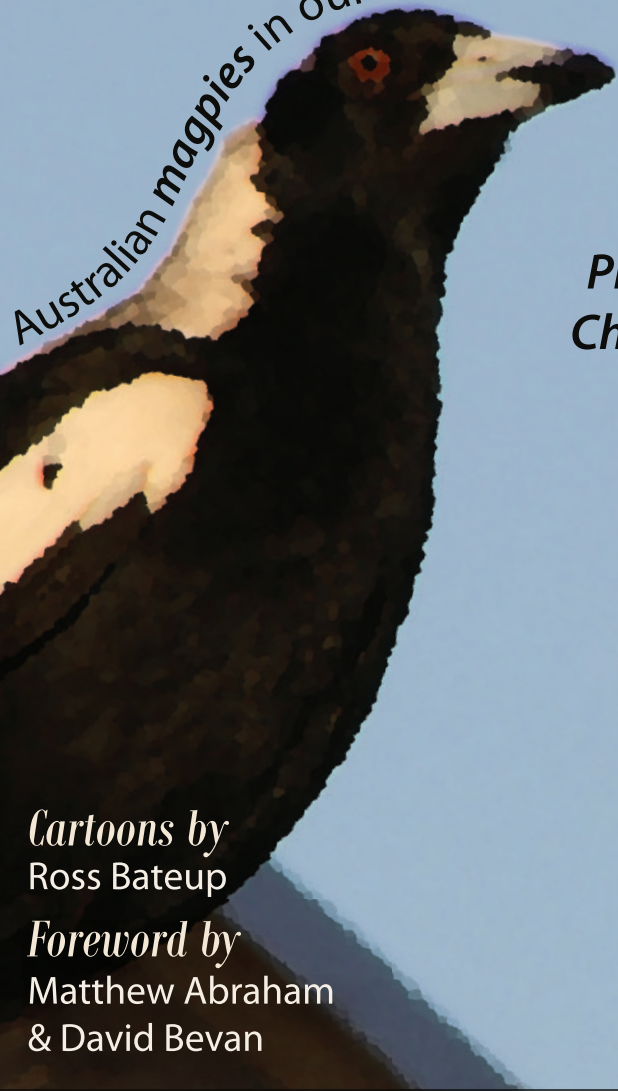


# *the* FEARSOME

## *Flute Players*

*Philip E. J. Roetman &  
Christopher B. Daniels*

*Australian magpies in our lives*



*Cartoons by*  
Ross Bateup

*Foreword by*  
Matthew Abraham  
& David Bevan



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Government of South Australia  
Department of Environment  
and Natural Resources

*Sequel to The Possum-Tail Tree*

# ***The Fearsome Flute Players***

***Australian Magpies in Our Lives***

***Philip E.J. Roetman***

*and*

***Christopher B. Daniels***

Cartoons by

**Ross Bateup**



**Crawford House Publishing** | Adelaide

**Dedication:****To our families**

Julia, James and Joni -- Sandra, Sam and Alex

*For putting up with long absences, too much magpie talk,  
and the strange noises we made when we were trying to mimic magpies*

**And to all the Citizen Scientists who provided information for this book**

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*We have a magpie or three that sit in an odorata [a Eucalyptus tree] just by the southern corner of our house so we enjoy those carolling moments in the warmer weather. When our eldest son was on exchange in the US I taped the beautiful sounds of the magpies which I knew would bring him back instantly, emotionally speaking, to his home here. What I didn't think about was how dreadfully homesick he would be after hearing this lovely carolling that is typical of warm days on our hill-top home here.*

# The sound of Australia: magpie calls and songs

## **Introduction:**

As an island nation, Australia has a high level of natural endemism, with many plants and animals that naturally exist only here. It makes the country unique and distinctive. And it means that we Australians have developed a strong sense of identity with this place, and the native animals and plants help inform this identity.

We are familiar with visual images of Australia, things that identify our location and our nation. Some images that stand out in our minds are the silhouettes of kangaroos and Uluru, and the distinctive form of gum trees, like a redgum on a creek-line or a mallee by the roadside. In addition to these natural forms, people have added some imagery to the canvas of our country, like Aboriginal art and the architecture of the Sydney Opera House. These images are embedded in our minds as we see them over and over – driving through the countryside, in books and on television. They inform us of where we are and help define who we are.

Other senses also give us cues and can give away our location, our place: the smell of eucalyptus leaves or petrichor (the characteristic smell of rain after a dry spell), the feel of the trunk of a gum tree, or the sand of a beach or desert. But would you recognise these cues, would you be sure of where you were? Are they explicit symbols of Australia and home?

