



Black-billed Magpie. *Ann Brokelman*

## Black-billed Magpie Nesting at Ear Falls, Kenora District

*Ross D. James*

**The Black-billed Magpie** (*Pica hudsonia*) is a widespread species in western North America. While it has a history of vagrancy into Ontario dating back to 1771 (Forster 1772), any eastern expansion into the province from prairie habitats has been very slow. It was only in 1980 that nesting was first confirmed in the province (Lamey 1981, Coady 2007). These first nests were found near Rainy River in western Ontario, and in the first Breeding Bird Atlas (1981-1985) nest-

ing was confirmed in only one northern block near Rainy River (Cadman *et al.* 1987). Most other breeding evidence came from nearby squares, plus sightings near Kenora and Dryden (six squares total). Twenty years later, during the second Breeding Bird Atlas (2001-2005), magpies had expanded their range considerably. Breeding evidence came from 39 squares, and the population was estimated to have increased ten-fold (Coady 2007).

Expansion was concentrated in the Rainy River area, as expected, and near Dryden, about 180 km to the northeast, where suitable open-country habitat had been created by farming activity. In addition to these two pockets of activity, birds were noted in four other squares north of Dryden along the Highway 105 corridor as far as Red Lake 150 km north, with breeding confirmed at Ear Falls and Red Lake (Cadman *et al.* 2007). This note presents information on the Ear Falls nesting, with evidence to indicate they may have been there for 15-20 years previously.

### Observations

Ear Falls lies about 60 km southeast of Red Lake on the north side of the English River near its exit from the west end on Lac Seul. The Ontario Hydro Generating Station at Ear Falls, about 4 km from Lac Seul, controls the level of water in Lac Seul and creates a sizable headpond above the dam close to town. I had an opportunity to visit the area on three occasions, May to July, 2002. Magpies were first noted from 18-22 May on the southeast side of town near the shores of the headpond. A pair was noted there each day making repeated visits to a Black Spruce (*Picea mariana*) tree. Watching from about 450 m away across the pond, nest building was suspected as they made repeated visits to the ground and back to the tree. One was finally seen carrying a stick across the pond to confirm my suspicions.

The area in which they were building was open woodland of White Birch (*Betula papyrifera*), Black Spruce and

Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*) with a few taller White Pines (*Pinus strobus*) on the rocky Precambrian shore of the pond near the southern part of the town.

On 19 May a pair of magpies was seen about 4 km to the east near Goldpines. It is not known if this was a different pair, but that seems likely, given the persistent nest building activity near the falls.

On my return to Ear Falls on 7 June, I went to the tree where the bird had been seen building. A nest was visible, though barely, amid a dense tangle of spruce branches. It was about 8 m high adjacent to the trunk of the tree, some 2/3 the tree height. The tree was about 6 m from the edge of the headpond. There were six eggs in the nest (50° 38.15' N, 93° 13.25' W).

When I returned to the area on 16 July, there was a family group of magpies, presumably from this nest, just more than 1 km south, on the south side of the river below the dam. This noisy group of magpies was heard in that vicinity over the next several days.

### Discussion

In talking with two long-time residents of Ear Falls in 2002, they indicated that magpies had first moved into the area at least 15 years previously. The father of one of these two, Jake Ellis, has a cottage on Wenasaga Lake (about 8 km northeast of Ear Falls). Jake indicated that a pair had been in the Wenasaga Lake area intermittently, starting possibly as long as 20 years ago, about the time or shortly after the first Breeding Bird Atlas. Jake's father had found a nest on a small island in the lake near the cottage some years earlier. While there does not appear to

be a large number of pairs around the town of Ear Falls, they have apparently found enough open habitat and food to persist for some time.

The Black-billed Magpie has done reasonably well in open farmlands of the Rainy River and Dryden areas (Elder 2006). Elder speculates that they may not move farther east, as there is insufficient farmland to host any population for a considerable distance to the east. They may also be physiologically ill adapted to more humid eastern climates (Bock and Lepthien 1975). However, if they were able to adapt to habitats other than farmland, perhaps there is less stopping them from adapting to more eastern areas. In the vicinity of Ear Falls, there is essentially no farmland. There is, however, a fairly constant supply of clearcut forest, as well as wide grassy hydro corridors, open woodlands on rocky terrain, and grassy places about homes and cottages.

However, another factor that may be strongly influencing their survival about Ear Falls is human activity. During summer, there is a copious supply of fish remains dumped on small shoals and

islands in the English River and Lac Seul. This food is largely appropriated by a large population of Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), but magpies were seen feeding on these remains at Goldpines. When fish remains are not available in winter, it is possible the birds fly farther south, or use the town dump, carcasses discarded by trappers, or possibly bird feeders, that continue to provide food. If magpies are able to adapt to this type of condition, they may well be able to move farther east to towns along the Trans-Canada Highway. Corvids are among the most adaptable of birds.

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