

# Kleptoparasitism of Australian Magpie by Australian Ravens

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**Abstract.** This note reports an observation of apparent kleptoparasitism by Australian Ravens *Corvus coronoides*. Such behaviour has rarely been recorded for Australian Ravens or other Australian corvids.

Kleptoparasitism—the theft of food from one bird by another—is known to be practised commonly by several bird groups, especially frigatebirds (Fregatidae) and skuas and jaegers (Stercorariidae) (Frances 2007) as well as some raptors (Olsen 1995).

The Corvidae (including crows and ravens, genus *Corvus*) is among the bird families of which some species are known to practise kleptoparasitism (Brockmann & Barnard 1979). About a dozen members of the family have been observed practising kleptoparasitism (Morand-Ferron *et al.* 2007). Common Ravens *C. corax* are known to steal food from nests of Bearded Vultures *Gypaetus barbatus* (Bertran & Margalida 2004). House Crows *C. splendens* have been observed to be more successful in stealing fish from Western Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus* when attacking in flocks ('mobbing') (Yosef *et al.* 2012). Carrion Crows *C. corone* have been observed to schedule their attendance at a waste dump at the best time of day to steal food from starlings *Sturnus* spp. (Baglioni & Canestrari 2009). Other species recorded obtaining food by kleptoparasitism include the Eurasian Jackdaw *C. monedula*, Rook *C. frugilegus* and Hooded Crow *C. cornix* (all from 'other birds'), and Large-billed Crow *C. macrorhynchos* and the Thick-billed Raven *C. crassirostris* (both from vultures) (dos Anjos *et al.* 2015).

Among the Australian corvids, Higgins *et al.* (2006) noted one record of kleptoparasitism by the Australian Raven *C. coronoides* (robbing Short-billed [Carnaby's] Black-Cockatoos *Zanda latirostris*), three records involving the Little Raven *C. mellori* (robbing Silver Gulls *Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae*, a Great Egret *Ardea alba* and White-winged Choughs *Corcorax melanorhamphos*) and one record involving the Torresian Crow *C. orru* (robbing White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster*). Other reported observations include apparent attempted robbery of prey from a Black Falcon *Falco subniger* by an Australian Raven (Charley *et al.* 2014), an Australian Raven stealing from a Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus* (Goodwin 1976, cited by Brockman & Barnard 1979), Little Ravens robbing Silver Gulls (Talmage 2011) and displacing Swamp Harriers *Circus approximans* from carrion (Marchant & Higgins 1993) and (although not strictly kleptoparasitism) apparent robbery of the cache of a Forest Raven *C. tasmanicus* by Torresian Crows (Secomb 2005). These ten records involve nine different victim species. Kleptoparasitism by the Little Crow *C. bennetti* does not appear to be documented (Higgins *et al.* 2006). Given the relative abundance and ease of observation of the five Australian corvid species collectively, it could be that kleptoparasitism is a rare or opportunistic behaviour

for Australian corvids. An alternative interpretation is that observers in Australia have not reported behaviour which might be more common than the literature shows, given that the behaviour appears common among overseas corvids.

At c. 0845 h on 21 April 2014, I was driving westwards along the Charles Barrett Nature Drive (formerly the Eastern Lookout Ring Road) in Wyperfeld National Park, north-western Victoria. About 2 km south-east of Wonga Hut, two Australian Ravens were observed in flight harassing a single Australian Magpie *Gymnorhina tibicen*. The two Ravens appeared to be acting co-operatively, first one then the other swooping on the Magpie, which twisted, banked and changed course and height repeatedly in windy conditions to try to escape the Ravens. Eventually, after c 1 minute of observation, the Magpie dropped an item which appeared to be approximately round and small (no more than 3–5 cm in diameter—perhaps the size and shape of a large beetle). Immediately, one of the Ravens dived and caught the item in its bill before it reached the ground, and both Ravens flew off northwards, away from the road. The Magpie landed in a nearby dead tree and immediately carolled.

It seemed that the Australian Ravens were executing a well-practised co-operative manoeuvre, in particular from the deft manner in which the dropped item was retrieved, and the attack was then immediately abandoned. The location was within and close to the edge of an area of >50 000 ha that had been burnt more or less severely by wildfire in January 2014, c. 3 months before this observation, so it is possible that food was scarce and local birds had found new ways to supplement their diets. It would have been interesting to discover what the Magpie dropped and why this justified the considerable expenditure of effort by the Ravens to take it from the Magpie.

The identification of the ravens as Australian Ravens was based on the calls of the corvids that we heard in Wyperfeld National Park over the preceding 3 days; all the corvids heard calling sounded to be Australian Ravens. Although the two ravens involved in the episode described here were not heard to call, it seems highly likely that they too were Australian Ravens.

No doubt coincidentally, the only case of kleptoparasitism by Australian Magpies recorded by Higgins *et al.* (2006) involved an Australian Raven as the victim (Lepschi 1990).

Although corvids are common in Australia, reports of kleptoparasitism by them are relatively few. I would encourage other observers to publish observations of

such behaviour to help build a better understanding of the frequency of this behaviour and the circumstances in which it occurs.

## Acknowledgements

I thank Damian Slattery, who shared this observation with me, and Dr James Fitzsimons and Dr Stephen Debus for constructive comments on an early draft of this note, including identification of several relevant references.

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Received 3 May 2014, accepted 29 February 2016,  
published online 15 September 2016

