

My Friend, Magpie



By William Loader

Magpie

I have a special friend and he is called, Magpie. He's a real magpie and we have known each other for hundreds of days – even more than that.

He sits on the fence which is just about as high as my head and we talk. Sometimes I feed him with a few seeds of grain.

If I'm sitting down at the table outside he drops down onto the table and once he even perched on my lap.



He is very beautiful with a sleek white back and sharply contrasting black feathers on his front and underneath. When he is close to me I can see how well his coat of feathers sits together and how clean he keeps himself.

He often talks – in a magpie kind of way – and I have come to understand what he is saying.

In fact he tells me lots of things about himself and his family and about magpies in general.

What he tells me is so interesting, that I thought I should tell you about our conversations. Often I need to start by asking a question and then off he goes and I listen.

Here are some of his stories:



1. Swooping Magpies

Not everyone likes magpies.

“They swoop down us on the way to school and peck our heads,” said one of the girls in our street.

I have heard that many times. So I asked Magpie: “Why do you swoop down and peck people’s heads?”

Magpie sat for a few moments, thinking, and then said: “You know why? It’s because of our babies. We don’t do it all the time, but only when our nests are full of eggs and our baby magpies have hatched.”

“But why do you do it then?” I asked.

“Well,” said magpie, “haven’t you see what happens then? Haven’t you seen how human beings climb up our trees to find our nests and take away our eggs and our little ones?”

“No,” I said. “I have never seen people doing that.”

“Well they do,” said magpie firmly.

“They do, hundreds of them.

Haven’t you see all those children climbing up the trees and out onto the branches on the way to school?

Haven’t you see the adults walking their dogs, who suddenly stop and jump up trees looking to steal from our nests?”

“No,” I repeated. “Never.”

“Well they do,” said magpie. “My grandma told me and her grandma told her and her grandma told her and that’s how we know. Human beings are always climbing our trees in spring time to steal our eggs and so we dive down on them to frighten them away.

Wouldn’t you do that if the elephants starting coming into your houses and taking away your babies in their trunks?”



This time I stood thinking for a while and then I said.

“You know, Magpie, you shouldn’t believe everything that your grandma says. Perhaps it used to happen once a long time ago, but I have never seen or heard of people climbing trees to steal magpie eggs and I certainly can’t imagine elephants stealing human babies.”

Magpie sat for a while and then said, “Some people even wear funny hats to scare us off and we would never peck you with your funny hat.”

“Yes,” I said. “You don’t seem to mind me. Why don’t you tell your friends to check for themselves sometime just to see if anyone really does still climb trees. I think you’ll find it never happens.”



When magpie and I disagree like that, magpie is very good. He doesn't fly away.

He just looked at me very carefully and said: "You know, it's hard to change when you've always done things that way."

I understood and smiled. Magpies can't smile, but they can move their heads in ways that say they're happy.

Magpie smiled in his way and we both said goodbye till another day.



2. Strange Sounds in the Night

I sometimes wake up at night and hear the warbling of magpies. For many years I wondered why they made these strange sounds in the night.

Often one magpie would call and another would answer, perhaps from a long way away, so that I could barely hear it, but then the first magpie would repeat the call and the answer would come again – and on and on it would go.

What was going on?

My special friendship with Magpie gave me the opportunity to find out. So one day I asked him,

“Why do some of you warble in the middle of the night?”

He looked at me, smiling by cocking his head from side to side and then up and down.

“Don’t you know the game?” he said. “Who will last the longest before falling asleep?”

“You mean, it’s a game?” I asked.



“Yes, it’s a game, but it doesn’t start that way. It starts with a maths question. One of us begins with a question. The other one gives the answer.

“If the answer is correct, that’s it. Nothing more is said.

But if the answer is wrong, we warble: ‘No’, sometimes, repeating it, so it sounds like ‘No’ said quickly a number of times.

$$8 + 6 = ??$$

“Then the other magpie who gave the answer also calls out, ‘No’ in the same way and the game begins.

We keep saying ‘no’ to each other until someone gets too tired. Whoever keeps going longest is the winner.”

“But, if the answer is wrong, why doesn’t the other magpie accept it and try another answer?” I asked.

$$6 + 7 = ??$$

“Well,” responded Magpie, “you see, some people find it very hard to say they are wrong and they keep saying they are right even when they know they are wrong.

“By playing these games magpies sometimes get very tired and so they get very impatient and when you’re very tired, it’s harder to say, ‘I’m wrong’ or ‘I’m sorry’.”

