

SHORT NOTE

Observation of an Australian magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) depredating a ship rat (*Rattus rattus*)

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At 10:35 h on 17 Apr 2010, a flock of 7 Australian magpies (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) was observed flying across open grassland in the vicinity of Waitora Road, Te Puna, New Zealand with one bird holding a prey item in its claws. This bird appeared to be struggling to hold the prey item and it fell from its grasp. The prey item was quickly approached and examined without touching it so further observations could be made of the magpie, which had landed 15 m from the rat. The prey item was identified as an immature ship rat (*Rattus rattus*) with a nose to tail base of 124 mm and a nose to tip of tail 220 mm (Fig. 1). It was already dead when found.

Once I had retreated, the magpie remained in the trees where it had landed for a further 10 minutes. It then flew to a row of trees where the rest of the group of magpies had landed after the focal bird had dropped the rat. The focal bird and the rest of the magpies were observed for a further 15 minutes but they made no attempt to retrieve the rat. When I returned to the area 2 hours later, the rat had been removed, perhaps by magpies observed earlier. The magpies were no longer in the area.

It is uncertain how the magpie obtained the rat as no hunting or scavenging behaviour was

observed directly. It is also unknown if the rat died from the injuries sustained, or if it had instead been scavenged. The rat had a hole in its head, as though a sharp object, such as a pointed beak, had been driven into its skull and brain. There were no other obvious injuries to the exterior of the rat and it looked recently killed. There was heavy dew on the ground, but the fur of the rat was dry and the blood around the wound in its head had not congealed. Thus, it is possible that the rat was directly attacked and killed by the magpie.

Australian magpies live in groups from 2 to in excess of 20 individuals and are principally carnivorous, feeding mainly on invertebrates and occasionally on small birds, reptiles and mice (Heather & Robertson 1996; Moon 1988). Attacks on birds by magpies in New Zealand have been observed previously. Crossland (2008) observed a magpie attack a goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*), while Parker (2007) observed a magpie feeding on a blackbird (*Turdus merula*) it had either killed or scavenged. It is evident from these observations, and that presented here, that magpies can actively pursue and consume vertebrate prey items when the opportunity arises.

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Fig. 1. Depredated rat *Rattus rattus* that was observed being scavenged by a Australian magpie. Photograph taken by author with a Nokia cell phone.

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