

Black-billed Magpies in our Back Yard

by **Bob Lane**

P.O. Box 85, Damascus, OH 44619

Extraordinary bird sightings are totally unexpected in Damascus. A small Ohio town, split down the middle by the Mahoning-Columbiana county line, Damascus is heavily wooded, with many large trees, including many pines and spruces. Scenic farmland and open country dotted with tracts of woodland surround it. Pleasant it is to be sure, but not a scene for rare birds.

The saga of the magpies began on the morning of Sunday, 28 August 2005, on the Mahoning County side of town. My wife Denise was working in the yard, and heard sounds with which she was familiar, but not in Ohio. Excited, she came back to the house and told me I was going to think she was crazy, but that she heard magpies out back. I followed her outside, and soon I too heard them, out along the tree line. It was not long before they flew into view, landing above us in a tree.

Like a dream for two avid birders, we had two black-billed magpies *Pica hudsonia* appear in our back yard. Entranced, we watched them for about an hour as they moved around in the treetops between our yard and a lake nearby. At length, a red-shouldered hawk showed up, and apparently disturbed them. The magpies were gone, over the trees, and we couldn't relocate them. We decided to announce the sighting, hoping that extra eyes and ears would help us relocate the birds. During the late afternoon, twelve knowledgeable birders, all from Ohio or Pennsylvania, showed up.

Hours of intensive searching failed to find the magpies. The only confirmation that Denise and I hadn't been seeing things was a story of an encounter one Pennsylvania birder had with some local kids. He'd asked them if they'd seen any unusual birds, and they'd responded that yes, two black-and-white parrots had just flown by about fifteen minutes earlier. As he pointed out, coming from Ohio non-birders this is as good a description of magpies as you can expect!

What a day! What mood swings! In the morning we felt like we were in some sort of birding Super Bowl, then by evening, after none of us could find the birds, we thought we'd missed the game entirely.

Two days later, on Tuesday, we witnessed the birds making another quick morning pass, and then they were gone again. How strange it was that such vocal and visually striking birds can vanish so quickly! Five days later, on Sunday 4 September, while I took an 8 am walk in the yard, I heard the magpies out toward the west. They were back. After just a few minutes of searching, I located them in a tree on the edge of the pasture. This was the first good view I'd had of the two birds perched side by side: one was noticeably smaller, with a smaller tail. Neither had a leg band, and their feathers were pristine and full.

Were they a pair, or an adult with a juvenile? We could not be sure, but in the account that follows we'll call them male and female. With looks this good, my next thought was to get photographs for verification.

I hurried to get Denise, as well as the owner of the pasture, a non-birding neighbor. When we returned, the birds were nowhere to be seen. Not again! After half an hour of listening and scanning, Denise heard a magpie to the north, and eventually we refound a single bird, the longer-tailed male. Here was the first sign of the reclusive nature of the female. Over the next two hours Denise and our neighbor tracked the bird on foot, while I fetched a camera and made phone calls. The male made nine tree-top stops over a half-mile area on the west side of town, and when I finally caught up with the pursuers I got photos of him in the crown of a dead tree.

Finally, visual proof! After twenty minutes of offering great views, the bird flew over the local fire station and out of sight. We walked to the other side of the station, and lo and behold, bird number two was back with number one, after two hours of being unseen together. After one more treetop stop, they were off, and gone for the day. Interestingly, of eleven stops we observed, nine were at the very tips of very tall spruce trees.

On the following day we were especially alert, and had a quick sighting of both birds in the morning, and later in the evening a sighting of the male on a silo half a mile to the west. The latter was the only time we saw either after noon in Mahoning County.

On Tuesday morning 6 September, the tenth day after our initial sighting, a member of the Records Committee was with Denise and both got good views of both birds for about an hour. Finally, an experienced birder, not just one of the neighbors, could verify the presence of magpies.

This was to be the last sighting for another ten days. It also closes the Mahoning County chapter of the story. On every occasion during this period, we heard the birds before we saw them. They were never seen on the ground, only in trees. We never witnessed them feeding; and they were always on the move, making photos hard to come by.