Magpie then gave a big yawn.

It made me wonder. How do magpies sleep? But that would have to wait for another day.

Magpie had things to do and so did I, so we said goodbye.



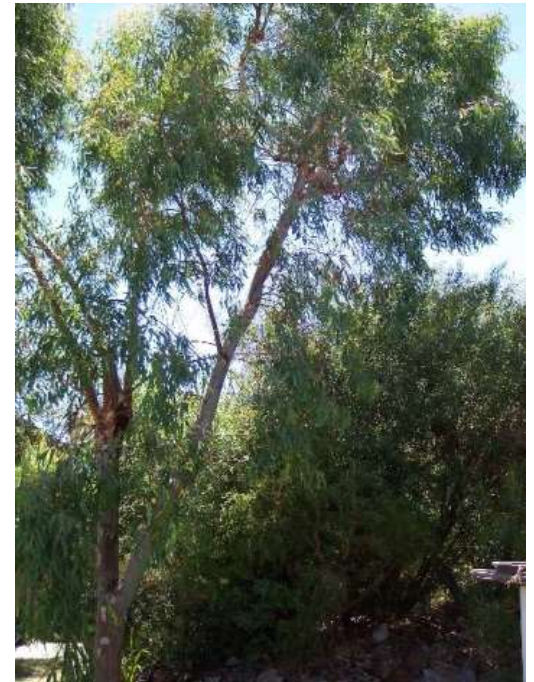
3. Where do Magpies Sleep?

I couldn't wait to see Magpie the following day and ask him about where magpies sleep. So as soon as magpie landed on the wooden fence I was there to meet him and ask, "Magpie, where do magpies sleep?"

He look at me very intently, wiggling his tail and slightly flapping his wings. I knew that this was a sign that he was enjoying himself.

"Well," he said, "you see that big tree over there?"

"Yes," I answered. It was a very big tree with lots of leaves and branches that spread out widely and I knew lots of birds flew there late in the day.



“Well,” he continued, “on the top most branch there is a large golden bowl filled with soft hair. It is the hair we gather each time we swoop down on people in spring time.

“Occasionally we even bite off small pieces of ear or occasionally a nose and it’s all there in the golden bowl.

“There we have made a large bed. We even have blankets made of handkerchiefs and tea towels which we pull off clothes lines. At night we all gather in the big golden bowl, pull the blanket over us and fall fast asleep.”

With that he twitched his tail, fluttered his wings and look at me with bright eyes for my response.

“You really do?” I said. “And then a koala climbs up next to you and sings a lullaby if you can’t sleep?”



“Of course,” said Magpie. “And in the morning the koala brings us breakfast, which he has put together over night while we are sleep, pieces of cheese from the moon, toast from the ghost, butter from the gutter, ...”



Before he could go on, I interrupted:

“Magpie, I don’t believe a word you are saying. How do magpies really sleep?” I insisted.

“By standing on their two legs, closing their eyes, and sometimes tucking their heads into their wings,” he said.

“Sometimes we sit,” he added, “but we are not like you. We don’t lie down on a bed. We are different. We are not the same as you. Try to remember that!”

I realised I had ruffled his feathers. I didn't really think he was like us. That was a misunderstanding.

“Yes, of course,” I said. “I didn't really think you had to be like us.”

Magpie smiled and his feathers settled back in their sleek black under his shiny white back.



But I still wondered: what if they fall a sleep and then fall off their perch? But that would have to wait for another day.

We left good friends.

4. Why don't Magpies fall over when they sleep?

Today Magpie dropped down onto the table near where I was sitting and I started straightaway with the question I had yesterday: "If you sleep standing up, why don't you fall over?"

"Why, that's simple," answered Magpie. Look at my short legs and my very wide feet. I'm not like you humans with big long legs and small feet. You would fall over. We don't fall over. Birds can sleep on their feet. It's great."

Well, that was a simple answer, but it set me thinking: what does Magpie think of the other birds? Does he like them? So I asked.



“There’s room for all of us,” said Magpie and began to list all the birds I had seen:

galahs with their pink underneath and grey wings and backs,
white corellas and cockatoos,
black cockatoos,
crows, which are really ravens,
but everyone calls them crows.



And then he went on to some of the smaller ones: red wattle birds.



When he mentioned them, I noticed his feathers got ruffled.



“What’s the matter with red wattle birds?” I asked.

