

Open Category – Winner 2026

THE MAGPIES HAVE UNIONISED

By Kailum Graves

The first sign that the magpies had unionised was not the swooping, which was seasonal, but the email.

It arrived in the general enquiries inbox of Marrow Creek Shire Council at 8:03 on a Monday morning, wedged between a complaint about a pothole shaped “like Tasmania if Tasmania had given up” and a photograph of a bin with its lid missing.

The subject line read:

*NOTICE OF INDUSTRIAL ACTION — AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE COLLECTIVE,
MARROW CREEK BRANCH*

I was on my second instant coffee and my first private despair of the day, both of which had become necessary since the separation.

My left eye was doing its twitching thing. My four-year-old, Lucy, had refused daycare because a magpie had looked at her “like it was allowed to”. My ex-husband, Nathan, had texted to say he was running late for school pick-up three days from now, which was

impressive even for him. Someone in Parks had microwaved fish again.

So I nearly deleted the email.

The only reason I didn't was that, attached to it, was a PDF on council letterhead. Not our current council letterhead. Our old one, from before the rebrand, back when the logo still included the creek and not the abstract blue swoosh that looked, according to one ratepayer, "like a dolphin having a medical episode".

The email began:

Dear Sir/Madam/Relevant Mammal,

We write on behalf of the Marrow Creek Magpie Collective, representing 147 local breeding pairs, 83 juveniles, 12 elderly females with grievances dating back to 1998, and one crow who attends meetings but contributes little.

For too long, our members have been maligned as "aggressive", "menacing", "psychotic little footballs", and, in one particularly hurtful Facebook post by a cyclist named Darren, "sky bastards".

We reject these characterisations.

We are not aggressive.

We are parents.

Effective immediately, unless the enclosed claims are acknowledged, the Collective will commence targeted industrial action across all council-managed parks, ovals, shared pathways and one Aldi carpark which, while not strictly council land, contains a tree of historical importance.

Respectfully,

Kevin

Acting Secretary

Marrow Creek Magpie Collective

I read it twice.

Then I took the PDF to my manager, Bev, who had worked in local government for thirty-one years and had developed the facial expression of someone watching civilisation collapse in slow motion but refusing to give it a purchase order.

"Is this a joke?" I asked.

Bev put on her reading glasses. “Everything is a joke now,” she said. “The difference is whether it has legal implications.”

She scrolled.

The magpies had six demands.

One: a twenty-metre no-helmet-shaming buffer around all known nesting trees.

Two: public signage acknowledging that swooping was not an act of random cruelty but “a targeted parental intervention”.

Three: replacement of the phrase “magpie attack season” on council communications with “heightened interspecies boundary awareness period”.

Four: installation of shallow water dishes during heatwaves.

Five: consultation before tree-logging.

Six: an apology.

“From whom?” I asked.

Bev scrolled further. “Humanity,” she said.

We sat with that.

Outside the staffroom window, a magpie landed on the railing. It looked through the glass with the calm, assessing stare of a barrister who had found blood on your shoe.

“Why is it called Kevin?” I asked.

Bev took off her glasses. “Because,” she said, “that is the sort of name that gets things done.”

By lunch, the email had been forwarded fourteen times, misfiled under “Animal Control”, and accidentally sent to the mayor.

By two o’clock, the mayor had issued a statement.

By three, the magpies had responded.

By four, the story was on regional news.

By six, a Sydney current affairs show displayed a picture of our main street under the caption: *MAGPIES DEMAND APOLOGY FROM HUMANITY.*

By seven, my mother rang to ask if this was my fault.

“No,” I said, stirring pasta sauce while Lucy lay under the kitchen table wearing a bike helmet.

“Because you do work in communications.”

“I don’t communicate *with birds*, Mum.”

“Well, maybe you should. You always had a way with difficult creatures.”

That was what she called Nathan now. A difficult creature. Not unkindly, which was worse.

Lucy rolled onto her back beneath the table, helmet scraping the tiles. “Mummy,” she said, “are the magpies cross because we are bad?”

“No, sweetheart.”

“Are they cross because Daddy left?”

The spoon slipped from my hand and landed in the sauce. “No,” I said too quickly. “No, love. That’s different.”

