

Position Statement

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MAGPIE AND CROW

Corvids (crows, magpies, and allies) are medium to large birds. Eight species are found in the UK, five of which are resident in the London area. These species have adapted well to urban environments, because of their adaptability and intelligence. However they are sometimes viewed as pests or problematic species, primarily because they will take eggs and nestlings of other birds; magpies in particular are often viewed with suspicion or contempt for their behaviour. There are often calls to control them because of their perceived impacts on more popular species.

I. Position

- London Wildlife Trust recognises that magpies and crows are natural constituents of UK wildlife and should be valued.
- There is no sufficient evidence to suggest that magpies and/or crows are causing a significant adverse impact on wild bird populations (or other species) in London or elsewhere, although we recognise that there may be localised short-term impacts.
- We will not endorse, support or carry out the control of magpies and/or crows to protect native species or habitats (unless there is strong evidence to make us reconsider this position).
- We will support the collation of and, where possible, gather contemporary data about magpie and crow populations and their behavioural impacts on other wildlife in London and in neighbouring counties, in order to inform any future policy or actions.
- We will encourage the gathering of information on the values people in London place on magpies and crows, in order to inform any future policy or actions.

The Trust will review this policy and amend it following any changes to legislation, planning guidance or scientific evidence, as appropriate.

2. Species, habitat and habits

London's crows

Eight species of corvid breed in the UK; five currently in London, not including the captive ravens at the Tower of London. These are carrion crow (*Corvus corone*), jackdaw (*C. monedula*), rook (*C. frugilegus*), magpie (*Pica pica*), and jay (*Garrulus glandarius*). Of these, carrion crow and magpie are the commonest and most frequently seen; jay are widespread but shy and more confined to woodland. Jackdaw are mostly found in clustered populations on London's fringes, although they are present in Richmond Park, and rook are currently found near London's boundaries, especially towards Essex and Hertfordshire.

Corvids are medium to large birds, fairly boldly plumaged in black, black and grey, or pied. They are adaptable but often shy where persecuted; in towns, some magpies and crows become tame and may visit gardens. Heavily urbanised areas are particularly attractive to magpies and crows given that there is good availability of food, particularly with the artificially high presence of food (e.g. bird feeders); and there are plenty of nesting/roosting locations in mature trees in open areas in our parks, gardens, small wooded areas and green belt beyond. They will utilise a wide range of urban habitats. The urban heat island effect provides a shortened,

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mild winter and enables a longer growing season and high mean temperatures during magpie and crow breeding seasons.

Foraging and food

Carrion crow and magpie will come to gardens for food and although often cautious initially, they soon learn when it is safe, and will return repeatedly to take advantage of whatever is on offer. Crows are omnivorous and highly adaptable to available food; they eat a wide range of food including carrion (e.g. roadkills), insects, worms, seeds, fruit, eggs, nestlings, and any food scraps. They will take food from bird tables, sometimes storing it in man-made structures such as gutters and eaves. Jay will enter gardens too, especially if there are blocks of woodland or clusters of mature trees nearby, and for them to retreat to if disturbed.

Nesting

Crows are primarily tree nesters, usually utilising the canopy. It is rare to find nests of all crow species much below 10 metres, which makes them safe from most natural predators. The maturity of post-war tree planting programmes, together with the relaxation of much woodland management (and, for example, the growth of railside tree belts), has provided huge opportunities for crow, magpie and jay to nest. They will also use artificial nest sites and nest materials; jackdaw, in particular, will utilise buildings, including chimneys and church towers.

3. Current status

There are approximately 790,000 breeding pairs of carrion crow and 650,000 breeding pairs of magpie in the UK. Numbers of both species have increased over recent years. Magpie numbers trebled from 1970 to 1990, but since then populations have become more stable (which suggests that magpies have reached an ecological equilibrium in the UK). However the carrion crow population has grown since 1994.

Factors that normally limit magpie and crow populations are lack of nesting territories and high mortality of young birds. Urban and suburban populations of magpie and crow have increased much faster than rural populations. In towns they are not persecuted as much as in rural areas, there is more food available, there is good availability of nesting sites, and they can breed earlier in the year because urban areas are warmer than the surrounding countryside.

Magpie, carrion crow, jay and jackdaw are currently fully protected by the European Union Birds Directive and also receive general protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. All four species are included in the Birds of Conservation Green List as birds of low conservation concern.

