

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



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One for sorrow, two for joy
Three for a girl, four for a boy.
Five for silver, six for gold
Seven for a secret never to be told.

This old English counting rhyme will serve to introduce this week's Advent theme – Joy. Like many counting and nursery rhymes, its origin has become blurred or even lost over time. Did you know this poem is actually counting magpies? It dates to a time when people considered the magpie a superstitious bird of ill omen and the number of magpies spotted along the way would determine if your future held good luck or bad luck. Though not often associated with the Christmas Season, this year let's take a closer look at magpies as we count down to Christmas Day.

Magpies are members of the *Corvidae* family. These large, flashy cousins of the jays, ravens, and crows are also vocal, social creatures and are found throughout the temperate regions of Europe, Asia, and North America. The species found here in the United States is *Pica hudsonia*, the black-billed magpie, thought to have accompanied the mega fauna that entered the New World via the Bering Land Bridge.

More recently, magpies followed the great bison herds of the 1700's and 1800's, picking ticks from their broad backs and scavenging the refuse of Native American hunts. In 1804, Lewis & Clark told of the bold black and white magpie bandits who entered their tents and snatched food right out of their hands.

Magpies are inquisitive, curious birds. They are entertaining to watch with their white wing patches and long tails that enable them to make sharp turns in flight. Magpies are also entertaining to listen to with their many calls, trills, cackles, and whistles. Did you know magpies are the only bird to recognize themselves in a mirror?

Magpies are not picky eaters and will feed on fruits, grains, insects, and even small animals. Large flocks may often be seen feeding on carrion. Today magpies pick ticks from the backs of deer and moose. If food is plentiful, they will cache some for later.

Magpies mate for life, having a lifespan of 4-6 years. One of the few North American birds to build a domed nest, the large structure may take both parents 40 days to build. The female lays anywhere from 1-9 eggs. The incubation period of 16-19 days is followed by a nesting period of 24-30 days.

Iowa is on the eastern edge of black-billed magpie range where they are widespread in the towns, fields, and streams of our western states. The first Iowa nesting in 59 years was spotted in 1997 in the Broken Kettle Grassland of the Loess Hills.

Perhaps you're aware that magpies appear to hold "funerals." A magpie, upon discovering a dead magpie, will call loudly until a large group surrounds the body. The gathering will last for 10-15 minutes before the magpies disperse and fly away silently, an unexpected reminder of the sorrow and joy of the Christmas Season.