We felt the birds had probably moved on, but we didn't give up hope. During the next week I visited farms, golf courses, and local householders within a three-mile radius of Damascus, showing pictures of magpies and asking if anyone had seen or heard of anyone else seeing the birds. No one responded positively. I left my phone number. One thing I did find out was that even a bird as stunning as a magpie can go unnoticed by most people. To them it's just an odd-looking crow, and even if they had recognized what they saw, whom would they tell about it? And what of smaller, quieter, less striking species---how many of them must pass through Ohio undetected?

On the evening of 16 September I received three phone calls within a twenty-minute span. My efforts had paid off. A lady who lived nearby, an animal control officer, and the owner of the Westville Golf Course had seen the birds, all in the same area in Columbiana County, two miles southwest of our location.

We immediately went out to look, and soon found the birds. Where had the magpies gone between the brief and occasional visits witnessed earlier? Denise was home all day, every day. She knows magpies well, and if they'd been around she would have detected them.

Thus began the Columbiana County chapter of the story. During the next nine days, even though the birds could be found with dedicated searching, there were no distinct patterns to follow. They were often on private property, out of sight from roads, etc. The property owners did not want visitors other than Denise and I or other local people. We followed their movements every day as best we could.

On several occasions I received calls from local observers who were concerned the male magpie had been injured. They had seen this bird hopping along, and had not realized this was his normal gait. One book describes this species as noisy, shy, and aggressive at times. When the magpies were vocal we never tired of listening to their continuous chattering; it was music to our ears. They did seem shy, and never tame, always avoiding coming close to human visitors. They never begged for handouts. As for occasional aggressiveness, a cat was once observed climbing into one of their roosts, and when it got close the male literally knocked it out of the tree. On numerous occasions, both magpies were seen tormenting local cats.

The magpies did not always roost close together at night, but usually within a few hundred feet of one another—within calling range. Except for some scoldings from blue jays, we noticed no antagonistic interactions between the magpies and local birds.

On Monday, 26 September, views from the public road were possible, both in the early morning and the late afternoon. The female continued to be very hard to come by, and preferred to roost in a nearly inaccessible area around some dilapidated farm sheds, overgrown with vegetation, behind a house with many barking dogs. Fortunately, the lady who'd called ten days earlier finally agreed, reluctantly, to let us bring individuals to her back yard to look for the birds.

I called the twenty-one people who'd made the trek to Mahoning County but had failed to see the magpies, telling them they now had a good opportunity to do so. During the early part of the week, most of these people came with us and observed the birds, most often at a huge compost pile behind the local lady's house. The magpies could be found rooting around in the pile, and I now wonder if they were possibly after earthworms in the decaying material. By Wednesday a large grassy field just to the north, loaded with grasshoppers, became a reliable and accessible viewing area, hosting many visits from the birds. This location, between a picturesque farmstead and some leaky gas storage tanks, was to host many human visitors as well.

Denise and I were able to obtain limited permission for access from the farm owners to let observers come. Now believing chances of seeing the magpies were very good, we decided it was time to let other birders know. We called and had directions to the site posted on the ohio-birds internet list,

including restrictions requested by residents neighboring the site. During the next eight days over 120 magpie-seekers from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Ontario came and had good looks at the birds. Most came in small groups, but twenty-two Amish visitors from Holmes and Wayne Counties came in larger ones. There was a carnival atmosphere when numerous visitors arrived, and few if any left disappointed.

A nature columnist for the *Columbus Dispatch* came to visit on Friday evening, sitting with five other birders in the middle of the field for three hours until dark fell. They enjoyed magpie activity all around and overhead, with colorful rolling farmland as background, taking away lasting memories shared with newfound friends. He was to have a four-hour drive home in the dark to savor them. Many others gladly paid a price in time and miles for the magpies, and others shared them vicariously through a wonderful article the columnist was to write about his visit.

