

## Yellow-billed Magpie

By Bob Garrison

The yellow-billed magpie holds the honors for being the only bird found exclusively within California's borders. Bird watchers from around the world travel to the Central Valley and south coast ranges to see this flashy native.

A relative of crows and jays, the yellow-billed magpie shares the family trait of being extremely gregarious. Shy and retiring they're not. Festooned with brilliant iridescent black and white feathers, a long tapered tail and a bright yellow beak, the yellow-billed magpie stands out in the farmlands and riparian forests it calls home. And, if their bright colors don't attract your attention, their scolding call will.



Magpies are one of my favorite birds to watch. They travel and nest in colonies, so disputes are frequent and their feeding habits are diverse. Magpies eat almost anything. The birds probe the soil for earthworms and insects, catch flying insects on the wing, rob other bird's nests of eggs and young and feed on road-killed animals. Throughout the Central Valley, magpies take full advantage of the fresh fruits, grains and berries grown by farmers. In the fall, acorns are an important food source.

It seems the magpie goes all out in every aspect of its lifestyle and nesting is no exception. Magpies build huge, domed nests of loosely woven sticks. Mud and grass line the nest cup where six to eight eggs are laid starting in late February. In the winter when the trees are bare, the large nests are easy to spot 30 to 80 feet off the ground in sycamore, cottonwood and oak trees. By their size, you may first think they are hawk nests, but look for the tell-tale dome, a good adaptation to protect the young from predators.

Yellow-billed magpies are a beautiful and interesting member of the Central Valley and south coast range communities. They are well worth the effort to find and observe. I guarantee their interesting behaviors will keep your attention for hours.

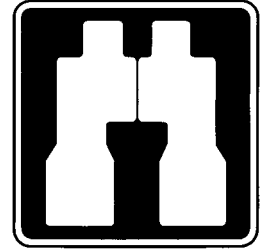
### Viewing Tips

- Magpies need three elements within their habitats: water, large trees for roosting and nesting, and adjoining fields or grasslands to feed. Whether you are in the city or country, if you are within the magpie's home range and you find these three elements, you will likely find magpies.
- Watch for magpies as you drive alongside prime habitat. You can't miss their bright colors.
- Listen for their raucous *chaw-chaw-chaw* calls to find the colonies of birds.
- Once you find a colony of magpies, find a quiet spot where you can view a large expanse of trees and meadow with your binoculars. Sit down and wait. It won't be long before the magpies will ignore you and go about their daily activities.
- Do not approach them, let them approach you. If you notice your presence is aggravating the birds, you are too close. Back away, sit down quietly and wait for them to return to the area.

## Yellow-billed Magpie Viewing Locations in California

Follow wildlife viewing road signs or check the California Wildlife Viewing Guide for directions to the following areas:

- Battle Creek Wildlife Area
- Gray Lodge Wildlife Area
- Effie Yeaw Nature Center/ American River Parkway
- Folsom Lake State Recreation Area
- Caswell Memorial State Park
- Los Banos Wildlife Area/Valley Grasslands
- Joseph Grant County Park
- Lake San Antonio
- Santa Margarita Lake



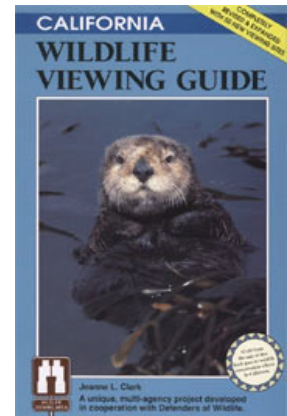
### **Other Magpies**

East of the Sierra Nevada, from the northeast corner of California down through the Owens Valley, look for magpies with black bills. The behaviors of black-billed magpies are nearly the same as those of the yellow-billed magpies, so look in similar habitats within their range.

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You can purchase a *California Wildlife Viewing Guide* which provides detailed wildlife viewing information and directions to these and over 190 other wildlife viewing sites by visiting [www.CAWatchableWildlife.org](http://www.CAWatchableWildlife.org).

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