The Australian Magpie - *Gymnorhina tibicen* - is a glossy black and white bird seen in numerous forms. Variants are divided by the extent of black or white colouring on the back; subspecies are divided into "white-backed" and "black-backed" variants; hybrids between variants occur readily. Black-backed forms are dominant over most of Australia while white-backed forms are generally confined to western and southern parts.

All variants have black crown, face and throat with strong, straight, white beak and darker tip. Breast and underside are black, the rump is black or white depending on variant. Females are similar in colouring to the males of their variant with grey mottled sections on the back. Reaches 36 to 44 centimetres in length.

Feeds on the ground, spending most feeding time in a family party walking around their territory within sight of each other and close enough to hear alarm calls or other softer calls. Individuals occasionally run to a spot where movement has been seen to stab at prey with its powerful beak. Birds stand still listening for beetles moving underground then stab at the buried beetle to dig it up.

Intensely territorial. Families of from 3 to 20 birds aggressively defend territory large enough to provide sufficient food and nesting sites for the family group; depending on the quality of the terrain, territories can be from 2 to 40 hectares in size. Magpies trespassing into the territory are attacked and often pecked savagely or chased away; magpies in adjacent territories are kept informed of territorial claims by means of carolling, especially as the spring breeding season approaches. Carolling by a dominant male can initiate a duet between the bird and its mate where one bird initiates a call and the other responds.

The magpie is one of the most vocal Australian bird species; both sexes and all ages using a range of calls at all times of the year. Magpie calls include short and harsh ones and extended, tuneful songs as part of the communications system keeping contact between group members dispersed over their territory while simultaneously warning intruders to stay away.

Alarm and distress calls are particularly important; alarm calls have been shown to include an indication of the type of threat, such as bird of prey or lace monitor which need different responses.
Magpie breeding season depends on location. In the tropical north, breeding takes place during the dry season (June to September); in temperate and cooler parts breeding takes place in August/September after the coldest spells are over; in the Victorian and New South Wales alps they may breed between June and December.

The female builds the nest in an exposed position open to the sky and the sun, often at least four to six metres above the ground and much higher if necessary to use the smaller forks and branches needed to anchor the nest against wind and storms. The male may bring some material but the female puts it into the nest. The nest is carefully built of an outer layer of twigs, vines and branches; near human habitation the outer layer may incorporate wire, fabric, binders twine, plastic strips or clothes pegs. The inner layer is like a separate nest made with softer, more densely packed material including grass, wool and bark formed in a neat circle with a lower centre.

Clutches of two to five greenish or brownish eggs are laid, often one or two are not fertile. Chicks are fed by the female parent and helpers, the male parent concentrates on defence of the nest and territory but also assists in feeding. As a rule of thumb it requires one adult to raise one chick. Chicks are fed by the parents and helpers for three months, then taught flying and feeding for another three months, then supervised for a few more months and some will stay in the family group as helpers with next year’s brood and observe how nests are built and young are raised.

Size and quality of the territory are crucial in breeding success. Magpies which cannot occupy territory are unlikely to breed successfully and the most successful breeders have the best territories.

Lives in open country with grassy plains and good trees nearby for roosting. They are not forest dwellers but can use forest edges for roosting. There appears to be a preference for the boundary between cleared agricultural land and remaining forest.

Common to abundant in coastal and agricultural areas, less common in drier parts and not found at all in arid parts and along the north coast of the Top End.