

Magpies grieve for their dead (and even turn up for funerals)

By [DAVID DERBYSHIRE FOR MAILONLINE](#)

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With its aggressive behaviour and appetite for young chicks, the magpie doesn't have a particularly good image when it comes to compassion.

But according to some experts, the predator may have a tender side, feeling grief and routinely holding 'funerals' for fallen friends.

Dr Marc Bekoff claims the rituals - which involve birds laying 'wreaths' of grass alongside roadside corpses - are proof animals feel complex emotions.

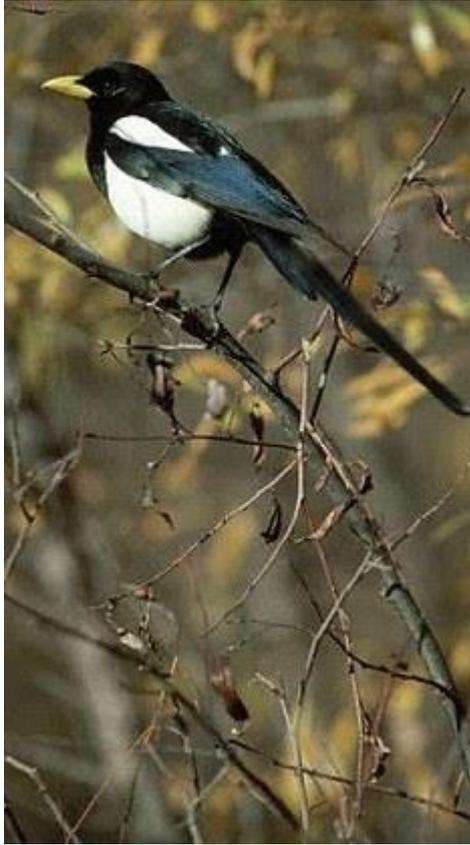


Four for sorrow: Magpies are said to hold funerals for fallen friends and even bring along wreaths

The claims are likely to reignite the debate about whether emotions are a uniquely human trait - or whether they are found across the whole animal kingdom.

Other studies have shown evidence of mourning in gorillas, empathy in rats, and friendship in cats.

Animal behaviour expert Dr Bekoff, of the University of Colorado had an encounter with four magpies alongside a magpie corpse as proof that animals have a 'moral intelligence'.



We salute you: Birds such as this yellow-billed magpie may have a more sympathetic side to their character than their notoriously harsh image

'One approached the corpse, gently pecked at it, just as an elephant would nose the carcass of another elephant, and stepped back,' he said. 'Another magpie did the same thing.'

Next, one of the magpies flew off, brought back some grass and laid it by the corpse. Another magpie did the same. Then all four stood vigil for a few seconds and one by one flew off.'

After publishing an account of the funeral, he received emails from people who had seen the same ritual in magpies, ravens and crows.

'We can't know what they were actually thinking or feeling, but reading their action there's no reason not to believe these birds were saying a magpie farewell to their friend,' he writes in the journal *Emotion, Space and Society*.

He also claims to have seen emotions in elephants. While watching a herd in Kenya he noticed a crippled cow elephant who was only able to walk slowly.

'Despite her disability the rest of the herd walked for a while, stopped to look round and then waited for her to catch up.'

'The only obvious conclusion we could see is the other elephants cared and so they adjusted their behaviour,' said Dr Bekoff.

Critics have argued that those who see emotions in animals are guilty of anthropomorphism - the attribution of human characteristics to animals.

But Dr Bekoff said emotions evolved in humans and animals because they improve the chances of survival.

'It's bad biology to argue against the existence of animal emotions,' he said.