

BLACK AND WHITES IN THE GREY BOX

Australian Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*)

The Australian Magpie is classified as 'Secure' in Victoria. It is a species highly adapted to the modified landscapes across the urban and rural regions of the Goulburn Broken catchment and beyond. However research featured in the 'State of Australia's Birds 2015' <http://birdlife.org.au/education-publications/publications/state-of-australias-birds> indicates that Australian Magpie numbers are declining in some regions, whilst increasing in others.

An iconic Australian species, the Australian Magpie is well-known across the country – even to the point of featuring as a mascot for several sporting teams! The 'maggie' is native to Australia and southern New Guinea, and consists of nine recognised subspecies, each with distinctive feather patterns. Even though they are known as 'maggies', the Australian magpie is not related to the European Magpie, which is a type of crow.

Well known for its carolling songs, breeding-season swooping habits, and penchant for sunbaking on backyard lawns or open paddocks, the Australian Magpie also possesses a finely tuned ear, listening keenly for underground prey as it struts across the ground; head tilting.



Feathered Fact: This species prefers a 'trees-combined-with-open-area' habitat such as urban parkland and farms. Although at home in the more open Grey Box Woodlands, they are absent from dense forests.



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GREY BOX WOODLANDS

– A Precious Vegetation Community

Protecting and maintaining Grey Box Grassy Woodland ecosystems is vital to the health of our environment – and us. This series of cards focuses on the special 'black and white' birds that inhabit our Grey Box environment.

Once, Grey Box Grassy Woodlands and the birds that inhabited them extended in a swathe from south-eastern South Australia, through the centre of Victoria to the centre of New South Wales. This vast woodland system is vital to the survival of many critically endangered, endangered, and threatened woodland bird species.

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Magpie-lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*)

Also known as 'peewee, peewit or mudlark', the Magpie-lark is a species that has generally adapted well to modified landscapes.

The Magpie-lark is commonly seen across the urban and rural landscapes within the Goulburn Broken catchment and beyond. In a rural situation, this busy bird requires Grey Box Woodlands on farmland with dams, or woodlands near to a water source from where it can collect mud to construct its bowl-shaped nest. The nest is built on a horizontal branch quite high above the ground, and lined with feathers and grass. Both parents incubate the eggs, and more than one clutch of chicks can be raised in a year if conditions are favourable.

The name 'magpie-lark' is erroneous, as the Magpie-lark has no close relationship to magpies or larks. It is much smaller than the Australian Magpie at 25 to 30 centimetres and is not related to other mud-nesters such as choughs and apostlebirds but is closely related to the flycatcher family.



Feathered Fact: Magpie-larks are one of the 200 or so species of birds (worldwide) that sings in duet. Each partner produces about one note per second, about a half-second apart, most likely signalling territorial claims to other birds. To our human ears, it is difficult to discern if there are two birds singing, or just the one.



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Black-shouldered Kite

(Elanus axillaris)

The Black-shouldered Kite is classified as 'Secure' in Victoria. It is common throughout much of mainland Australia and is occasionally observed in northern Tasmania and on islands in the Bass Strait. Open grasslands, paddocks and even the median strips on the Hume Freeway are viable Black-shouldered Kite habitat.

The Black-shouldered Kite is a hovering specialist, meaning it can suspend itself in flight over grassy areas whilst scanning for small prey. When prey is detected, it will drop like a stone onto its meal, grab it with strong talons and fly away – presumably before a larger predator can seize their prize. Prey is eaten either whilst in flight, or from a high lookout such as the tall branches of a dead tree – reinforcing the need for, and importance of, retaining dead trees in our landscape.

Before European settlement and the expansion of agriculture, the Black-shouldered Kite would have dined on a variety of native ground dwelling marsupial prey. Nowadays small rodents form most of the this birds diet. At times, large flocks of Black-shouldered Kites will move into a region, signalling a mouse (or locust plague) is in motion. The perfect pest controllers, Black-shouldered Kites can significantly reduce pest populations.