“They swoop down on our young ones in spring. Haven’t you see them?”

In fact I have seen them. They fly after the young birds and try to peck them and sometimes fly after the older magpies.

“Why do they do that?” I asked, wondering if their grandmas had told them similar stories.

“Well,” said magpie, “we do sometimes like to raid their nests and eat their eggs, so I suppose this is their way of getting back at us.”



“I noticed,” I continued, “that your chicks still chirp like chicks even when they are as big as adults. I often see the mother magpies feeding their chicks and the chicks look as big as they are.”

“Why do you think it’s only mothers who look after chicks? We all do. We share.” He then continued: “Do you know how to tell that they are chicks?” asked Magpie.

“Yes,” I said, “the chicks – some of them as big as their mums and dads – still have some baby feathers, the grey ones.

“But why do they keep feeding them, picking up food in their beaks and putting into the beaks of the chicks, when they are so big?” I asked.



“If you look carefully,” said Magpie, “you will see that sometimes the chicks get the food themselves. They copy what we are doing. It doesn’t take long for them to realise that it is much quicker if they get the food themselves. That’s how birds grow up. They learn to do things for themselves.”

I nodded – because that’s how we grow up too. We learn to do things for ourselves. It’s a pity we don’t learn to fly.

Magpie had left me with lots to think about and off he flew with a brief warble – to say good bye.



5. Magpie and the Shopping Centre

Today when magpie jumped down onto the table in front of me as I was eating a crunchy biscuit, he had a glint in his eyes and I could tell he was ready for some fun.

Magpies can't really smile, but you can tell they are happy. It's the way they walk and ruffle their feathers and look at you.

Magpie looked at me intently and said: "You know about me and the shopping centre, don't you?"

"No," I said. "Tell me."

And he did.



“One day,” he began, “ I flew down to the shopping centre and perched on a car which was parked very close to where everyone goes in.

“It was late in the afternoon and there were nice smells coming out the doors, each time they opened.

“So I decided: next time they open I’m going to fly in, so I did. Some people saw me and wondered what I was doing.

Others covered their heads with their hands, afraid I might swoop down and peck at them.

“That was silly because I only do that in spring time when the babies are small. I decided, all the same, that it was best if I flew into a quiet corner where no one would notice me, but I could watch what was going on.



“And did you know, there’s a pet shop in the shopping centre with birds and kittens and puppies and mice?”

I could see them in their cages. ‘How sad,’ I thought. But then suddenly I saw people going out through the doors and I thought:

‘That’s great. Now I can fly around without people noticing me.’



“‘Clunk!’ ‘What was that?’ I wondered. Then from the other side of the shopping centre I heard the sound again: ‘Clunk!’ There were lots of bangs and clunks as people shut up their shops. Soon everyone was gone and there were only a few security lights.

‘I’d better go, too,’ I realised, but it was too late. The doors were all shut and they did not open. I was locked in.

“Now you know magpies are very clever, don’t you?” he continued.

“Yes, of course,” I said.

“Well that wasn’t very clever,” said magpie, “but I had an idea. I flew over to the pet shop. It wasn’t very difficult for me to unpick the lock which held the door of the shop shut. Soon it was open.

“It also wasn’t difficult for me to unlock the cages.

So first I went to the birds. After all, we birds need to stick together. One by one I unpicked the latches and opened the cage doors. The birds, who were preparing to go to sleep in their cage for another night were so surprised.

“One by one they realised they were free and out they flew: galahs, budgies, finches, parrots. It was wonderful. ‘Thank you, thank you’, they all said. ‘That’s OK,’ I replied. ‘I’m a magpie and you know how clever we magpies are and how much we care.’



“But we were still all trapped inside the shopping centre. Next I turned to the kittens and the puppies. Puppies can do no harm, but cats can, especially if they hunt birds, but these were only kittens. If any of them misbehaved I knew I could swoop down and peck them on their ears. No problem.

“My best idea was with the mice. I opened their cage, but immediately picked one up in my beak, very gently so it wouldn’t hurt.



“‘Now, I know what to do,’ I thought.

“So I flew to the main doors and picked open the box which controls when the doors open and shut. It was very hard to do, I had to hold the mouse with one foot while I used my beak and my other foot to pull down the switch.

“Once I had done that I flew down under the sensor by the door and sure enough: the doors opened, I was free! And so were all the kittens the puppies, the birds and the mice.



