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Inter-flock Fighting in the Western Magpie

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Much has been written lately concerning the Western Magpie (*Gymnorhina dorsalis*) and its habits, and possibly the territory theory with that species will be the subject of much discussion in the future.

These notes have been compiled from intermittent watching of Magpies residing in my locality. A party which has

for the past six years, to my knowledge, nested in a large tuart tree (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*) a few chains from my house, frequently comes to grips with another group of Magpies which reside in the south end of the Karrakatta Cemetery, about one mile distant from my locality. When the cemetery birds trespass within half a mile of the local Magpies' domain a 'squabble' is inevitable.

The actual number of birds in the two separate parties is difficult to determine, as on different occasions there are from ten to fifteen birds in the local group, though there appears to be no more than nine in the visiting group. However, there have been odd occasions when as many as forty Magpies have been counted. This suggests that individuals from yet another group have appeared on the scene.

The whole procedure generally begins with the local white-backed Magpie singling out an adult male of the intruders. The local bird makes repeated dives on the other and eventually both birds take to the air with the local one in hot pursuit. Meanwhile other birds of the two opposite groups hold what look like 'debates' while perched on a house-top and at times their actions are very amusing.

On several occasions I have watched two or three of the local birds assume a position in which the body feathers appear puffed out, the wings partly raised and the head bent downwards, giving an appearance of anger and looking decidedly defiant towards the visiting Magpies, some of which were perched at this period on the same roof. I have noticed also that individual birds will advance towards each other, then retreat. I am uncertain, however, whether the two birds indulging in such behaviour are members of one group or one from each of the two neighbouring flocks.

A subdued croaking noise is often uttered by these birds whilst in this position and it seems to me to be a warning signal preceding any attempt of hostility towards the intruders. This call note must not be confused with the 'warning' cry of a Magpie, as the former is hardly heard unless one is fairly close to the birds.

If the rival Magpies decide to enter into any combat, the real fight usually takes place in the air during the flight. Immediately any of the visiting birds leave the roof-top or perching site, the local birds at once give chase, amid much harsh cries, and pursue their quarry for some considerable distance, at times disappearing well out of sight. However, shortly afterwards the 'locals' can be seen wending their way back to their own domain, giving forth that triumphant carolling which cannot be mistaken. This behaviour is more in evidence just before the breeding season and more activity is shown by these birds after a shower of rain.