

Magpies



Several residents have expressed concern at the arrival and number of Magpies now seen on Drumoig and the effect they may have on songbirds. I have looked at the RSPB, BTO and BBC websites and have contacted Norman Elkins the BTO Regional Representative for Fife & Kinross and below are my findings.

The RSPB website says that until the mid-19th century, magpies were very common in Britain and were popular with farmers because they eat harmful insects and rodents. But from then until the First World War, heavy persecution by gamekeepers caused their numbers to plummet. Since the Second World War, magpie numbers have increased. Their numbers trebled from 1970 to 1990, since when they have become more stable. Urban and suburban magpies increased much faster than rural populations. In towns they are not persecuted, there is more food available, magpies will nest close to people, which protects their nests from crows, and they can breed earlier in the year because towns are warmer than the surrounding countryside. Urban magpies will use artificial nest sites and nest materials, and will take food from bird tables, sometimes storing it in man-made structures such as gutters and eaves. Factors that normally limit magpie populations are lack of nesting territories and high mortality of young birds. The relatively stable population since 1990 suggests that magpies have reached an ecological equilibrium.

The RSPB has undertaken intensive research on species such as the skylark and song thrush, to discover whether magpies could be to blame for the decline, the RSPB commissioned the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) to analyse its 35 years of bird monitoring records.

The study found that songbird numbers were no different in places where there were many magpies from where there are few. It found no evidence that increased numbers of magpies have caused declines in songbirds and confirms that populations of prey species are not determined by the numbers of their predators. Availability of food and suitable nesting sites are probably the main factors limiting songbird populations.

They have also undertaken intensive research to find out why songbirds are in trouble and have discovered that the loss of food and habitats caused by intensive farming have played a major role in songbird declines. The change from spring to autumn sowing and the increase in the use of agricultural chemicals have reduced the number of insects and weed seeds available for songbirds to eat.

These and other habitat changes, including the removal of hedgerows which are used for nesting, roosting and feeding sites by some birds, have been major reasons for the severe declines in many of our farmland species.

Songbirds need dense vegetation to nest in, to help protect their eggs and young from predators. This is not usually available in suburban gardens. You can help the birds in your garden by planting climbers such as ivy and honeysuckle, and dense shrubs such as hawthorn.

The RSPB suggest that one deterrent would be to hang CD's or something shiny in trees to scare the predators away. Magpies don't like the way light reflects from the surface.

Norman Elkins from the BTO, confirmed that the latest Fife bird atlas did show a continuing slow spread from the core area in West Fife and this year has seen a further increase in reports in east Fife, with the first Magpie seen in his garden in Cupar in 34 years. He said that that predation by Magpies will probably increase a little as they spread across Fife, although he has no figures showing how much. They will always be at a low density compared to the major small bird predator, the Carrion Crow, but it's just another problem for small birds. However, research by the BTO and RSPB has not revealed any relationship between corvid predators and declines in small birds. Both species are part of the natural environment so that any predation is normal, although perhaps unwelcome in a local context. So many factors influence the number of birds coming into gardens (snow, frost, food supplies in the wider countryside etc.), so he wouldn't expect a major change due to Magpies. He also said that in the Fife & Kinross area although Magpies have increased so have Chiffchaff, Blackcap and Tree Sparrows.

If you would like more information on Magpies, please go to the following websites

RSPB - Magpies: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/magpie/>

RSPB – Effect on songbirds <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/magpie/effect-on-songbirds/#o4kOecMzfPCUqCXt.99>

BTO: <https://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/gbw/gardens-wildlife/garden-birds/a-z-garden-birds/magpie>

BBC Earth - There is also a very interesting article on their website on Magpies:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/earth/story/20150408-the-truth-about-magpies>