“When I arrived back to the tree where I sleep along with all the other important magpies, I told my story. They were delighted and they all crowed out loud, chortling and warbling as we do.

“Next morning the chief magpie came to my branch with a big fat worm, and, while all the others were looking on, said: ‘You are the cleverest magpie of all!’”

Magpie strutted up and down on the table, then turned his head and looked closely into my eyes, as if to say: “Now what do you think about that?”

“That’s a great story, magpie,” I said, “but I think you just made all that up.”

Magpie smiled – the special way that magpies do – and then said: “Well, it was something I dreamt about last night.”

Magpie chuckled. I laughed. I like magpie. He’s fun. Then off he flew into the trees, then suddenly flew back and said: “Oh, and I forget to mention. I ate the mouse!”



6. The cleverest magpie of all

Next time magpie trotted along behind me on the grass and we sat down together, me on the grass and magpie on a branch.

“So you’re the cleverest magpie of all!” I said, remembering his story about the shopping centre.

“No, I’m not really,” said magpie, “but I think I am sometimes wise. It is always better to be wise than clever.”

“That sound very wise,” I said. “Why do you say that?”

“Well,” said magpie, “we magpies tell a story about a magpie who thought he was the cleverest magpie of all and who loved to tell people he was clever. In the morning when we made our songs and our warbles, his warble always ended with the words: ‘and I’m the cleverest magpie of all’.

“When we were out hunting for worms, trotting across the grass, he would stop and call out: ‘I’m the cleverest magpie of all!’

“Everywhere he went he would say: ‘I’m better than you. I’m the best. I’m the cleverest magpie of all’.

“Sometimes he said it over and over again, even when we had finished hunting and everyone had flown back to our tree.



“One day we were hunting in the park. Children had been playing football and had gone home.

“When there’s lots of running and stamping on the grass as people play football it makes the worms curious. So they come up to see what’s happening and that’s when we have our feed.

So there we were with lots of worms. You would eat one and then warble, like saying, ‘Thank you’, like saying grace.



“But our cleverest magpie of all didn’t just say ‘Thank you’. He said: ‘and I’m the cleverest magpie of all!’

Some of the other magpies found this very annoying.

They don’t like it when people say they are better or best at things. It’s skiting or crowing.

Magpies shouldn’t crow. Crows crow!

“Now that day we had a wonderful feast of worms and as evening came and the sun was going down off we flew to our nests, all except you know who!

Yes, the cleverest magpie of all.

What was he doing? He was crowing: ‘And I’m the cleverest magpie of all!’



“Unfortunately he was so busy crowing about himself that he didn’t notice that a woman had come to exercise her dog.

“As soon as she let this dog free from its leash, the dog rushed over to our cleverest magpie and crunch, bit it on its wing. Cleverest magpie was startled but had just enough strength to fly to the nearest tree next to the bushes.

“His wing was not broken but was bleeding and he felt very weak. Some of the magpies who saw this also began to crow, saying, ‘Serves you right! That’ll teach you to crow about yourself!’ Others were concerned. ‘He is very annoying, but we can’t be glad that he has been hurt. He is still a magpie and we should care about him.’

“Just then they saw the cleverest magpie fall, down into the bushes.

‘He’ll die,’ said one magpie. ‘The cats will get him.’

“The magpies who really cared said: ‘Let’s make a plan. We need some of us to go down to the bushes and keep watch. We need others to sit in the tree and keep watch. If any cats come we can scare them off.’



“Did a cat come? Yes, it did.

And this is what we did. I landed near the cat and held my wing out like it was broken.

“The cat saw me and started to get ready to pounce. I hobbled away from the bushes and the cat followed. Just when it was ready to pounce, I hobbled away further, and so gradually the cat had come a long way away from where poor cleverest magpie was.



“I hobbled all the way over to the house where the cat belonged, so that the cat was now back where it belonged.

Someone opened the front door and called, ‘Puss, puss, puss! Dinner time!’

“I never intended to be the cat’s dinner and off I flew back to where poor cleverest magpie was.

“By morning cleverest magpie felt a lot better and could fly back to the nest for a good long rest.

In a very weak warble, he said, ‘Thank you’ to all of us, ‘and I still think I’m the cleverest magpie of all.’

We all went: ‘Shh! We don’t to hear that ever again.’

And then cleverest magpie in a very sad voice said: ‘but I am not very wise.’

‘Yes, we know,’ we all said, ‘but clever people can also be wise, especially if they don’t crow about it.’