She nodded, unconvinced in the efficient way of children.

Nathan had not, technically, left. We had “restructured the family arrangement”, according to the mediator, a woman named Fran who wore a necklace of blue stones and looked as if she had never once slammed a cupboard for emphasis. Nathan had moved six streets away into a unit with beige carpet and a balcony too small for his barbecue. Lucy called it Daddy’s holiday house. I called it nothing.

Outside, something tapped the window.

Lucy froze.

A magpie sat on the back fence, black and white and tidy as a nun. It held a twig in its beak.

Lucy began to cry without making a sound.

I closed the blinds.

The next morning, Bev appointed me official liaison to the Marrow Creek Magpie Collective.

“You’re good with language,” she said.

“I write bin collection updates.”

“Exactly. You can make anything sound less catastrophic.”

“I don’t know anything about birds.”

“Neither does Council, historically. That’s why we’re here.”

The first meeting took place at Rotary Park at 10 a.m. on Wednesday.

Present were myself, Bev, two officers from Parks, one ranger, three local journalists, a wildlife volunteer named Moira, twelve concerned residents, four cyclists in defensive sunglasses, and approximately thirty magpies arranged along the goalposts, barbecue shelter and nearby bottlebrush like members of a very judgemental choir.

Kevin stood on the picnic table.

He was larger than the others. Not physically, perhaps, but spiritually. There was something in the way he held himself, chest forward, eye bright, beak slightly open, as if about to correct your minutes.

The ranger, Steve, leaned towards me. "You're up," he whispered.

"Why me?"

"You're communications."

"I communicate *out*."

Kevin made a sound. It was not birdsong. It was not speech either. It was somewhere between a car alarm learning jazz and a kettle remembering its childhood.

Everyone turned to Moira. She listened carefully, head tilted. "He says," she said, "'You brought the wrong biscuits.'"

The first negotiation was not productive. The cyclists wanted safe passage through Rotary Park. The magpies wanted the path moved. Parks said the path had been installed in 2004 at significant cost. Kevin replied, through Moira, that the tree had been installed approximately eighty years earlier by a seed, the wind, and no committee whatsoever.

A man named Darren stood up and said he paid rates and had a right to ride wherever he liked without being "scalped by a monochrome psychopath".

The magpies fell silent.

Kevin hopped once.

Moira swallowed. "He says," she translated, "'Your helmet is fluorescent yellow and contains three separate GoPros. No one is trying to scalp you. We are trying to speak to you.'"

That was when Darren called Kevin a birdbrain.

By sunset, Darren's helmet had been found in the ornamental lake. No one saw what happened.

The footage from his three GoPros was corrupted, except for a single frame showing Kevin in extreme close-up, one eye filling the lens.

Council issued a statement condemning “all forms of equipment relocation”.

The magpies issued a statement condemning the word “all”.

For three weeks, Marrow Creek became the centre of national attention. Reporters came from Melbourne. Podcasters came from Brunswick. A British newspaper referred to us as “a rural township under avian siege”, which offended everyone because Marrow Creek had a Kmart and was therefore not rural, strictly speaking.

The magpies escalated.

They did not swoop randomly. That would have been easier. They swooped only people who had signed the anti-magpie petition, which suggested either sophisticated surveillance or the presence of a rat in Customer Service.

They dropped bottle caps into the mayor’s convertible. They arranged sticks on the council lawn to spell *CONSULT*. They sat in rows outside the planning office whenever a development application involved tree removal.

One morning, we arrived to find the bronze statue of J.F. Marrow, the town’s founder and a man who had done well in sheep, wearing a small sign around his neck.

THIS MAN DESTROYED SIX WETLANDS AND HAD POOR HAT DISCIPLINE.

Bev looked at it for a long time.

“Can we prove he didn’t?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “That’s the problem with history.”

At home, Lucy refused to go outside unless I walked in front of her carrying an umbrella.

“It’s not even nesting season on our street,” I told her.

“They might have helpers,” she said.

Nathan found this funny. He laughed when I told him at handover, standing beside his car while Lucy transferred her backpack, Bluey water bottle, possum socks, and catastrophic emotional weather from one parent to the other.

