewis and Clark expedition, which documented magpie's behavior of entering camps and stealing food. Large flocks followed buffalo hunting parties in the late 1800s, feeding on hunt refuse.

**HABITAT:** Open country with scattered trees, brushy habitats, sagebrush communities, riparian and open woodland, croplands and pastures.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Resident in Eurasia and North America. Resident in much of western United States and Canada, including Alaska. Bordered by Great Plains to the east, the desert to the south, and the coastal ranges to the west. Possibly increasing resident in extreme northeastern Arizona. Easily seen near Tec Nos



Pos and Many Farms Lakes. Also found along Chinle Wash south to town of Chinle. Disperses locally in fall and winter. In Arizona, dispersal usually occurs along vegetated washes. In parts of its range, some movement into higher elevations in fall. Wanders erratically in winter in flocks of as many as 50 or more. Greater movement is observed in northern latitudes, where severe winter weather occurs. Range of black-billed magpie does not overlap with that of yellow-billed magpie.

**BIOLOGY:** Highly social; nests in small colonies. Nest a conspicuous, two-to-four foot high dome, shaped of heavy, thorny sticks and lined with rootlets, fine plant stems, and hair. Nest height ranges from a few feet to 25 feet above ground. Sometimes builds nest close to hawk nests, perhaps to benefit from leftover food scraps the hawks bring back to their own young. Male brings nesting material to female, she arranges it. Nest takes 40 to 50 days to construct. Male feeds female throughout incubation. Abandoned nests often used by other species of birds for nesting and roosting.

Lays eggs from March through June, before many other species of birds. Five to eight greenish-gray eggs, blotched with brown. Young of the year have been observed at Many Farms Lakes as early as May 5.

Feeds mostly on insects, carrion, invertebrates, and small vertebrates; some fruit and seeds. Often seen

feeding on roadkilled animals along highways. Nestlings are mostly fed animal food. Most insectivorous North American corvid (member of crow family). Caches food.

**STATUS:** Common over most of its range, including Arizona. Not listed federally as threatened or endangered, and not a candidate for such status. Included on the Department's list of *Threatened Native Wildlife in Arizona*, due to suspected threats to its nesting habitat here.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** Earlier this century, magpies were considered minor pests in some areas. In the 1920s, magpies hindered campaigns to control predators by feeding on poisoned bait intended for coyotes and other animals. Where this was a problem, they were sometimes killed prior to placing poisoned bait stations. Fortunately, magpies are hardy birds. They were never extirpated and numbers have recovered.

The black-billed magpie does not receive much management attention in this state. It is locally common here, and management conflicts are minimal. Magpies are reasonably compatible with human habitation, because they take advantage of the food sources created by mankind. At most they need a little more protection of the riparian habitats in which they nest. ♣