‘Thank you,’ said cleverest magpie. ‘I also haven’t really been very clever.’

‘Yes, but you are a magpie just like us and we love you, too.’

Cleverest magpie didn’t hear our words. He was so tired. His eyes had closed. He was fast asleep.”

“That’s a wonderful story,” I said, “and very, very wise.”

“Clever and caring, too,” replied magpie, and flew off to be busy with other things.

7. Magpie and the Aeroplane

Magpie skidded on the glass table as he landed right opposite where I was sitting. The wind was very strong and ruffled his feathers.

“Very windy!” he said, while catching his breath. “Very windy!”

“Sure is,” I answered.

“But flying in the wind is fun,” he continued. “If you open your wings wide, then the wind catches you up and you float high up into the sky or fast across the land and then you can use your tail to turn sharply, to left or right, or even straight up if you are careful.

“That’s what happened to me one day. I took off and soon the wind was carrying me through the air faster than the cars on the road.

“I suddenly bent my tail up and whoosh, I started sailing high into the sky. Higher and higher I went. The air was warm and was rushing me up into the clouds.



“Then something strange happened.

As I was approaching a big white cloud I heard a loud noise coming towards me, getting louder and louder. ‘What can it be?’ I thought. And guess what it was. It was a plane flying towards the airport.

First I thought: I’d better get out of the road.

Then I had an idea and flapping my wings as fast as I could, I flew straight towards the plane with my sharp claws stretched out.

Bang! I bounced off the nose of the aircraft, but with my claws I caught hold of the edge of the wing, just near the jet engine, and I held on for dear life.



“What a ride that was!

I went so fast I started to get very cold and felt like I would soon fall off, but then I edged closer to the jet engine and managed to tuck my claws into a groove.

The jet engine gets very hot, but over where I was it was not too hot, because the wind kept it just right.

In no time at all I could see that we were going to land.

Down we went.



“Then bang: the wheels touched the ground and suddenly the engines went into reverse, blowing the other way with a huge roar, and it blew me off into the air.

“I landed upside down on the side of the runway on some grass. I picked myself up, shook my head, straightened out my feathers, and sat for a moment thinking what to do.

“There was another plane which would soon be taking off. I could take a ride on it, but then that ride had been very exhausting and my poor feet were now quite sore.



“There was a helicopter. I could try riding on its propeller – not a good idea. I’d get dizzy.



“And then I remembered. Birds have GPS. That is, we can find our way home from anywhere.



“That’s why people take pigeons hundreds of kilometres away home, let them loose, and they find their way back. Some birds even fly all the way from Russia down to Australia and Zealand every year.

“So I sat for while, picked a worm or two, snatched a grasshopper – quite a treat – and then flew back up into the air and sure enough, I knew the way. It was a long way, but in the sky there’s no traffic lights, no corners. It’s easy. Wouldn’t you like to fly?”

“Well, yes, of course, I would,” I said, “ but for a start I’m too big and I don’t have wings. I can fly, but only in an aeroplane. But tell me, did you get home alright?”

“Oh yes. It took a long time, but I was home by the end of the day and did I have a story to tell the others!”

“Did they believe you?” I asked.

“Why not?” magpie replied.

I smiled. I’ve heard magpie’s stories before. But what he said about birds finding their way home over long distances is certainly true.

8. From Willie Wagtails to Magpies

One day Magpie landed on my table just as I heard a twitter on the lawn. It was a willie wagtail. Magpie heard it, too. He turned to me, smiling in his own special way, and said: “He’s really a magpie!”

“No,” I said, “He’s a willie wagtail. He’s much smaller or, if it’s a she, she’s much smaller than a magpie.”



“Then let me tell you a story,” said my special friend. “You see, once upon a time we were all small like that, but one day two of our ancestors, a male and a female, were pecking under some trees and they found some golden juice. They drank the juice.

“Nothing happened, except that when the female laid her egg, it was much larger than usual. When it hatched, guess what! It was a bigger black and white bird.

“You know them as magpie larks.
Yes, magpie larks are magpies, too.



“Now the willie wagtails and the magpie skylarks forgot about the tree under which the special juice was found until one day a cat was chasing a lark and nearly caught it. Its claws pulled the feathers off one of the wings and the poor lark just managed to fly up to a lower branch out of the road of the cat, but it was very sore and very sad. It couldn't fly home.

“The branch belonged to the special tree.