Feathered Fact: The Black-shouldered Kite forms monogamous pairs and will display their aerial acrobatics during courtship with the male feeding the female in mid-air (she will flip upside down and take food with her talons). High up in a tree, both birds build a large stick nest in which they lay and incubate three or four eggs for thirty days. Black-shouldered Kite chicks are fully fledged within five weeks of hatching.



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Hooded Robin

(Melanodryas cucullata)

As a member of the Victorian Temperate Woodland Bird Community, the Hooded Robin is classified as near threatened. Protecting and maintaining the health of Hooded Robin woodland habitat is the most important action landholders can take so this little bird remains in our Grey Box Woodland region.

The Hooded Robin uses a 'perch and pounce' tactic, where upon it will sit motionless on low branches and logs until it spots its invertebrate prey below... and pounces. Its survival is largely dependent upon these perches, and it seems that the Hooded Robin will choose its foraging sites largely based upon the quality of perching sites available.

Hooded Robins are quickly disappearing from our woodlands. They rely upon healthy and robust patches of box woodland bush – 10 hectares or more – to survive, as it is these remnant patches that contain the understorey, fallen timber, native grasses and herbs that sustains the insect population this little bird feasts upon.



Feathered Fact: The Hooded Robin is the only 'black and white' member of the robin family (the male is black and white), and at around 170mm in length, is larger than its robin cousins, but smaller than a Magpie-lark or Pied Butcherbird. The female is grey-brown in colour (insert photo). Like all Australian robins, it is not closely related to either the European or American robin, rather it shares its family tree with pardalotes, fairy-wrens and honeyeaters.



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Photo: J Mentiplay Smith

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Pied Butcherbird

(Cracticus nigrogulari)

The Pied Butcherbird is classified as 'Secure' in Victoria. It sports a distinctive black hood and a strong hooked beak which it uses to tackle anything from lizards, small snakes, birds and large insects. The Pied Butcherbird can be found in Grey Box Woodlands perched on a stump or low branch patiently waiting for unsuspecting prey to pass by.

The Pied Butcherbird has a rich and complex sound that rivals the song of the Australian Magpie. It can be identified by its early morning (or moonlit night) flute-like call - but don't be fooled - it can also mimic other species. Curiously, the melodies produced by Pied Butcherbird in one part of Victoria will differ to songs produced from another region or state.

The Pied Butcherbird has adopted a variety of hunting skills to increase its survival. It can run along the ground to chase down terrestrial food, it can catch flying insects, and will sometimes hunt alongside larger birds of prey to take advantage of the excess of smaller birds flushed out by the larger hunter. It has adapted well to the agricultural landscape, and will successfully feed upon rodents and grasshoppers. The Pied Butcherbird will store larger pieces of food in a 'larder'. This food may be wedged into a tree fork or secured onto a sharp twig or piece of barbed wire, in readiness for a 'long lunch'.



Feathered Fact: Songbirds originated in Australia and spread throughout the world. The Pied Butcherbird's song can be extremely elaborate and complex, made by a single performer or an entire choir, and there is evidence that Pied Butcherbirds readily improvise to create new melodies.



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Pied Currawong (*Strepera graculina*)

The Pied Currawong is classified as 'Secure' in Victoria. As with its relative the Australian Magpie, the Pied Currawong is a species highly adapted to the modified landscapes across the urban and rural regions of the Goulburn Broken catchment and beyond.

In the Goulburn Broken catchment's Grey Box Woodlands, the robust, melodious Pied Currawong is generally seen in the wintertime when, upon seeking a milder climate, it migrates from the high country to lower elevations. Upon their descent, they follow the fertile creek lines to the plains, whereupon they disperse to various locations that offer food and territory.

