



WORD OF THE MONTH

OXFORD AUSTRALIA: THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH | SEPTEMBER 2013

Swooping season

- **noun:** the nesting season of the Australian magpie, especially as characterised by aggressive attacks on passers-by.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

She looks warily at a row of magpies on the wire fence. They aren't looking at her, but it is nearly **swooping season** so she puts her school tin on her head just in case. (Carrie Tiffany, *Mateship with Birds*, 2012)

In cities, towns, and rural areas across Australia **swooping season** is here again. Residents are preparing to do battle and the usual weapons of choice are sticks, hats, umbrellas, and bike helmets. The enemy? Aggressive magpies (mostly male) who attack humans and animals that stray into their territory during nesting season. **Swooping season** usually occurs between August and October, and the behaviour lasts as long as chicks are in the nest. Only a small proportion of magpies swoop, but those that do typically attack without warning, dive-bombing the unwary passer-by from behind. Sometimes they will simply surprise and alarm the victim with a snap of the beak and a swish of wings as they pull up short, but sometimes they will make physical contact, peck at the head and face, draw blood, or cause accidents:

Yes, it's magpie **swooping season** again and favourite 'dive-bomb' stories are emerging from all over Sydney. Postman, Ray Daley ... was attacked from behind by an especially angry one. Mr Daley was so shocked, he fell off his bike, spraining his ankle. ... To outwit his assailants, Mr Daley now rides along the streets of Revesby wearing his sunglasses on the back of his head. (*Sun Herald*, 25 September 1988)

Although magpies have long been behaving like this during nesting season, the first evidence of the term **swooping season** only appears in print in the 1980s:

The love/hate relationship between Canberra citizens and their magpies is of very long standing. The September–October **swooping season** has long been an accepted part of life here. (*Canberra Times*, 30 November 1984)

Local authorities have come up with various ways to deal with swooping magpies:

Break out the empty ice-cream containers, it's the **swooping season** for magpies. ... The National Parks and Wildlife Service says the best protection against magpie attacks is to wear an ice-cream container as a helmet or hat. (*Newcastle Herald*, 5 September 1998)

Warning signs are sometimes posted where a swooper's territory is near a school, playground or shopping centre, and an especially aggressive bird may be relocated (magpies are a protected species). Cyclists have been especially inventive in developing anti-swooping strategies, and in recent years have found a new use for cable ties in **swooping season**:

One simple deterrent is for cyclists to attach large cable ties to the back of their helmet, which stick up like antennae and effectively prevent attacks. (*Gympie Times*, 20 August 2008)

Aggressive magpies appear to have individual preferences in swooping targets, and also in what deters them from swooping; one method does not work for all. During **swooping season** you cycle, jog, or walk the dog at your own risk.

Swooping season will be included in the forthcoming second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.



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