

For these birds, fidelity's a lark

Birds use many different breeding strategies – ranging from rampant promiscuity to life-long pair bonding – to perpetuate their species.

Ecologist Michelle Hall of the Australian National University has investigated in detail the breeding behaviour of Australian magpie-larks. These are jaunty black and white birds often seen in the suburbs and also known as 'peewees' due to their piercing call.

Hall confirmed that this species tends towards long-term monogamy (having just one mate) and found that male magpie-larks certainly rate highly as the 'sensitive new-age guys' of the bird kingdom.

Males worked at least as hard as the females at the domestic duties of mud nest building, incubation of eggs and brooding and feeding of chicks. It is unusual for male birds to contribute to all aspects of parental care.

This so-called biparental care (by both parents) proved important to survival of the offspring and in cases

where the male disappeared, the deserted female magpie-lark invariably abandoned the nest.

Fortunately, divorce rates were low, whether due to simple desertion or due to a competitor routing the male bird, for magpie-larks are very aggressive. You may occasionally see a male magpie-lark furiously attacking an 'intruder' in a window or car mirror within his territory!

Hall found that established pairs (that had bred with one another before) were more successful parents than new couples that had not bred together in the previous year. This was not because the established pairs raised more fledglings per brood, but rather because they tended to start their first clutch earlier in the season than did the 'newlyweds'. Consequently, they were more likely to find time to rear two broods during the breeding season.

This meant that the established pairs – thanks to their greater age, experience, or both – raised more little magpie-larks per year than novice pairs.

So, in terms of breeding success, long-term fidelity pays dividends for this species. Some of the magpie-larks under study paired up for several years and members of the species are known to pair up for life. Given the observed benefits of these stable relationships, monogamous behaviour must confer strong selective advantage in magpie-larks.

We will no doubt continue to see close-knit pairs of these striking birds raising their families – to us humans, a picture of avian domestic bliss.

More about magpie larks

Hall ML (1999) The importance of pair duration and biparental care to reproductive success in the monogamous Australian magpie-lark. *Australian Journal of Zoology*, 47:439–454.

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Long-term fidelity pays dividends for magpie-larks.

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