Would-be magpie watchers sometimes had to wait as long as an hour and a half, but patience paid off with views of grasshopper foraging, breathtaking flyovers, and memorable vocalizations. On two occasions observers grew impatient, and played a magpie recording, whereupon the male popped into view in a nearby tree. Even this more demonstrative bird could blend into the shadows of the leaves, where his dramatic black and white coloration served as a camouflage. By contrast, a magpie seen flying across the open grassy field was striking, its long bluish-green tail streaming gracefully, seemingly in slow motion as everyone watched in silent appreciation.

We kept a magpie log, where all visitors signed in; many returned more than once, some up to four times. Many saw only the male, though the female could often be heard calling from the trees. On one occasion two groups of birders were about 500 feet apart at opposite ends of the field. At exactly the same moment, one group spotted the male perched briefly atop the silo next to the barn, while the other was glimpsed along the tree line to the south. Members of both groups were frantically signaling one another, and we all had a laugh when we discovered both birds were involved.

Among many interesting behaviors was one noted as the male walked along the right edge of the paved road, plucking grasshoppers from the grassy berm, then snapping his head to the left, bouncing them off the pavement before eating them. Perhaps this served to stun them and ensure they couldn't escape. On two occasions while going to check on the female at her roost, I heard what I believed to be her, only to find a blue jay doing a perfect imitation of a magpie call. Claiming a find by sound alone is not necessarily a certainty, especially when a mimicking corvid is involved. Once the male, while foraging around the area of the barn, was seen pulling insulation from electrical wiring. On another occasion he was observed catching what appeared to be wasps under the eaves of the barn.

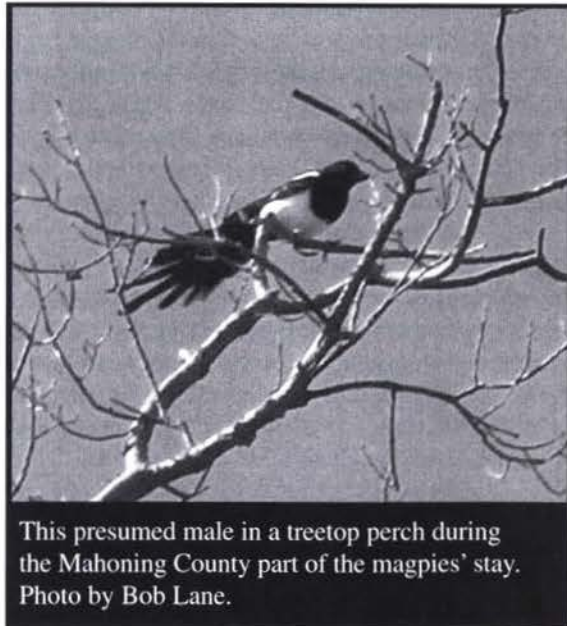
The magpie's presence in the Damascus area was acknowledged by over twenty-five internet postings. We found Mike Busam's write-up the most entertaining, using the characters Heckle and Jeckle, the mischievous cartoon

magpies, to make light of some of the issues encountered when out-of-town birders come to visit a rural area with many private landowners. Here's an excerpt:

Bob and Denise Lane have helped scores of birders navigate the local social mores in order to catch a glimpse of the birds. Birders interested in taking a shot at seeing the magpies would do well to catch up on the do's and don'ts of magpie watching before traveling the road to Damascus: don't even think about talking to the neighbors; watch where you park, for there are No Trespassing areas and natural gas leaks; and beware of angry dogs, as well. All in all, sounds like a lot of fun! But all of this is in keeping with the Damascus magpies' namesakes. One can imagine the cartoon magpies and what they would make of the fuss, perhaps Heckle peddling a "Bad Humor" ice-cream cart, bell a-jangling, down the road, advertising his wares to birders and residents alike, and Jeckle puffing on a stogie next to the "Caution" tape alongside the gas leak, a cruel grin on his face.

