

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher,

Jim Butler

Mobbing for Survival

MY GRANDCHILDREN and I rush outside and join in when we hear mobbing calls: the loud, strident, harsh, bird chorus at a particular location. On one occasion, Noisy Miners, Magpies and Grey Butcherbirds mobbed a large predator perched in the open. Why do birds engage in mobbing behaviour? All bird behaviour is tied up with survival and reproduction.



Predation plays a powerful role in bird evolution. Many birds evolved mobbing calls that attract group members and other species to harass predators. During mobbing, potential prey approach a potential predator to harass and attack it, to drive it away with less risk. Clearly, mobbing is only beneficial for species that can be killed by a given predator.

There are costs of mobbing: possible death, higher energy consumption, less time spent foraging, unguarded eggs and nestlings. Mobbing also brings survival benefits: predatory defence by intimidating or expelling a predator and teaching offspring to identify a predator. Generally, it is expected that the costs and benefits of mobbing vary across species, influencing its expression.

Among birds, many species respond to the warning signals given by other species. This has been researched for the Australian Magpie – Noisy Miner pair. Miners give two alarm calls: 'hawk' calls signalling a flying predator, and 'mobbing' calls proclaiming a perched predator. It has been found that Magpies can distinguish the two types of threat when it hears the Miner's alarm calls. Magpies lift their heads higher and search the sky when they hear Miner's 'hawk' as opposed to 'mobbing' calls.

This sharing of information between species about predator threats has been found to be intercontinental. Four European bird species participated in a recording playback experiment to examine whether they would respond to the mobbing calls of several North American species. As expected, the European species reacted strongly towards recordings of European mobbing calls but then without any prior experience of North American mobbing calls, responded to them as well.

Join a mobbing event. Find a predator!

~ Jim

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Digital Bird Guide: <http://www.moggillcreek.org/>

Image: Grey Goshawk at Brookfield, by Ed Frazer