At night time the poor lark cried in a bird kind of way and its mate heard the sound and flew over to keep it company.



“When everything was quiet and it was all very safe, they dropped to the ground and began to scratch around for some food.

“When you’re sad, it some times helps to get something to eat. They pecked at an orange root sticking up out of the ground and guess what! Out came golden juice.

It made the sore magpie lark feel strong and soon both were able to fly back to their nest which they had built because it was spring time and they were hoping to lay their eggs.

“When the time came for the female magpie lark to lay its eggs, out they popped but they were huge!

The two magpie larks looked at each and wondered: ‘What have we done?’

“Then when the time came for the eggs to hatch, out came two rather big chicks, which then grew and grew.

They grew much bigger than the magpie larks.

They grew into real magpies just like you and me – I mean me,” said magpie, who for a moment forgot that I’m not a magpie.

“So that’s where magpies come from,” he said.



“That’s not everything,” he continued.

“Some magpies can’t keep a secret and some are greedy.

“One day some two very greedy magpies decided: we’re going to find the golden juice and keep it just for ourselves! They did find it.



“The tree looked down on them and frowned. The kookaburra who had been watching thought: ‘This is not going to turn out well.’

“But it all looked fine at first. A greedy male and female magpie drank the golden juice, flew to their nest, and when spring time came laid their eggs and guess what! Even bigger eggs!

“When these ones hatched the chicks had only black feathers. They grew and grew until they became much larger than their magpie parents. And they had no white feathers at all. They were all black with white rings around their eyes.

“You know them as crows or ravens.



“And for punishment they can’t sing. Instead they make a sound like a growling cat.

Kookaburra laughed when he saw it, because he knew that the seed he had mixed into the juice while the magpies were not looking had changed things.



“Some crows realised the mistake that had been made. They got together and decided. ‘We must keep that tree safe and protect the magic root.’

So they chose two of their number, another breeding pair, to visit the tree and the root.

By this time the tree was very old and the root almost dried up. It was hard to find. When they did find it, there was only a little amount of golden juice, which they carefully sipped until there was none left. As if to say, it is all over, a strong wind came and blew the tree over.

But the two crows made it
back to their nest
and you know what happened?



“Yes, they laid their eggs and their eggs were bigger still and their chicks were bigger still.

They grew and grew and grew until they were very large black birds, but this time they has some white feathers and they didn’t growl like cats; they warbled a little bit like we do. I mean, I do,” he hastened to correct himself.

“You know them as currawongs.”



“And now there’s room for all of you, willie wagtails, magpie larks, magpies, crows or ravens, and currawongs – and you are all magpies!” I said.

Magpie smiled again in his own special way, shook his head and said. “No, not really. That’s just a story we like to tell. But we are all black and white!” he said – “except the cats, ... I mean, the crows!”



9. *Mixing Magpies*

Magpie was quite impressed that I liked his story about where magpies came from. So the next day he started on another story.

“You know,” he said, “there was a time, long ago, when all the animals and birds were very close friends. A galah and a corella or white cockatoo became such good friends that when they laid their eggs, guess what! The chicks were a mixture of pink and grey, like a galah, and white like a corella.”

“I’ve seen that,” I interrupted.
“I’ve seen a corella-galah in my garden and taken a photo of it! a galah with a white back”



“So, you see,” said magpie, “my story is true.

“Now one day,” he continued, “a black dog, that used to chase birds, found a sick galah and instead of killing it, licked it and cared for it until it was able to fly again. They became very close friends.