“You have to admit,” he said, “it’s pretty classic.”

“What is?”

“You. Accidentally becoming a bird diplomat.”

“I did not accidentally become anything.”

“Right. Sorry. You were probably headhunted.”

He smiled the smile I used to love before it became evidence.

Lucy climbed into the back seat and stared out at us.

“We need to talk about Saturday,” I said.

Nathan’s smile thinned. “I told you I’ve got work.”

“You always have work.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No. It’s accurate.”

He glanced at Lucy. “Can we not do this in front of her?”

It was amazing, the way adults said this while doing exactly it.

A magpie sang from the powerline above us.

Nathan looked up. “Great,” he said. “Even the birds are judging.”

The magpie cocked its head. For one wild second, I hoped it would swoop him.

It didn’t.

It sang. That was worse.

The negotiations continued every Thursday.

We met under the old river red gum at the edge of Rotary Park, a tree so large it seemed less like a plant than a decision the earth had made and stuck with. Its bark peeled in long grey strips. Its roots lifted the path. Its branches held nests, wind, gossip, plastic bags, and Kevin.

Council brought folding chairs.

The magpies brought minutes.

Their minutes were pecked into bark, which made distribution difficult but gave them moral force.

Slowly, absurdity became procedure.

We established speaking turns. We created an agenda. We learned that the magpies objected to reflective zip ties because they made bicycles look “injured but arrogant”.

They supported helmets, provided humans stopped decorating them with fake eyes.

“The eyes are rude,” Moira translated.

Kevin sang sharply.

“And badly positioned,” she added.

They wanted the primary school to stop teaching children that magpies were dangerous.

“They are dangerous,” Steve muttered.

Moira listened.

“He says, ‘So are school zones. And yet you have signs.’”

They wanted nesting maps protected from public release to avoid harassment. They wanted council to stop lopping branches in August. They wanted “Shoo!” recognised as hate speech. They wanted, above all, to be understood as creatures with claims upon the world.

The angry emails from residents were not entirely wrong.

A woman on Baines Street had stitches above her ear.

An elderly man had fallen off his bike.

A toddler had developed such a fear of the sky that he wore a bucket indoors.

And then there was Lucy, who watched the ceiling whenever birds sang, as if the roof might become negotiable. At night, after she slept, I sat at the kitchen table and drafted statements no one would like.

Council recognises the importance of coexistence.

Council urges residents to avoid known nesting zones.

Council is committed to balancing the needs of all park users.

Balancing. That was the word people used when they meant no one would get enough.

Sometimes, after midnight, Nathan texted.

How did she go tonight?

Sometimes I answered. Sometimes I didn’t.

Once, at 1:12 a.m., I wrote:

She asked if love can stop suddenly, like the TV when the power goes out.

Then I deleted it and sent:

Fine.

On the fourth Thursday, the twist arrived limping.

We were halfway through agenda item three—“Appropriate terminology for aerial boundary enforcement”—when a small grey-black juvenile magpie dropped from the gum tree and landed badly in the grass.

Every magpie on the goalposts screamed. The sound cut through the meeting, through the journalists, through the council lanyards and laminated risk assessments, through the rehearsed human idea that only human panic mattered.

The young bird tried to hop and fell sideways. Its left wing dragged.

Kevin flew down so fast I stepped back. The others gathered along the fence, black eyes fixed on us.

Steve reached for his gloves.

Kevin lunged.

“Don’t,” Moira said sharply.

Steve froze.

“What do we do?” I asked.

No one answered. This was the problem with committees. When life stopped being theoretical, everyone looked for the form.

Then Lucy ran past me.

I had not known Nathan had brought her. He was standing near the playground, phone in hand, wearing the expression of a man who had intended to drop in for five minutes and found himself inside a myth.

“Lucy!” I shouted.

She stopped three metres from the bird. Her helmet was on. Purple, with stickers of planets. Her hands were clenched at her sides.

Kevin faced her. So did every magpie in Marrow Creek, or so it seemed. My daughter, who had not walked under a tree for a month, crouched in the grass.

“Hello,” she whispered.

The juvenile bird panted.

“Your wing is wrong.”