Sounds of Australia would certainly give us away. Animals can be heard all around, almost wherever you are, and no matter the time. We've got some noisy invertebrates; you might recognise the chirp of crickets or a cacophony of cicadas. The amphibians could help, too – like the 'bonk' of a pobblebonk frog or the clicking of a common froglet. The reptiles and fish aren't commonly heard and the mammals might not help, either – would you recognise the bellow of a male koala in the night (or would you want to), or the 'tinging' of a white mastiff bat; and can you even imagine the sound a kangaroo makes? But the songs and calls of birds are distinctive and we all recognise at least some of them; they can be heard, night and day, throughout the country.

The laughing call of the kookaburra is often heralded as the iconic noise of the Australian bush, but it is the warbling of the magpie that is the quintessential

Australian sound. Magpies are more abundant, more widespread, and we typically hear them more often. In Banjo Paterson's poem 'In defence of the bush', he expresses the essential character of Australia, including the line, 'Did the magpies rouse your slumbers with their carol sweet and strange?' The poet was suggesting that people from the city were unfamiliar with the sounds of magpies. It was perhaps meant as an insult to suggest that the urbanites of the day would find a 'sweet' sound of nature to be strange. He wrote this poem in response to Henry Lawson's work 'Borderland' that had put a sorry spin on non-urban Australia, and his inclusion of magpies suggests he found them quintessentially Australian.

The magpie's song might have been strange to those unfamiliar with the bush at that time when Paterson and Lawson wrote their poems, but times have changed. In the 1890s, when the poems were published, cities lacked the lush plantings of today's urban areas. With the greening of Australia's urban areas, and, in particular, the increase in urban lawns, the magpie is not just a bird of the bush – there are dense populations in urban areas, and magpie carolling can be heard all around. It's a sound that reminds us of where we are; as one person wrote in a story in this chapter, 'Listening to magpies calling out into the neighbourhood before I get up in the morning makes me feel part of the broader world'.

Many of the stories in this chapter tell of the magpie as an essential sound of Australia. To Australians overseas, hearing the song of these birds triggers such strong memories of home that some writers become emotional and homesick. To international visitors, the sounds of magpies are also interwoven with their Australian experience. A Dutch visitor to Australia thought someone was playing a flute outside at night. Interestingly, the species name of Australian magpies is *tibicen*, a Latin word that means 'piper' or 'flute player' – for more information see the 'What's in a name' section of the introduction to magpies in this book.

The song of Australian magpies resounds in our literature. In 'Magpie Island', Colin Thiele describes that a magpie 'sits on a high, high gum tree and rolls the sunrise around in his throat like beads of pink light... Nobody tumbled the morning air about with so much happiness'. And Pamela Allen, in her book 'Waddle Giggle Gargle!' about a family's struggle with a swooping magpie, describes the song as 'Waddle giggle gargle paddle poodle'. These birds, like other Australian animals, have been introduced to nearby New Zealand. Their impact there has not been as detrimental or as negatively received as the introduction of brushtail possums has been, and the song has infiltrated the literature of their new home. Denis Glover from New Zealand wrote the

poem 'The Magpies', wherein the bird's song is described as 'Quardle oodle ardle wardle doodle'. It is hard to imagine how the song could be transcribed any better than that!

The fascination and admiration that Australians feel for magpie song is reflected in the stories people wrote about these songbirds. A total of 31.9% of the stories submitted during Operation Magpie commented on magpie songs or calls. The selection of stories in this chapter is representative of people's sentiments towards magpie song. More stories about magpie vocalisations are presented in the next chapter on their amazing mimicry. Many people also mentioned a common sound of spring – that of a magpie chick's cries for food; those stories are represented in the section on magpie parenting. Although most of the comments about magpie song were positive (e.g. 'I love seeing and hearing them'), some people remarked that they can be annoying when they sing at night. One person wrote, 'They wake up early don't they!' But, overall, the stories are, like the song, uplifting.

### **Stories:**

Last spring I watched a young magpie try out how to use his voice. He would croak a bit then hide his head in his wing. It was like a young boy whose voice is breaking – embarrassed but determined to master the damn thing. He would strut around on the top of our garden chairs, try a croak, try again, then slink away to the other side and try again. Fascinating!

\*

My sister-in-law visited us from The Netherlands and when she first heard the magpies at night, at about 1:00 a.m., she thought someone was playing the flute!

\*

On a cold morning when the magpies (about five of them) came in for a feed, they sat on an outdoor table and started carolling to let us know they were there. It was incredible to see the steam coming out of their beaks as they sang. It gave a good indication of just how cold it was.

\*

They sound like a discordant music box. One of my first Australian memories.

\*



The magpie song was the first truly Australian sound I heard upon waking on my first morning in Australia. It was magical then and it continues to enchant me all these many years later...

\*

My earliest childhood memories are of magpies warbling.

\*

The family of magpies are my alarm clock. They begin their dawn chorus when my radio wakes me and they visit later in the day to feed in the yard. They are noble, elegant birds with a strong sense of family!

