

Tuesday 29 May 2012 – Morning

GCSE ENGLISH/ENGLISH LANGUAGE

A680/01/RBI Information and Ideas (Foundation Tier)

READING BOOKLET INSERT

Duration: 2 hours



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How the UK's otters have reclaimed the urban waterways as their home



You've heard of the urban magpie and the urban fox. Now stand by for the most remarkable example yet of wildlife moving into our towns and cities – the urban otter. Efforts to clean up rivers and canals have allowed an animal that is normally a recluse to live and breed in city centres.

A survey by The Wildlife Trusts Partnership has found that otters are starting to use waterways in towns and cities throughout Britain. These animals have now been seen in 100 urban centres, including major cities that are some of Britain's least wildlife-friendly and most industrialised places – such as Birmingham, Leeds, Bristol, Newcastle upon Tyne, Glasgow and Cardiff.

'The recovery of the otter has to be the most exciting wildlife success story of the last decade,' says Simon Lyster, director-general of The Wildlife Trusts Partnership. 'Watching otters at play has been largely restricted to remote areas of the countryside, but now otters seem set to become a part of urban wildlife too. People are now more likely than ever to enjoy a glimpse of one of the UK's most attractive creatures.'

Three developments have coincided to bring the otter to town. The first is the recovery of the otter population itself which had declined dramatically from about 1957 onwards. This was mainly because of the use of poisonous pesticides in agriculture, which then washed into rivers and built up in the animals' bodies. By the 1970s otters had been wiped out in most of lowland England. But the pesticides were eventually banned, and since then the otter has made a startling comeback, especially over the last decade, returning to many rivers where it was once familiar. The move into towns is an extension of this, as the otter population increases and moves rapidly into new territories.

The second reason for the otter's return is the national clean-up of waterways. Britain's rivers and canals are purer than at any time since the Industrial Revolution, according to the Environment Agency. This is the result of the billions of pounds spent recently on improving sewage treatment.

The third factor is probably the urban regeneration movement of the last two decades, which has led to greater appreciation of water features in city centres. As a result, river banks and old canals have been cleaned up and are no longer just graveyards for shopping trolleys.

But problems remain. The urban otter faces all the hazards of the built-up environment, including lack of secure shelter and the risk of road death. It is this that has led The Wildlife Trusts Partnership to call for local planning authorities and developers to consider the needs of the otter when building alongside urban waterways.

MAGPIES ON TRIAL

The ‘maggot-pie’ (or magpie) has the worst reputation of any British bird.
But the case against the magpie is far from black and white.

Derek Niemann investigates.



We may find egg-stealing hard to forgive, but in most cases it does little or no harm to other species.

IN THE BRIGHT sunlight, the magpie is a colourful sight. Its chest is pure and white as a swan, and its head is so dark that a pearly glint is the only sign of its watchful eye. The bird’s royal blue tail fans out into a graceful curve like the blade of an African spear.

A stranger stops when he sees my raised binoculars and asks me what I’m watching. ‘A magpie,’ I say. ‘Dreadful things. I hate them,’ he says. It’s a fairly typical response.

THIEF

This undeniably handsome bird was the darling of the Middle Ages. People caught it and kept it as a pet. But times changed. Now it stands accused of being a thief, a murderer, a bully boy of the suburbs. But is the magpie all that bad? Is there room for a little understanding, tolerance and even sympathy for this most hated of birds?

Granted, the magpie can be a hunter, a burglar who has the cheek to raid other birds’ nests while the family

are at home. It tramples the nest and grabs the eggs, deaf to the parents’ shrieking protests. Often, it’s just not nice – seemingly the perfect example of anti-social behaviour.

MURDERER

In Victorian times, the magpie was branded a heartless killer. Landowners blamed it for killing young game birds which they were trying to breed for shooting. In the twentieth century, many people blamed the magpie for the decline of songbirds. The number of birds such as bullfinches and yellow hammers were tumbling; magpies were increasing in number. A simple case of cause and effect, people claimed.

But then, in 2010, the British Trust for Ornithology published the results of research that shows no such link exists. The research brought together data collected from 200 sites between 1967–2000 and information collected by 2,000 volunteers between 1995–2005. This shows that there is no link between an increase in magpie numbers and a decline in songbird numbers.



**Young magpies have short, stubby tails.
Their lives, too, are often short: the young birds face many dangers.**

BULLY

But magpies use strength in numbers to bully weaker creatures, don't they? During the hour before darkness falls, magpies do often gather in groups, sometimes 20 or more. But their purpose is quite harmless: they are coming home to roost. And the small gangs that sometimes taunt a cat or fox are using self-defence to drive a predator away. There have been no known cases of magpies using mob-handed bullying tactics.

VICTIM

On the contrary – this loud, lively species can be vulnerable too, when young. After leaving their nest,

for just a few short weeks they remain under close parental protection. But then they are finally driven away to fend for themselves.

Foxes, crows, stoats, goshawks and tawny owls are among the many predators just waiting to take advantage of young magpies' inexperience and unsteady flight. A recent study found that, where rabbits are scarce, young magpies are the main prey of buzzards. Most young magpies won't see next spring.

**MAGPIES: KILLERS AND BULLIES?
VERDICT: NOT GUILTY!**

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