



# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Black-billed magpie

*Pica pica*

There are not many birds as ubiquitous and conspicuous as the black-billed magpie. This raucous, black-and-white species ranges through Korea, Manchuria, Siberia, down to Tibet, across western Mongolia, and into Europe and northwestern Africa. North America has magpies only in Western states and provinces of the United States and Canada.

The magpie is a member of the corvid family, in which New Mexico is rich. The family includes crows, ravens, jays, and nutcrackers. Magpies probably evolved as inhabitants of open, dry scrub-covered country.

Magpies are inquisitive and wary. They regularly show up at campsites in northern New Mexico. With one eye cocked at the camper, the bird will check out the dog food bowl, taste-test a hotdog, and investigate brightly colored bootlaces or a shiny metal plate.

At this close range, the magpie presents new colors to the observer. Sunlight can give a bronze tint to a magpie's head, while the tail feathers take on a dark-green sheen. These iridescent colors come from the structure of the feathers. A thin lamination on feather barbules scatters light rays, causing a change in color as the light strikes the feathers from different angles.

When so many wild species have soft, muted colors that conceal and protect, how does the dandified magpie survive? One answer may be the bird's social behavior. Magpies usually travel in family groups of six to 10, or more, individuals. When an animal approaches and is perceived as a threat, the entire flock may dive-bomb the intruder. This can be quite intimidating.

The magpie's effective predator defense, and a rather wide ranging palate, help insure the future of this striking species.