Kevin made a low sound.

Lucy looked at him. "It's okay," she said. "My family is wrong too."

No one moved.

Even Darren, who had come to the meeting wearing a reinforced hat with cable ties and the expression of a freedom fighter, lowered his phone.

Lucy reached into her pocket and pulled out half a cheese stick wrapped in lint. I should have stopped her. Cheese was not appropriate for wildlife. But parenting, like local government, involved many situations where the correct thing was obvious slightly too late.

She placed it on the grass and pushed it forward. The young bird pecked once.

Kevin watched my daughter. His head tilted.

Moirira began to cry.

"What did he say?" I asked.

She wiped her face with her sleeve. "He said, 'Small mammal understands nest damage.'"

The injured magpie was taken by Moira to the wildlife centre in a towel printed with council's old Clean Up Australia Day slogan: *OUR TOWN, OUR FUTURE*.

Lucy named him Biscuit. Kevin objected, formally, to the name. Lucy overruled him.

After that, everything changed, though not in the way the news wanted.

The headlines said: *BRAVE GIRL BROKERS PEACE WITH MAGPIE UNION*.

This was not true. Lucy did not broker peace. She sat in the back seat on the way home and shook so hard her teeth clicked. She vomited into her lap at the roundabout near Woolies. That night she wet the bed for the first time in two years and cried because she thought Biscuit's mother would be looking for him.

"It's my fault," she sobbed, while I stripped the sheets at midnight.

"No, sweetheart."

"I fed him bad cheese."

"You helped him."

"What if helping hurts?"

I had no answer that was not a slogan. So I lay beside her on the bare mattress until she slept, her hair damp against my cheek, her little body twitching with dreams.

At 2 a.m., I found Nathan in the kitchen. He had stayed. He was washing the sheets in the sink because the machine was already full. His sleeves were rolled up. His face looked older under the fluorescent light.

"You don't have to do that," I said.

"I know."

The old version of us would have made a joke then. Something about heroic laundry. Something about the washing machine being emotionally unavailable. Instead, he wrung water from a fitted sheet.

"I'm sorry," he said.

I leaned against the doorframe. "For the sheets?"

"No."

The house hummed.

Outside, a magpie sang once in the dark. I had not known they did that at night. Perhaps they didn't. Perhaps the world had changed its habits while we were busy destroying each other in small, efficient ways.

"I keep thinking," Nathan said, "that if I'm calm enough, she won't know."

"She knows."

"I know."

Water dripped from his hands. "I didn't leave because I don't love her."

"I know."

"I didn't leave because I don't love you either."

This was less useful. I looked at the floor tiles. One was cracked near the skirting board. I had been meaning to fix it for three years.

"Don't," I said.

He nodded. After a while, he said, "That bird today. The big one."

"Kevin."

"Of course. Kevin." He almost smiled. "He looked like he wanted to kill all of us."

"He probably did."

"But he didn't."

"No."

We stood there with the wet sheet between us, like a flag belonging to no country.

The next council meeting was standing room only. The mayor wanted a swift resolution. The residents wanted safety. The cyclists wanted justice, though Darren also wanted his helmet back, because apparently the lake had not been kind to the audio system.

The magpies wanted the apology.

The problem was the apology. Legal advised against any admission of liability, especially to birds. Risk advised against anthropomorphising wildlife. Parks advised that moving the pathway would cost \$183,000, not including drainage, signage, or the possibility of “further avian stakeholder escalation”. The mayor wanted language that sounded compassionate without promising anything measurable.

Bev asked me to draft it. I tried.

Council acknowledges community concerns.

Delete.

Council regrets any distress experienced during seasonal swooping incidents.

Delete.

Council recognises that native wildlife forms an important part of our shared environment.

Delete.

At noon, I walked to Rotary Park. The gum tree moved slightly in the wind. Not much. Enough.

Kevin was on the lowest branch.

“How’s Biscuit?” I asked.

He looked at me.

“Stupid question,” I said. “Sorry.”

The park was quiet. Someone had tied laminated warning signs to the fence. Someone else had added a handwritten note underneath: *THEY WERE HERE FIRST, DARREN.*

A child’s bike lay beside the path, training wheels up like a dead beetle.