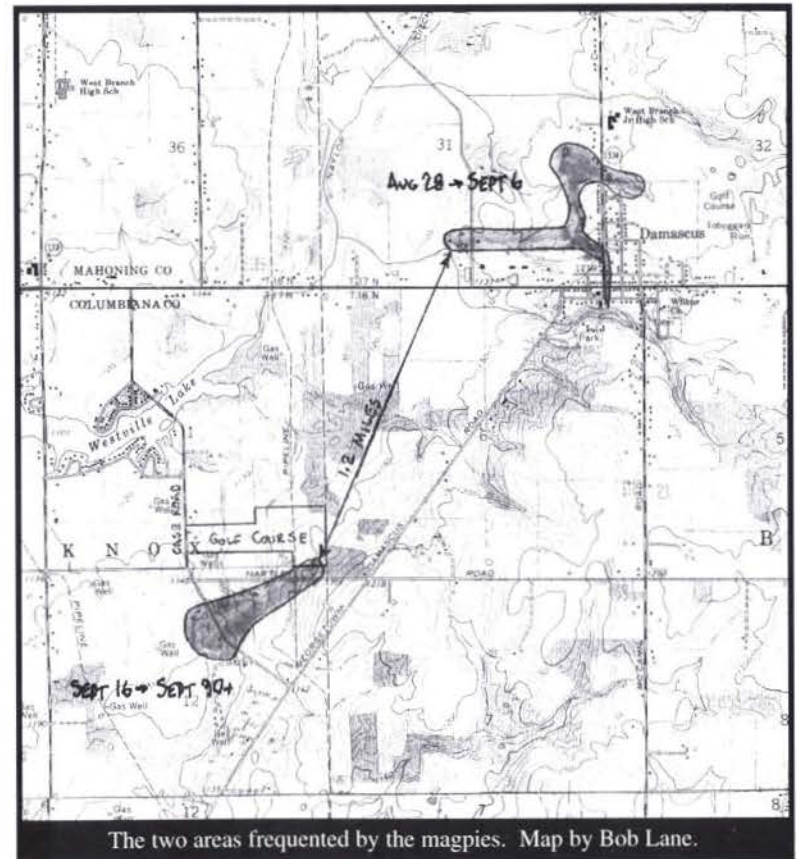
The daily habits and movements of the magpies while at the Columbiana County site were completely different from those while at the Mahoning County location. At times one wondered, indeed, if these might really be a second pair of magpies. Very seldom did we witness any type of repetitive daily routine. The only hint of a reliably observable pattern was at the pond adjacent to the field. The male was observed on five nights at about 6:30 pm—though never on consecutive nights—walking or hopping the perimeter of the pond at the water's edge.

The last sighting was of both birds near the gas storage tanks on the morning of 14 October. During the week before their apparent departure they were being seen together, feeding early in the morning; they were both hard to find during the rest of the day. Previous to this, seeing them together at the site was unusual. By the 14th, it seemed the grasshoppers and crickets at the field were nearly gone. Perhaps this was an invitation to move on.



This presumed male in a treetop perch during the Mahoning County part of the magpies' stay. Photo by Bob Lane.

It has been an interesting chapter in our lives. It was lucky for us that they stayed in our area for forty-seven days, and we totally enjoyed playing magpie hide-and-seek. Finding and observing them gave us an unusual purpose every day. We felt a sense of emptiness when they'd left: what then were we going to do today instead with our spare time? We were fortunate also to make personal contact with most of the birders who came to visit. All of those we met, sometimes with our assistance, succeeded in seeing a magpie, and some to see them both. One of the most rewarding aspects of having these birds so close to home was the opportunity to put faces to the names of birding enthusiasts we have seen mentioned in publications for the past twenty-five years. As diehard birders, this was our once-in-a-lifetime spot in the limelight, right in our back yard, our moment of birding glory! To any reader who was a magpie watcher, thank you for coming to visit our little corner of Ohio. It has been fun. And good luck to the magpies, wherever they may be.



The two areas frequented by the magpies. Map by Bob Lane.