



## Black-billed Magpie (*Pica pica*)



### Wildlife and Landscapes

Scotts Bluff National Monument is a unique historic landmark which preserves both cultural and natural resources. Sweeping from the river valley woodlands, to the mixed-grass prairie, to pine studded bluffs, Scotts Bluff contains a wide variety of wildlife and landscapes. The 3,000 acres comprising Scotts Bluff conserves one of the last areas of the Great Plains which has not been significantly changed by human occupation.

### History of the Magpie

As emigrants crossed the western prairies, they found the numerous and wide-spread black-billed magpie. Referring to the magpie's noisy chattering, they gave it a female name "Marguerite" (Maggie). Pie comes from the latin word "pica", meaning black and white. The French fur traders named the magpie (Hoffman).

Long streaming tails, longer than their bodies, and white wing patches characterize magpies. While often admired for its beauty, it was more often cursed. Lewis and Clark reported that magpies even entered their tents and stole food, and were often tamed by the children. They frequently followed the buffalo hunters and fed on the waste from the kill.

### Magpie Nests

The black-billed magpie makes a very large nest that can take up to 40 days to construct. The nest is a sturdy domed bowl, made primarily of sticks and mud. It is lined with hair, grass, bark, or rootlets and placed in a tree, shrub or on a utility pole. Adapted to grasslands, but requiring trees for nesting, the magpie is the most visible bird species at the monument. If a large mass of sticks is visible in a pine tree or juniper, it is most likely a magpie nest.



### Predators

American crows commonly take eggs from black-billed magpies. Other common nest predators are long-tailed weasels, mink, domestic or feral cats, raccoons, northern harriers, red-tailed hawks, common ravens and especially the great horned owl. Bull snakes are also known to raid nests.



Raccoon



Great Horned Owl



Bull Snake

## Sanitation Engineers

Magpies are omnivorous, meaning that they eat both plant and animal material, including many types of insects, carrion, eggs and rodents, as well as berries, seeds, nuts. Garbage and food from pets that are fed outside are also fair game. They are opportunistic scavengers and play a major role in cleansing the environment of decaying carcasses which earns them the title of “sanitation engineer” of the prairie.

Not only do they eat dead animals, magpies frequently launch relentless and vicious attacks on live animals. A park employee observed a magpie kill a healthy rabbit. The magpie repeatedly struck the back of the rabbit’s neck with its heavy sharp beak. On another occasion, a magpie was observed defending its nest from a marauding bull snake. As the two animals faced each other, the magpie circled the snake repeatedly while the bull snake twisted into a corkscrew and each animal struck out at the other at the most opportune times.

## Tree Top Sitting

Treetop sitting is a behavior that denotes ownership of space. It might not look like a territorial display, but it is equivalent to a song in other songbirds. An individual magpie simply sits in the top of a tree for an extended period of time, with white flanks fluffed so that the dark wings are hidden. Black ends and white middle makes this bird highly visible. This behavior allows it to advertise its presence and overlook its own and its neighbor’s territories.



## Other Birds Common to Scotts Bluff National Monument

Listed below are some of the more common birds found within Scotts Bluff National Monument. There have been approximately 100 species of birds identified in the Park.

- |                        |                       |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Great Blue Heron       | Rock wren             |
| Mallard                | House wren            |
| Turkey vulture         | American robin        |
| Red-tailed hawk        | Brown thrasher        |
| American kestrel       | Townsend’s solitary   |
| Prairie falcon         | Loggerhead shrike     |
| Ring-necked pheasant   | European starling     |
| Northern bobwhite      | Yellow warbler        |
| Rock dove              | Common yellowthroat   |
| Mourning dove          | Yellow-breasted chat  |
| Great-horned owl       | Blue grosbeak         |
| Short-eared owl        | Lazuli bunting        |
| House sparrow          | Indigo bunting        |
| Common nighthawk       | Rufous-sided towhee   |
| White-throated swift   | Chipping sparrow      |
| Belted kingfisher      | Lark sparrow          |
| Northern flicker       | Lark bunting          |
| Hairy woodpecker       | Grasshopper sparrow   |
| Downy woodpecker       | White-crowned sparrow |
| Say’s phoebe           | Dark-eyed junco       |
| Eastern kingbird       | Western meadowlark    |
| Western kingbird       | Common grackle        |
| N. roughwinged swallow | Brown-headed cowbird  |
| Cliff swallow          | Orchard oriole        |
| Barn swallow           | House finch           |
| Black-capped chickadee | American goldfinch    |



American robin



Red-tailed hawk



Dark-eyed junco



Western meadowlark