

# The Thieving Magpie

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I first came across a magpie when I read the comic book 'The Castafiore Emerald' by Hergé. The Milanese diva Bianca Castafiore invites herself to the castle of Marlinspike, home to Tintin and Captain Haddock. The diva always travels with her extensive collection of jewels and a few days after her arrival, her most valuable jewel, an emerald, given to her by the Maharajah of Gopal, disappears. Castafiore is distraught but has to leave for Milan where she is due to perform in Rossini's opera *la Gazza Ladra*. Tintin eventually discovers the emerald in the nest of a magpie.

I thought the magpie was a beautiful bird with its distinctive black and white plumage and its long tail. When, many years later, I saw my first magpie, I realised that its black feathers had a purplish-blue iridescent sheen to the wing and a green gloss to the tail making it even more beautiful.

Despite their beauty, magpies do not have the best of reputations. They are seen as scavengers with a weakness for shiny objects. *La Gazza Ladra* translates as The Thieving Magpie and the opera tells the tale of a servant

sentenced to death for stealing a spoon only to be reprieved at the last minute when the spoon is discovered in a magpie's nest. The opera was itself inspired by a French historical melodrama *La Pie Voleuse* which also translates as the Thieving Magpie and has a similar storyline.

The magpies' character was not helped by a superstition that held that magpies were the only birds not to go in the ark with Noah preferring to sit outside 'jabbering over the drowning world'.

This is reflected in the collective names of magpies ranging from a tittering, a gulp, a tidings, a parliament to the quite sinister: a murder of magpies.

Then again, we all know the nursery rhyme about magpies, though they are not mentioned by name:

*One for sorrow  
Two for joy  
Three for a girl  
Four for a boy  
Five for silver  
Six for gold  
Seven for a secret, never to be told.  
Eight for a wish  
Nine for a kiss  
Ten for the bird you must not miss*

But an earlier version was a lot darker:

*One for sorrow  
Two for mirth  
Three for a funeral  
Four for birth  
Five for heaven  
Six for hell  
Seven's the Devil his own self*

Lying behind all this negativity is probably the magpies' somewhat bloodthirsty behaviour. They will eat smaller bird's eggs and chicks including those of songbirds though, recent research by the British Trust for Ornithology suggests that their activities have little impact on songbird population. In fact, songbird numbers are no different in places where there are many magpies from where there are few.

But surely magpies are thieves that like to collect shiny objects? A recent study conducted at Exeter University showed that instead of being compulsively drawn towards shiny objects, magpies tend to keep a safe distance from such things.

So, not bloodthirsty and not thieves. Yet magpies can surprise you. Despite their very small brain, studies have shown that

magpies can make and use tools, imitate human speech, grieve, play games, and work in teams. They can also recognise themselves in a mirror, a feat that, until recently, has only been seen in humans, apes, Asian elephants and dolphins. An intriguing consideration given that magpies, unlike the other four creatures, are not mammals, but living dinosaurs.

Perhaps we should join China and Korea in admiring these amazing birds. In these countries magpies are considered a symbol of good luck, happiness, good fortune and joy.



SUBURB

FEATURES

## Life before toilet paper was not worth living (Sherrilyn Kenyon)

MARIE-CHRISTINE O'CALLAGHAN

During the first lockdown, we had to deal with empty supermarket shelves where rolls of toilet paper should have been and, despite repeated announcements that there was no shortage, people felt the need to hoard this comforting necessity

Toilet paper is now such a routine part of our lives that, in normal times, we rarely give it any thought, but toilet paper was not around for the majority of human history. Before its invention, we had to make do with an array of cleaning materials. Nature's toilet paper was one option: leaves, grass, moss and natural sponges but also wood shavings, shards of pottery, stone and seashells. More hygienic practices included washing in water or snow in colder climates and with sand in hotter ones.

The Chinese invented paper about 2000 years ago. At first it was used for wrapping precious objects, but soon people began to write on it because it was lighter than bamboo and cheaper than silk. The first documented use of toilet paper was in AD 589, when an official named Yan Zhitui wrote that he "dare not use" any paper on which has been written quotations from the Five Classics or the names of sages for "toilet purposes".

It took a few more centuries before toilet paper, as we know it today, became widely available.

In 1857, the American, Joseph C. Gayetty created the first commercially packaged paper. It was sold in packages of flat sheets, medicated with aloe and water-marked with his name. But it was Seth Wheeler who became the official 'inventor' of toilet paper. In 1871, Seth Wheeler patented

rolled and perforated wrapping paper and began selling the first toilet paper on a roll. Splinter free toilet paper was introduced in 1935, and the first coloured toilet paper was produced in 1954.

Toilet paper can be surprisingly valuable. In 2019 a roll of World War II toilet paper which poked fun at the Third Reich sold for £160 at auction. It was imprinted with an image of a Nazi caricature, including Hitler and the caption: "Now I'm brownshirt all over."

It has become such a part of our psyche that Dr Tsivrikos, a Consumer and Business Psychologist at University College London, recently said that if we had an international sign for panic it would be a traffic warning sign with a toilet paper roll in the middle.

This goes some way in explaining the empty supermarket shelves referred to earlier.

To us, toilet paper has become a necessity, but despite the comfort it provides, toilet paper is not always good for our planet. Its manufacture can involve bleach, toxic chemicals and deforestation.

So next time you buy toilet paper please do consider the following points:

- Is it recycled? Recycled paper is far more sustainable than virgin pulp.

- Is it made from alternative fibres? Responsibly sourced bamboo (with FSC stamp) and agricultural waste are also more sustainable.
- Is its packaging recyclable?

And spare a thought for the 2.4 billion people who do not use toilet paper because they do not have access to a toilet.



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