4. Causes of concern

Harm to native species/habitats

Most British members of the crow family will take eggs and nestlings of other bird species. This can be upsetting to witness but it is completely natural. Some people are concerned that there may be a long-term effect on songbird populations; however, extensive research has found no evidence that increased numbers of magpies have caused declines in songbirds, and confirmed that populations of prey species are not determined by the numbers of their predators (e.g. high numbers of predators usually indicate high numbers of prey).

There is a degree of concern regarding magpie feeding on stag beetles (a protected species). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the increasing numbers of magpies may be having a damaging effect on the population of stag beetle in London (a national stronghold for the species). Based on the current number of stag beetle sighting and recordings it appears that the London population is fairly static, however we await further scientific research into the subject before drawing any conclusions.

Garden and crop damage

As opportunistic and adaptable feeders, magpies and crows will sometimes cause damage to garden plants, crops and allotment site. However they are mainly carnivorous scavengers, and will mostly be in search of worms, rodents and other carrion material.

Noise

Carrion crow, magpie and jay can make a noise, usually in defence or territorial behaviour, exacerbated especially if there are high numbers – their calls are not mellifluous. The overall increase in the urban corvid population inevitably has an aural impact that can further serve to fuel calls for their control.

5. Implications and potential controls

Magpies and crows are thriving in London and there is no expectation that any natural factor will be able to reduce numbers significantly. There is a high availability of food and habitat.

Decisions to control any animal on conservation grounds should be based on the ecological impact of the species concerned, i.e. its effects on species of conservation importance and/or habitats. At present none of the five London corvids appears to be causing adverse conservation impacts on any species, and therefore there is currently no need to carry out controls of them on conservation grounds. However, there is a need to monitor the potential impact on predation of stag beetle.

Licensed control

Control of magpies and crows can be carried out under licence from Natural England (under the Wildlife & Countryside Act, 1981). However, the terms and conditions of licence agreements are very specific; for reasons of economic damage to crops, public health, and harm to native birds, fauna & flora. Licences allow certain actions to be carried out that would otherwise be illegal under the legislation. These licence changes came into force on 1st January 2010. However, attempts to control magpie and/or carrion crow numbers for other reasons will, almost without exception, remain unlawful.

6. References and useful links

CorvidAid: www.corvidaid.org info@corvidaid.org mob: 07762 195 187

RSPB Wildlife Advice Line: 01767 693690

Natural England: www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/wlmsfaqs_tcm6-3859.pdf (Guidance on frequently asked wildlife questions, including dealing with magpies and crows).

7. Related policies

RSWT: Position Statement on Killing of Wild Animals

8. FAQs

How can I deter magpies and crows from damaging my allotment or garden plants?

- It is not easy to deter magpies or crows from gardens, but the usual methods of protective netting, half-full plastic bottles or CDs hung on sticks may help.

I'm worried about magpies and/or crows predation on song-birds in my garden

- Extensive research has found **no** evidence that increased numbers of magpies and/or crows have caused declines in songbirds. Whilst they will kill nestlings and eat eggs, these are part of the typical predator-prey relationships. Some song-bird populations have decreased, but others are flourishing; if corvids were having an adverse impact we wouldn't witness these population trends.

Can I shoot magpies and crows in my garden if they annoy me?

- No. The new licensing arrangements require demonstrable evidence of negative impacts on economic crops, human health, and native species and if issued by Natural England licences will clearly state when it will be justified to kill the birds and when it won't. Magpies and crows remain protected species and there will be no "free for all" to kill them. Shooting the birds because they are a nuisance would not be permitted.

Can I trap magpies and crows in my garden if they annoy me?

- No. Magpies and carrion crows can be trapped and killed but there must be a specific reason and the person doing it must hold a licence.

My local magpies are very noisy, how can I deal with this?

- Magpies are a natural part of our British wildlife. It is not easy to deter magpies or crows from gardens, but the usual methods of protective netting, half-full plastic bottles or CDs hung on sticks may help.

Where is a good place to see corvids in London?

- Magpies and crows can be easily seen throughout much of London in a wide variety of habitats.
- Jays can usually be found in woodland, often in pairs, but also in suburban areas with large gardens and parks with mature trees.
- Jackdaws may be found in more open countryside on London's fringes, but also in Richmond Park and Epping Forest.
- Rooks are rarer, but can be seen in a few of the rural areas of outer London boroughs, such as Havering, Bromley, Harrow and Barnet.
- The seven ravens at the Tower of London are, according to legend, a response to King Charles II, who decreed that they should be protected (six are meant to remain there, the seventh is a 'spare', all looked after by the Ravenmaster). It is more likely that the first ravens were kept from the late 19th century, possibly as pets by Yeomen following a craze for keeping them in the 1850s.