

The Black-billed Magpie, a long-tailed crow

WARREN NELSON

The prairies of the American West would seem like a much more appropriate setting to find one of our more interesting songbirds. They are much more common in the western United States, but can be found fairly easily in our area too. When people see one in flight for the first time, they will most likely stop with mouth wide open wondering what they just saw. Over the years, I have been called several times from people excited over this bird....and rightfully so! Central Minnesota is about as far east as these birds are found to nest. What is kind of interesting is that they nest all around the world with the exception of the United States east of the Mississippi River.

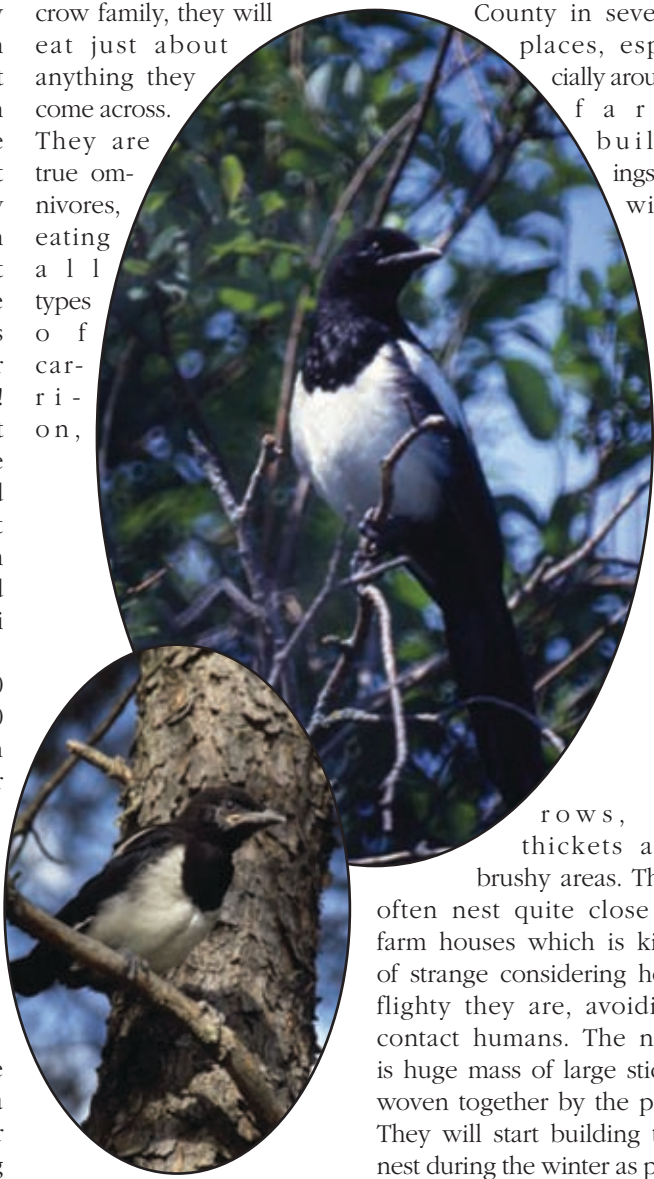
The magpie is about 20 to 22 inches long with 10 to 12 inches of that length being their tail, just over half of the body length. It is the only songbird in our area that has such a long streaming tail. The bird itself is a mixture of black and white plumage with white patches in black and iridescent blue/green wings. It has a black bill (hence the name) and that long tail is a blackish green shade. Their call is a raspy, chattering

cack, cack, cack.

They will spend most of their time on the ground searching for food and, like most other members of the crow family, they will eat just about anything they come across. They are true omnivores, eating a l l types o f car- r i - on,

grains, grasshoppers, mice, fruit, any insects and they will even occasionally show up at suet feeders around farms.

They nest here in Aitkin County in several places, especially around f a r m build- ings, in wind



rows, in thickets and brushy areas. They often nest quite close to farm houses which is kind of strange considering how flighty they are, avoiding contact humans. The nest is huge mass of large sticks woven together by the pair. They will start building the nest during the winter as part

of their courtship and bonding, and it will take them several months to piece it together. It can reach a size of over four feet in what looks a lot like a big round witch's broom. The top is actually a canopy with either one or two holes in it along one of the main branches, which they use as entrance and exit holes. The inside is lined with fine grasses to help cushion the four to ten eggs (commonly four or five). Incubation is by both parents and their young hatch out in about three weeks. They will fly about four weeks after hatching and those who have had them nest close to their homes will attest to the fact that their young are just about the noisiest of all young birds as they grow and finally leave the nest. They will normally hang around the area where the nest was and, if you get close to the young off of the nest, you can expect to be told off by the parents in no uncertain terms. But the joy of having them around is well worth the two weeks of noise you have to put up with. The family group will hang around our area all winter, wandering until they come across carrion to feed on. It is truly a special bird to be enjoyed every time it is seen.

MN Master Naturalist Volunteer Training

Fort Snelling State Park in St. Paul is hosting a one-week Minnesota Master Naturalist Volunteer Training beginning Mon., June 25, running through Fri., June 29.

Master Naturalist volunteers complete a 40-hour hands-on course with expert instructors and fellow learners – studying natural history, environmental interpretation and conservation stewardship. Final certification comes with the completion of 40 hours of volunteer service. The program offers three courses that correspond to Minnesota's three major ecosystems – entitled 'Big Woods, Big Rivers', 'Prairies and Potholes', and 'Northwoods, Great Lakes'.

This course will cover the natural and cultural history of the 'Big Woods, Big Rivers' region. An in-depth overview of the deciduous forest ecosystem will be provided and participants will observe and

learn about the variety of plant and animal communities of the region. Through the course, participants will develop their ability to observe nature and will learn tools to improve these skills. In addition, participants will improve their communication skills by sharing knowledge with other participants and working on a group project.

The classes will be held Mon., June 25 through Fri., June 29, from 8 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. Field trips are included in the one-week class. The cost for the course is \$200, including materials.

Register on-line at www.MinnesotaMasterNaturalist.org, call 1.888.241.4532, or e-mail info@minnesotamaster-naturalist.org.

Minnesota Master Naturalist is sponsored by Univ. of MN Ext. and MnDNR and supported in part by a National Science Foundation grant.

Lakes & Pines to meet

The Board of Directors of Lakes and Pines Community Action Council, Inc. will meet Mon., May 21, at 10 a.m. at Lakes and Pines' central office facility, 1700 Maple Ave. East in Mora.

Lakes and Pines CAC serves

a seven-county area with anti-poverty programs including Head Start, Fuel Assistance, Weatherization, Housing Rehab and emergency food and shelter programs.

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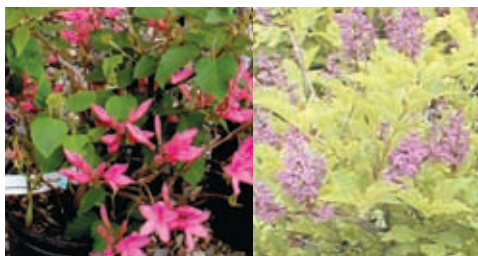
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