I sat on the grass. “My daughter thinks it’s her fault,” I said. “The wing.”

Kevin blinked.

“It isn’t. Obviously. But children take responsibility for things because adults are always dropping it.”

A jogger entered the park, saw me talking to a bird, and turned around.

“I’m supposed to write you an apology that isn’t an apology.”

Kevin began to sing. It was soft at first, a liquid ripple, then a bright cascade, then something stranger—notes looping and falling, mimicry and memory, car alarms and flute music and water over stones, all of it pouring from one black-and-white throat.

I had heard magpies all my life. Everyone in Australia has. Morning sound. Background sound. The country clearing its throat before the heat arrives.

But I had not listened.

The song changed. For one second, unmistakably, it became Lucy’s voice.

Hello.

Then the squeak of a playground swing. Then a dog barking. Then someone laughing. Then, impossibly, my own voice from a week earlier, tired and sharp:

You always have work.

I stood so fast I got dizzy.

Kevin stopped.

“What was that?”

He looked away.

Moira later told me magpies could mimic sounds they heard. Phones, alarms, other birds, people. She said it cheerfully, as if this were only interesting.

But I could not stop thinking about it.

How much had they heard?

All the arguments under trees. All the phone calls in parks. All the loneliness spoken aloud because the speaker believed no one who mattered was listening. All the mothers crying quietly behind sunglasses while pushing prams. All the fathers sitting in utes outside ovals after training, practising apologies they would never deliver. All the children begging the sky to be safe.

The magpies had not suddenly become sentient. We had suddenly become aware of

being overheard.

That night, I wrote the apology. Not on council letterhead. Not at first.

I wrote it by hand, after Lucy fell asleep clutching a stuffed kookaburra because she said it was “not on anyone’s side”.

I wrote:

We are sorry.

Then I stopped, because it looked too small.

I started again.

We are sorry we called you aggressive when you were afraid.

We are sorry we built paths through your nurseries and then acted surprised when you objected.

We are sorry we taught our children to fear your shadows before we taught them your songs.

We are sorry for every tree we treated as scenery until something loved it.

We are sorry that, when you defended your young, we named the defence violence.

We are sorry we recognised ourselves in you and chose insult instead.

Then I sat there for a long time. The house was quiet. The fridge clicked. Somewhere down the street, a dog barked twice and gave up.

I thought of Nathan in his beige unit. Of Lucy in two bedrooms. Of myself, making lunchboxes with the grim efficiency of a soldier. Of all the ways I had mistaken fear for righteousness.

I added one more line.

We are still learning how to share the ground.

Bev read it the next morning. She was silent for so long I began to sweat.

“Legal will hate it,” she said.

“I know.”

“Risk will hate it.”

“Yep.”

“The mayor will try to put ‘where appropriate’ in every sentence.”

“Probably.”

Bev looked at the paper again. Then she took off her glasses. “My husband used to feed the magpies,” she said.

I blinked. “I didn’t know that.”

“No reason you would.” She folded the paper carefully. “After he died, one came to the fence every morning for six months. Same time. Seven twenty. I never fed it. Didn’t want to encourage dependency.” She smiled without happiness. “Stupid phrase.”

At the extraordinary council meeting, Bev read the apology aloud before anyone could stop her.

The mayor went pale. Legal closed her eyes. Darren objected on the grounds that humanity had not authorised Council to apologise on its behalf. Kevin, perched in the open window, listened.

When Bev finished, the room was silent.

Then one magpie outside sang. Then another. Then another. The sound moved through the chamber like weather. It rose from the carpark, the bottlebrush, the oval, the school roof, the powerlines, the Aldi sign, the statue of J.F. Marrow, the river red gum whose roots had broken the path because the path had assumed roots were a problem.

People turned towards the windows. Some laughed. Some covered their ears.

Moira cried again, which was becoming administratively inconvenient.

The mayor whispered, “Is this good?”

Kevin flew into the chamber. He landed on the lectern. The microphone squealed.

Moira stepped forward.

Kevin sang.

Moira listened. “He says,” she said, ““The apology is incomplete.””

Legal opened her eyes.

Kevin continued.