\*

When our son was a baby we couldn't work out why he was making these burbling noises. Then, having been woken by him at about 1:00 a.m., I could hear the magpies call in the dark of night and realised that our son was singing their song during the day. As a 15-year-old he has grave doubts as to the veracity of what we tell him but each time I hear the magpies burbling it reminds me of when he was a baby singing to the unseen maggies.

\*

Three stories! When we lived in Perth in a rented house in 1981, two magpies used to come to the back door every day and sing. We would feed them with mince meat.

One day we were driving in the suburbs of Perth. A magpie must have been hit by a car and lay in the gutter. Its mate was standing over it, prodding it from time to time, as if to say, please wake up. It was so sad.

When we lived in England for ten years in the 80s, the TV was on in another room. It was an Australian programme and I could hear a magpie in the background. I burst into tears, realising that magpie song is for me the sound of Australia and I would have to return home!

\*

I have known many magpies. I love seeing and hearing them. An iconic Aussie bird.

\*

Magpies must have an amazingly detailed vocab! I was watching them through my kitchen window while they were fossicking for bugs about 4 metres away. One magpie was standing watch. He spied me and immediately chortled to the others who instantly looked to the kitchen window and to me. Does this mean that they can communicate exactly a direction and object/person to each other (i.e. 'woman at house window to your left!!!!')? Anyway, I loved experiencing this small part of life with magpies.

\*

Every year, only for around a week, magpies sing at night at our place. It's a beautiful but very short-lived annual event. I don't know if it is the same magpie each year. Watching these birds on my lawn I have begun to appreciate their sense of fun, the communal way they teach their young, and their good humour.

\*



Last summer I was in my living room and I heard screeching. I looked out and there were three magpies stationed at intervals along my front verandah making a noise I had never heard before. They were all looking at the paving from about 3 or 4 feet away. Then I saw what they were looking at. There was a red-bellied black snake travelling along in the gap between the cement and the lawn. As it reached a wire fence the magpies flew and perched, one on each of the posts, and monitored the snake, which looked very angry as it couldn't get through the wire. When the snake had gone, the birds flew away, but I now know their warning sound and take note.

\*

Magpies sometimes have distinct calls or songs. Quite some years ago I used to hear a magpie that made the same call each morning. It was a delight to wake up and be having breakfast with the sound of the same magpie each morning. Its warble was very easily recognisable. It only lasted for some months as, sadly, this same beautiful sound was no longer heard. Who knows what happened to this bird, or did it just change its song?

\*

My second son (who is now nearly seven) has always been fascinated with magpies and at a very young age developed a beautiful bird call whistle to summons them into the yard. At the time that he made this bird call we lived in Flagstaff Hill and with this little song of his he would call up to six or more magpies onto the fence. It was amazing! They (the birds) would just sit and watch and listen. It is a beautiful memory that we all share as a family which is why the magpie is so special to us.

\*

I have spent a lot of time working overseas. The sound of magpies carolling is so evocative of home that it brings tears to my ears. I get my wife to hold the phone to catch the sound for me. Irreplaceably the sound of home.

\*

Only the one about how my magpies sing to the radio when the promo for the [Operation Magpie] survey and Macca's birds [an ABC radio program] on Sunday morning are played. They sit on the back steps and sing in through the door.

\*

My husband was dying of cancer and I was nursing him at home. We had had a very bad night and I was extremely sad. Then I heard this beautiful magpie warbling coming from my front garden. Opening the curtains there were two adult magpies apparently teaching their baby to sing. My heart lifted, then I laughed out loud because we are SANFL Eagles and AFL Crows supporters and here was a magpie cheering me up. Each year when they bring their baby (this year two babies) my heart lifts.

\*

I love all the native animals and birds we have in our area. I had a pet magpie as a child which we hand-raised from a fledgling that had fallen from of a nest. They are feisty birds, very beautiful and make me feel very Australian when I hear their song.

\*

Our magpies are part of our family. We recognise individuals in the tribe and know that they live for several years. One magpie has a signature tune and we know where he (or she) is in the yard at any time because of his (or her) distinctive call.

\*

Magpies have become regular visitors – especially during the recent hot years and after we put in a birdbath. Magpies do not seem to drink from the birdbath except on very hot days. Recently, what we think is a young male has started a gentle warbling at about 3:30 a.m. every day. It almost seems like practice for the day ahead!

\*

Love their warble!

\*

I love where I live. I have lots of magpies, kangaroos and koalas that visit my small piece of the Adelaide Hills. I really couldn't imagine a place where the magpies didn't squawk when something strange was afoot, or wake me in the morning by carolling in my backyard. Having reared a baby magpie to adulthood, and slowly watching it integrate back into the wild population, I know what characters they can be and appreciate their gregarious natures.

\*