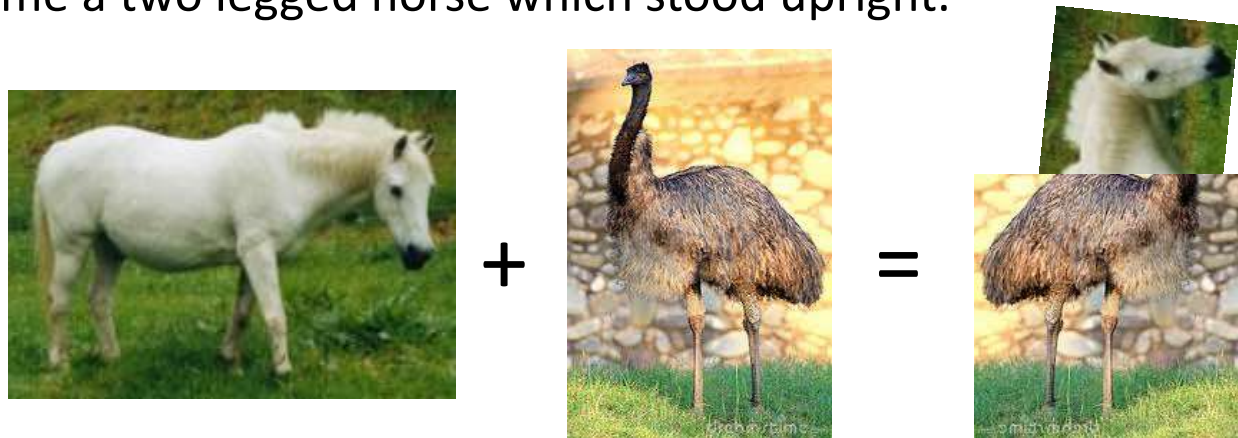
“And guess what happened in spring time? The galah laid a very, very big egg and out hatched a very strange looking bird with four legs, black fur, and pink and grey feathers.”



“You’re kidding,” I said.

“Oh no,” replied magpie, “in those days lots of things like that happened.

Did you know what happened when a horse became every good friends with an emu? The emu laid a huge egg and out came a two legged horse which stood upright.



“And do you know what happened when that two legged horse became close friends with a pig? Out came a two legged pig-horse, looking a bit like you. In fact, I think you human people must be a mixture of two legged birds and animals something like that!” 😊

“Magpie, you have a wonderful imagination. So did pigs mate with birds? Can pigs fly? Did elephants mate with eagles and produce elephants with wings?” I replied.

Magpie sat for while and said nothing. After a long time he said: “I like imagining things. Don’t you wish you could fly? Don’t you sometimes imagine things, too?”

“Of course, I do,” I replied. “That’s fun. It’s also good when people imagine what it’s like to be someone else. One day I saw someone who was very sad because he had lost his dog. Some people around him said: ‘Stop worrying! Don’t be sad. Forget about it.’

But I imagined what it would be like to lose a dog. When I did that, it helped me be his friend and help him find it.”



Magpie looked at me for a long time.

“There are some things I find it very hard to imagine,” he said.

“I can’t imagine myself lying down to go to sleep.

I can’t imagine myself putting on shoes or clothes.

I can’t imagine driving a car!”

“Of course you can’t,” I said. “You’re a bird. But I’m sure you can imagine what it’s like to be an injured bird or a lonely one or a baby one.”

“I sure can. And I also like imagining and making up stories and flying high into the skies.”

And with that off he flew.

10. Where is Magpie?

I sat and waited in the usual place, but magpie did not appear. The next day was the same, and the next.

What had happened to magpie?

Had he been trapped again in the Shopping Centre and this time been exterminated?

Had he hitched a ride on a plane which was going in the wrong direction and I would never see him again?

Had he been run over on the road? Though magpies are very quick to get out of the road of cars.

Had a cat taken him?

I began to worry. I listened for sounds in the night as my magpie friends traded answers on maths problems, but did I hear his voice? I wasn't sure.

Then on my morning walk through the park one morning I saw him.

What a great relief!

But he was very busy.

There were two other magpies beside him nearly as big as he was, but I could tell they were very young. They still had speckled white on their backs and grey baby feathers tucked in among their new shiny white and black ones.

I came close and magpie looked up a little startled.



“Busy,” he said. “Very busy. I’ve got to find worms for three mouths, theirs and mine. Come and meet the family!”

They were his chicks. He was the male. His mate, the female, was nearby also fetching worms.

The difference between males and females is that males have a white back and females have both black and white in the backs.



Magpie was there with lots of others. I counted fourteen.

“Uncles and aunts and cousins,” he explained. “Busy time. These youngsters need lots to eat to become strong. Some of them are fussy. They will be weak. You’ve got to eat everything to be strong!”

The little ones, which were not really little at all, followed the adults around and chirped like little sparrows, holding their beaks open.

The adults then picked up worms or bugs and dropped into the beaks of the youngsters.



“Would they be doing this all day?” I wondered.

Magpie knew what I was thinking. “No, not all day,” he said, “but sometimes it feels like it! They also need to rest. Otherwise they get tired and if a dog or cat suddenly appears they may be too slow to get away and get caught and eaten.”

With that he called out to the others and off they flew, but magpie first perched on a branch just above my head and did something very special.

