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PICA PICA HUDSONIS

I am not much of a bird man and the only bird that I really noticed in The West was the magpie. I am talking about the subspecies known as the American magpie. Professor Ed Sloane, who is an outdoorsman and a bird nut, kindly supplied me with its ornithological name: *pica pica hudsonis*. Now there can be no confusion.

The magpie seems to live comfortably throughout The West, and as soon as you get out onto the road you find them all over the place. You can't miss them. The magpie is a large and quite handsome bird, about fifteen inches from crown to toe, and with black and white feathers. It flies gracefully, and when it walks, it does an imitation of a 1926 gambling dude strutting down the Boardwalk in two-tone shoes. It can be tamed and taught to speak like a parrot.

The magpie has a hankering for meat and does a fair amount of scavenging. Cattlemen consider it a great nuisance because it may molest animals that have an open

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cut in their skin such as occurs after branding.

I asked Ed whether the American magpie is as much a thief as its European namesake.

"Oh yes. A very big thief. They learn to steal bait out of traps."

And then Ed, who is a Texan by upbringing and a Utahn by readjustment, was overwhelmed by reminiscences and produced his Magpie Story. (I suppress the Texas drawl in writing it up.)

"It was about three or four years ago and I was up to the Crystal Lake Country in the High Uintas doing a bit of camping and fishing. This is in the part that is labelled "Primitive Area" on the road maps. And you've got to believe it. There are no roads in there, and if you want to go, well you'd better go with someone who knows the area. I don't mean to insult you; just being realistic.

Well, there's this little lake I keep coming back to. It's got a little stream leading into it, and just before the stream feeds into the lake there's a bit of a waterfall. I was fishing for trout. First I fished the stream, maybe for a quarter of a mile above the fall. I was using spoons and spinners, but I didn't have any luck. So I decided to come down the stream,

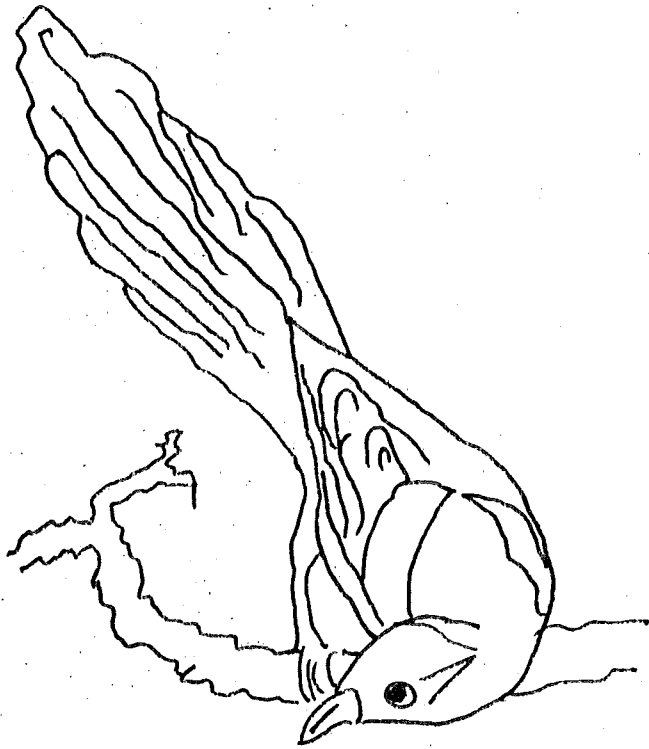
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and as it was getting on toward the end of the afternoon, which is a good time for catching trout, I decided to fish the lake not too far from the falls.

I was coming down by the falls and I must have slipped or something and I kind of fell into the stream, not very much, but enough to get my wristwatch wet. It's supposed to be one of these waterproof things, but I'd been having a little trouble with it, so I took it off and put it into my fishing basket.

Then I set up on the lake, and I figured that I'd better change my technique and use a night crawler instead of a spinner. Maybe it'd bring me some luck. So I put the worm on the hook, used a bob with a fairly long lead, couple three feet maybe, and cast off.

Now all the while there's this magpie up in a low branch near where I was fishing and he was watching the whole procedure. I'd cast off and reel in and nothing'd come of it. The magpie held on up there and every once in a while'd put out a squawk. I began to get rattled, and I figured that maybe I'd better call it a day. Maybe I'd better put my gear away and hike back over to where I'd pitched my tent. I wouldn't have trout for supper, but I had a couple of cans of chili and other stuff so I'd make out O.K.



The American Magpie

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At Home in the West

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One last try. I cast off, and the magpie who'd been watching me like an eagle all this while must have known what was in my mind; he must have wanted a bit of a snack before he turned in, and he came off the branch like a bat out of hell and dived into the water after the worm on the hook. The poor dumb bird didn't make it, of course, he got his feet caught up in all that line below the bob. The poor thing was squawking, beating his wings, trying to fly off, but the line held him. I reeled in, slowly, and I was thinking all the time: Hot Damn, I've caught me a magpie instead of a trout. And I was madder than hell at the bird for bringing me bad luck and fouling my line.

I said to myself, why open a can of chili? I'll have me a broiled magpie for supper. That'll teach him. I'd eaten crow before--in the direct and indirect meanings-- it's not fancy eating but it'll sustain life and they say that magpie tastes only twice as bad.

Well, I cut the line near the top of the rod and hauled in this flustering pack of feathers almost as big as a chicken. I shoved him in my fishing creel and hiked back to where my tent was. I put all the stuff

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on the ground and started making preparations for supper. It was getting on to dark. I started heating up the grill. I reached down to take out my supper. I opened it up, and the bird-- I should have wrung his neck before I put him in-- managed to fly off, line and all.

Well, there went my supper up into the trees and into the wide blue yonder and I had to content myself with chili and franks. Probably much healthier anyway. The bird would have soured my personality for a week and my wife would have complained. But that's only half of it. I didn't realize until I'd tucked into my sleeping bag and wanted to know what time it was, that the damn magpie had stolen my wristwatch out of the basket. What the bird would do with a wristwatch was more than mortal man can tell.

I spent a few more days fishing. I lost track of the time. In them high mountains the sun goes down early. And I got home one day before I started."