

Black-billed Magpie

6 Oct 1985

NW Lyon Co., IA

\*D. Harr

IBL 55:127; 56:44, Harr 1986

Record Number: 85-20

Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATION

Douglas C. Harr

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 55:127

Harr, D. C. 1986. Black-billed Magpie in Lyon County. IBL  
56:32.

Records Committee: IBL 56:44

VOTE: 7-III

III, Easy bird to ID if seen well. I feel this part of state  
would produce more Magpies and other "goodies" if regularly  
birded.

III, Short but diagnostic description.

III, Good description.

III, Not an easy bird to misidentify.

## BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE IN LYON COUNTY .

DOUGLAS C. HARR



Just a few minutes after 2:00 p.m. on 6 October 1985, State Conservation Officer Bill Fribley and I observed and identified an adult Black-billed Magpie in flight at the Lyon County Conservation Board's Hidden Bridge Wildlife Area in western Lyon County. This 154-acre tract, acquired as a public hunting area about five years ago, borders the Big Sioux River and South Dakota six miles west and two miles south of Larchwood, Iowa. The area consists of steeply rolling loess hills which are largely dominated by typical prairie vegetation and cut by several wooded or brushy draws and creek bottoms.

While assisting County Conservation Board Director Paul Hagan assess the prairie habitat, I spotted an apparently crow-sized, black and white bird flying about 40 feet above the ground and 250 to 300 feet northeast of us. I pointed it out to Bill Fribley, and we simultaneously identified it aloud. I then observed the magpie with binoculars and noted its characteristics. Total time of observation was about one minute on a bright, clear day, with the sun behind us.

Including its long tail, the bird was almost crow-sized, but somewhat slimmer. Plumage was mostly black with white belly and large, white scapular patches showing as the bird flew. Some white could also be detected on the outer primaries. Its tail, about the length of the body, was seen to be diamond- or wedge-shaped when the bird turned from profile and flew away from us. Its flight pattern resembled that of a Blue Jay flying in open country. Both Bill and I have observed Black-billed Magpies in western states on numerous occasions.

Magpies are at present considered accidental in Iowa (Dinsmore et al., 1984, *Iowa Birds*). There have been only five records since 1972, the last on 1 June 1980 in Sioux County about 13 miles south-southeast of the present sighting.

In late November I received a phone call from a local hunter who reported seeing 4 magpies while he was bow hunting for deer in this same area in mid-November. Although the reporter is not known to me for his bird identification skills, he is usually a careful observer of all wildlife and is familiar with magpies from western South Dakota. He also reported finding two, large, stick nests in a wooded and brushy draw; it was his opinion that these might be magpie nests, and they were certainly in typical magpie habitat.

These sightings deserve further investigation; I hope to pursue them this spring or sooner. The site is quite remote and frequently difficult to reach, especially on foot during a snowy winter.

P.O. Box 65, Larchwood, IA 51241

Middlewestern Prairie Region  
(Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio)

85-70

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Black-billed Magpie 2. Number: one
3. Location 6 mi. W, 2 mi. S of Larchwood, Lyon County, Iowa
4. Date: October 6, 1985 5. Time Bird seen: 2:04 to 2:05 PM
6. Description of size, shape and color-pattern (describe in great detail all parts of the plumage, and beak and feet coloration, in addition, to the diagnostic characteristics, but include only what actually was seen in the field):  
Approximately the length of a crow (including the long tail), but slimmer than a crow. Body basically black, with white belly. Large, white scapular patches noted in flight, also some white in outer primaries. Head and bill black. Tail long and diamond or wedge-shaped in flight. Flight pattern somewhat similar to that of a Blue Jay.
7. Description of voice, if heard: not heard.
8. Description of behavior: Seen in flight for about 45 sec. Flight was similar to that of a Jay.
9. Habitat - general: Hills bordering Big Sioux River  
specific: Prairie hills, with some riverbottom & hillside timber, cropfields on tops of hills nearby.
10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:  
Only similar groups would be crows, jays and blackbirds. Size, tail shape and unique color pattern dictate nothing else except Black-billed Magpie.
11. Distance (how measured)? approximately 200-300 yds.  
(estimated visually)
12. Optical equipment:  
7x25 Bushnell Ensign Binoc's.
13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you):  
Mostly high clouds with some approaching rain; good viewing light; light from SW, bird seen to NE.
14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species:  
Have seen this species many times in western SD and other western states.
15. Other observers: Bill Fribley (Conservation Officer) and Paul Hagen (County Park Ex. Dir.)
16. Did the others agree with your identification? C.O. (Fribley) agreed immediately; other observer was not familiar with species.
17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: None
18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:  
Field guides by both Peterson and Robbins, et al (latest editions of both). These were consulted much later, and field notes and ID had been made prior to checking guides.
19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? Field notes prepared about 1 hr. & 20 minutes after sighting.
- Signature Douglas C. Harr Address: Box 65,  
Douglas C. Harr, Wildlife Biologist, I.C.C.
- Date: Oct. 10, 1985 City, State: Larchwood, Iowa 51241

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