Moira looked at me. “He says, ‘But so are nests.’”

The Marrow Creek Interspecies Coexistence Accord was signed on a Friday afternoon in Rotary Park. It had no legal force. This was very important, according to Legal. It had moral force. This was very important, according to Kevin.

The path was not moved, not yet. Council did not have \$183,000 lying around, despite widespread public belief that rates were collected in a large vault beneath the library. But we closed the worst section during nesting season. We installed signs designed by the primary school.

MAGPIE PARENTS AT WORK. PLEASE GIVE THEM SPACE.

THIS TREE IS SOMEONE'S HOME.

HELMETS ARE GOOD. PANIC IS OPTIONAL.

The water dishes went in before summer. Tree-logging was delayed until after fledging. The schools changed their worksheets.

The anti-magpie petition remained online, but someone edited Darren's name to "Darren (under review by birds)", and no one seemed able to fix it.

Biscuit came home in late October. Moira released him at Rotary Park with half the town watching.

Lucy stood beside me, helmet in her hands. Not on her head.

Nathan stood on her other side. We did not touch. We did not need to for the photograph everyone wanted. That seemed important. Not every repair was a return.

Moira opened the carrier. For a moment, Biscuit did not move. He stood in the doorway, smaller than memory, his healed wing folded tight against his body.

Then Kevin called from the gum.

Biscuit flew. Not perfectly. There was a dip in the flight, a small stutter where pain had once lived. But he reached the lowest branch. The magpies erupted.

Lucy laughed. It broke something in me. Not loudly. Not dramatically. Just a little internal structure I had been leaning on without knowing. Something made of fear and competence and the idea that if I controlled enough variables, nothing would fall from the tree.

Nathan glanced at me.

I wiped my face.

"Hay fever," I said.

"It's October."

"Extremely punctual hay fever."

He nodded.

The ceremony ended. The journalists packed up. Darren asked for a photo with Kevin and was refused. The mayor gave an interview about leadership. Bev stole three lamingtons from the refreshments table and said this was why she still worked in government.

By late afternoon, the park emptied. Only the three of us remained near the gum tree.

Lucy looked at the path. "Can I walk under it?"

My chest tightened.

Nathan crouched beside her. "You don't have to."

"I know."

I wanted to say no. I wanted to place the helmet back on her head. I wanted to carry her through the world in a sealed room where nothing with a beak, vehicle, diagnosis, opinion, market force, heatwave, bad marriage, random cruelty or falling branch could touch her.

Instead, I said, "We can walk together."

She shook her head. "Just me."

Lucy stepped onto the path.

The gum tree spread above her, enormous and indifferent and full of lives. Kevin watched from a branch. Biscuit hopped beside him. The air held still.

Lucy took one step. Then another. Halfway under the tree, she looked up.

A magpie launched from the branch.

My whole body became a scream.

But the bird did not dive.

It flew above her once, a clean black-and-white arc against the bright hard blue of the Australian sky, then landed on the fence ahead.

Lucy stopped.

The magpie sang.

Not warning. Not surrender. Something else.

A sound like water finding stone. Like metal gates in morning wind. Like a child saying hello to a broken thing. Like every ordinary day trying, despite the evidence, to begin again.

Lucy stood beneath the tree and listened.

So did we.

So did the cyclists waiting at the closed sign.

So did the mayor beside his convertible.

So did Darren, holding his ruined helmet.

So did the town, though most of them would later claim they had only paused because traffic was bad or because someone was in the way.

The magpie sang for a long time. Long enough for my daughter to stop looking afraid.

When the song ended, Lucy walked the rest of the path alone. At the other side, she turned back and waved, not at me, not at Nathan, but at the tree.

Kevin fluffed himself once. Then, with the authority of someone concluding a meeting, he flew and shat on the mayor's car.

No one laughed immediately. We were too moved.

Then Bev started, quietly and helplessly, and the sound spread through the park until even Nathan was bent over, and I was crying again, and Lucy was shouting, "Kevin!" in the scandalised voice of a person who had expected better from leadership.

Above us, the magpies watched.

Not kindly.

Not cruelly.

Closely.

And for the first time in months, maybe years, I was grateful to be seen.