Once settled for the winter, the Pied Currawong generally stays in one area. The importance of large patches of healthy bushland becomes evident, as this big bird requires a wide variety and constant supply of food - seeds, reptiles, frogs, insects, bird eggs, juvenile birds, and small mammals. The Pied Currawong occupies a different niche to its Australian Magpie cousin, as it lives and forages predominantly in the treetops, in contrast to the ground-foraging magpie. This highlights the importance of healthy, complex bushland consisting of its various layers, that naturally sustains the needs of different species.



Feathered Fact: There is credible concern that in some areas, Pied Currawong populations are reaching artificially high levels caused by human activity, such as planting privet, asparagus fern and other exotic berry-producing plants in gardens, and by well-meaning 'bird feeding' activity. Unnaturally high numbers of Pied Currawongs have a negative impact upon the small, vulnerable, woodland bird populations, as smaller birds struggle to survive and raise chicks in the presence of this much larger predator.



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Restless Flycatcher

(Myiagra inquieta)

The Restless Flycatcher is classified as 'Secure' in Victoria, however, as with many woodland bird species, there is concern for its long-term survival in Grey Box Woodlands as habitat is lost to clearing and weed invasion. Being an insectivore, the survival of this and many other woodland birds depends on the health and abundance of the insect population, which we can help maintain by reducing or eliminating the use of pesticides on our properties and in our homes.

The Restless Flycatcher is also known as a 'scissor grinder' due to its distinctive fast-paced whirring call. It requires a robust, healthy ground-layer as it feeds upon insects found on or close to the ground. With its tail flicking and quivering, Restless Flycatchers characteristically hover above the ground, calling in a manner that is thought to disturb insects to make them fly for easier catching.

When not scanning the ground for prey, the Restless Flycatcher will sit, tail flicking and crest erect, safely atop a branch, stump, or fence post, from where the next meal can be spotted and caught. It is often found in the same habitats as the Willie Wagtail, and the two species are sometimes mistaken for the other.



Feathered Fact: This noisy, busy little bird builds a small cup-shaped nest made from bark, grass, lichen, and even old spider egg sacs, bound securely with spider web. They prefer to build their nests in a tree fork, placed over or near to a water source, possibly for safety from predators and for a more reliable insect supply. Both parents help to build the nest, incubate the eggs, and feed the chicks. In a 'good' year, Restless Flycatchers may raise three broods.



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White-winged Chough

(Corcorax melanorhamphos)

The White-winged Chough is classified as 'Secure' in Victoria and is highly adapted to the modified agricultural landscapes across the rural regions of the Goulburn Broken catchment. They are an extremely sociable and complex species, almost always seen in large groups of up to 10 or more, often on roadsides, chattering, squawking, scratching, and pecking enthusiastically through the ground litter.

White-winged Choughs can be mistaken for a raven or currawong, but a distinctive curved bill and red eye sets it apart. It sports white wing patches, most visible when it is flying from the ground into a tree or flapping noisily at fellow family members.

As with many woodland bird species, the White-winged Chough relies on a healthy, abundant ground layer, as it feeds on insects, small reptiles and seeds found amongst the messy leaf litter. When roadsides are 'tidied up' by raking up and burning, this and a myriad of other species that rely on the critters that live amongst the sticks, dirt, and leaves, are denied their next meal. Constant 'tidying up' has long-lasting and detrimental consequences for the White-winged Chough and its fellow woodland bird family members.



Feathered Fact: Flocks of White-winged Choughs may contain birds that have been kidnapped from other groups of choughs. Two groups will come together and 'detain' the selected bird while its family flies away. This is a tactic that reduces inbreeding within family groups.





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White-winged Triller (*Lalage sueurii*)

The White-winged Triller is classified as 'Secure' in Victoria, and true to its name, is often heard before seen due to its canary-like 'trill'. It is a migrant from northern Australia, visiting the Grey Box Woodlands and surrounds in spring and summer to breed.

Male and female White-winged Trillers are visually quite different, with the breeding male being the true 'Black and White of the Grey Box', while the non-breeding males and females are grey and brown in colour. Populations of White-winged Trillers fluctuate significantly – some years large numbers visit yet the following year they may be completely absent. Climate and food availability are most likely the main drivers behind this behavior.