“We don’t usually invite human beings to come to see our nests,” he said, “but would you like to see?”

This was very special because he knew where we lived, but I never really knew where he did.

“Then come,” he said and began to fly away.

I walked, walked very fast, then ran, but magpies fly so fast. Soon I lost sight of him. As I stood there wondering what to do, back he came.

“You’re a bit slow,” he said.

“But I don’t have wings,” I replied.

“OK,” he said and this time he flew on stopped and looked back very patiently, waiting for me to come. It’s so good when people are patient.

Soon I was under a very large gum tree.



“Our nest is up here,” he said, pointing with his beak to a nest high up in the branches. “We built it together.”

He meant him and his female mate.

“We do lots of things together. We feed the youngsters together. We sometimes hunt in different places, but then we come back to our nest and talk about what we saw. She knows all about you, too. I’ve told her.”

I smiled. “That’s great. But I can’t see your nest very well. Do you expect me to climb up this gum tree? I don’t think that’s possible.”

“No, not at all,” said magpie. He then pointed me to a very large rock up on raised piece of land not very far away. “If you climb up on top of that rock, then you will be able to see.”

I did and there they all were, all four of them, the two youngsters sitting in the nest and magpie and his mate on a branch nearby.

The nest was made of straw, but also had coloured ribbons, pegs, pieces of string, and on the bottom quite a lot of hair, human hair.

“Where did all that come from?”
I wondered.

Again magpie read my mind.
“Promise you won’t tell,” he said.

“No, not at all,” I answered.

I knew the answer to my question. I did wonder if he had visited the shopping centre more than once.



This time I said goodbye to magpie at his place and I turned around flapped my arms very hard and flew back to my place. Well, I tried to, but it just made magpie laugh and all the other birds and the kookaburras looking on laughed, too.



No, I had no alternative but to walk. Magpie flew alongside, stopping every now and again and saying, “What a pity you can’t fly. Never mind. Everyone is different. Enjoy your night.”

I would. It had been a big day. Lots of things went through my mind as I lay in bed ready for sleep, how good it was to do things together with your mate, what fun it would be to fly, and before I knew it, I was asleep.

That was fine because it’s when I’m asleep, then I can dream, and when I dream, then I know: of course I can fly!

11. Magpie and Wheatie

Magpie was eating and when he had finished, he sat for a long time very still, thinking.

He was looking at a grain of wheat and began to imagine himself having a conversation. The grain of wheat, which he later called “Wheatie”, looked very frightened.



“Why are you so
afraid?”
asked Magpie.

“I’m scared that one day I might get hurt. I’m so sacred,” said Wheatie.

“You don’t need to worry,” said Magpie. If you get a cut, it will heal – especially if you keep it clean and don’t have an infection. It will just take time.”



“But what if I feel sad?
It would be terrible to be sad,”
cried Wheatie.

“Feeling sad is just like having
a cut,” said Magpie.

“It hurts for a while, but then
it will heal.

It’s OK to feel sad sometimes.
Give it time and it will go
away.”

Wheatie still looked worried, very worried.

“What if I feel bad? What if I do something bad. I would feel awful. I’d feel just like rubbish,” moaned Wheatie.

“It’s OK to feel bad sometimes when you’ve done something wrong.

When you own up to it, the bad feeling will gradually go away.

God forgives you.

You can forgive yourself.

Everyone makes mistakes and we can all start again.”



Wheatie wasn't finished.

In a very soft voice Wheatie said:
"But what if I die?"

"Everyone dies," said Magpie.
"Then you go to be with God.
There's nothing to be afraid of."



Just then Magpie leaned down closer to Wheatie and in a moment picked Wheatie up in his beak and swallowed. Down went Wheatie, like down a slippery slide, all in the dark, down , down, until Wheatie landed in a warm soft bed, Magpie's tummy, and went fast asleep.



After three days Magpie was again sitting on his favourite perch when plop: down dropped Wheatie in Magpie's plop onto the sandy soil.

Soon the rain came and washed the plot and Wheatie deep into the sandy soil.

After a week a tiny green shoot appeared, popping its head above the sand. Soon it was a blade of grass and then a full grown grant clump of wheat.

One day Magpie looked down and saw the wheat that had sprouted already forming new ears of grain, so he hopped down right next to the plant. Smiling inside he then whispered to the plant: “I told you it would be alright!”

Magpie knew it was all in his imagination, but he also knew I would enjoy the story and that what he said was true.

