

The Magpie-Lark

By NORMAN CHAFFER, R.A.O.U., Roseville, Sydney,
N.S.W.

The Magpie-Lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*), ranging widely throughout Australia, is one of the best known of our common birds and a general favourite. One of our most useful birds, it is of inestimable value as a destroyer of insect pests. Tame and confiding, it will if unmolested regularly visit the house surroundings or farmyard. Always spick and span with coat of shining black and white, it is a striking figure as it walks elegantly across the lawn, with long slender legs. The sexes are readily distinguishable, the female having a white face and throat, and the male being black on those parts. During the winter months large numbers resort to a common roosting place, although they move about in pairs during the day.

An interesting association exists between the Magpie-Lark and the Willie Wagtail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*) the nests of the two species being very frequently found close together. A Magpie-Lark regularly nests in my yard, and, with the exception of last season, a Wagtail has always nested nearby. In each of the years 1925 and 1926 both birds reared three broods, the nesting period extending from June to January. Sometimes the same nest is used twice, at other times a new nest is built. In 1927 the Wagtail arrived late, whilst the "Peewee" had been busy for some time and was then attending her third brood. Before the eggs hatched one of the adult Wagtails disappeared, probably the victim of a cat. The remaining bird carried on however, and successfully reared the three young. On January 8 at dusk I was watching the nest when the excited movements of the young birds indicated that something unusual was about to happen. Obedient to the call of the parent bird the three young left the nest and made a short flight to a nearby tree. Glancing up to the Magpie-Larks' nest, I found that the young there were also preparing to leave the nest, which they did within five minutes of the Wagtails' doing so. Closely as these birds were associated, it was surely a coincidence that both lots of young should vacate the nests together. I thought it strange also that they should leave the shelter of the nest in the evening. Is this usually the case with birds when undisturbed? In 1928 the Magpie-Larks again reared three broods between June and January. About the middle of March, 1929, the birds again commenced building, and the young left the nest early in May.

Few of the common birds of Australia have been so little photographed as the Magpie-Lark. This is probably



Magpie Lark and Young.

Photo. by Norman Chaffer, R.A.O.U.

due largely to the inaccessible position usually chosen for nesting. The conspicuous bowl-shaped mud nest, placed on a horizontal branch or in a fork of a eucalypt or other suitable tree, is certainly not difficult to find. Again, the birds are, so far as my experience goes, timid at the nest. I attempted to photograph the pair nesting in my yard, but they refused for four hours to face the camera, although the nest contained half-grown young. I finally had to remove the camera for fear of the young coming to harm.

On August 9 last year a pair of Magpie-Larks were noted building in an unusually low position about 12 feet from the ground in a slender tree. On August 13 the third egg was laid, and the young hatched out, one on August 27, and the other on the 28th. The third egg did not hatch. I might add that four eggs is the usual clutch about this district. The young birds left the nest on September 15. About the time the young hatched out a Willie Wagtail commenced building immediately below the nest of the Magpie-Larks, and was a continual source of trouble, repeatedly betraying my presence to the latter birds by its harsh scolding notes. The nest, although low, was in a difficult position. The camera was placed on the top of a batten lashed firmly to the tree. Focussing had to be done with the aid of a mirror held behind the focussing screen, as I could not get behind the camera for that purpose. The female only would pay fleeting visits to the nest, but with long intervals between each visit. Often she would alight nearby, calling in loud scolding notes, while the male flew overhead uttering warning cries. I paid a visit to the nest on two separate days before securing a satisfactory photograph. The exposure used was one-hundredth of a second. The young birds don the adult plumage before leaving the nest, the sexes being readily distinguished. In the accompanying photograph the two young are males.

Report of Bird Observers' Club, Victoria

A small club party spent the afternoon of August 3 at Altona. The day was boisterous enough to make a walk exhilarating, but bird life kept much to shelter. By the shoreline several Red-capped Dotterels (*Charadrius ruficapillus*) and Silver Gulls (*Larus novæ-hollandiæ*) were feeding, and a solitary Pacific Gull (*Gabianus pacificus*) in perfect black and white plumage cruised about seeking what he might devour. A single wading bird among the rocks attracted our attention; it proved to be the Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominicus*), showing much black on the undersurface, the remnants of summer plumage. This is