Colonies of White-winged Trillers build their small cup-shaped nests on horizontal branches, or in the forks of a single tree, constructed from nests from bark, grass, and other fine materials bound with spider web. They have also been known to use the empty nests of other birds.

White-winged Trillers forage for insects and other invertebrates on the ground amongst the fallen leaves, sticks and twigs, demonstrating the importance of a healthy, intact ground layer, not one that is 'tidied up'. They will also forage for insects on leaves of trees and will happily feed on nectar. Diverse meal options means increasing the chances of survival!



Feathered Fact: At breeding time, this bird is a fast mover. Incubation is fast and clutch sizes small, with only two or three chicks hatching after just two weeks. The young leave the nest after an amazing 12 days. This fast breeding cycle enables White-winged Trillers to take advantage of 'good' seasons, and raise multiple clutches when food is plentiful and conditions amenable.



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This massive loss has significant repercussions for the broader ecosystem, the way it functions, supports native flora and fauna, and ways it benefits us. This habitat cannot be replicated, as there are often intricate symbiotic relationships evolved over time between plants, animals, insects, fungi, and soil that are impossible to recreate. Once these habitats are gone, they are gone forever - along with the species that rely on this vegetation type for habitat. By protecting what we have, and understanding the species that inhabit them, we can continue to benefit from and enjoy our unique Grey Box Grassy Woodland environment.

For more information visit www.gbcma.vic.gov.au

Photography by Chris Tzaros, Birds, Bush and Beyond.
Special thanks to Chris for assistance and advice on content.

BLACK AND WHITES IN THE GREY BOX

Willie Wagtail

(Rhipidura leucophrys)

The Willie Wagtail is a common sight on mainland Australia (it is absent in Tasmania) and in the Goulburn Broken catchment in paddocks, patches of remnant vegetation, urban situations, and backyard gardens. However, research featured in the 'State of Australia's Birds 2015' <http://birdlife.org.au/education-publications/publications/state-of-australias-birds> indicates that Willie Wagtail numbers are declining in some regions, whilst increasing in others.

A member of the Australian fantail family, the Willie Wagtail is probably the most well-known of the Grey Box Woodlands 'Black and White' species. This iconic little songbird is distinguishable from similar birds by its black back, white underparts, long legs, fine bill, and distinctive 'angry' white eyebrows – not to mention its busy, important attitude. They are equally at home in the drier, more open bushland of the Grey Box Woodlands and the urban backyard. They are skilled aviators and will perform impressive acrobatic manoeuvres to catch insects flushed from the ground layer, strategically disturbed by their aptly named wagging tails.

Built on a horizontal branch of a tree, the Willie Wagtail's nest is a small woven cup of grasses, covered and bound with spider web and lined with grass, feathers, or soft animal hair – which is often taken directly from the backs of oblivious nearby grazing stock. The nest can be re-used in following years, but if it is not deemed suitable is recycled for its 'spare parts'.



Feathered Fact: Most birds cannot tell when a cuckoo lays its eggs in their nest, and small birds will unwittingly incubate and raise large, imposter cuckoo chicks without pause. However the ever vigilant Willie Wagtail can recognise these interloper's eggs, and will push them out of the nest.



This project is supported by the Goulburn Broken CMA through funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Program.



How can you help our Woodland Birds?

Recording your sightings and information about our Grey Box Woodland Bird Community is one of the most important things you can do to help preserve them!

e-Bird Australia enables you to contribute your field observations as data for bird science and conservation, through the real-time online checklist program. Every birding record is important, as it can influence how conservation projects and programs are developed.

Visit <https://ebird.org/australia/home> and click on 'Get Started' to set up your own account.

GREY BOX WOODLANDS

– A Precious Vegetation Community

Protecting and maintaining Grey Box Grassy Woodland ecosystems is vital to the health of our environment – and us. This series of cards focuses on the special 'black and white' birds that inhabit our Grey Box environment.

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