

MISTLETOES IN OUR AREA...DO YOU KNOW THE DIFFERENCE?...Ellinor Campbell

Mistletoe is a fascinating plant and a relic from Gondwana. There are 91 species in Australia, but only two of these grow in our district.

Mistletoe is semi-parasitic, producing its own energy by photosynthesis, but gaining mineral nutrients and water from its host plant. It is often considered to be very destructive to our native plants. However, though they are often seen to infest isolated trees and those on forest edges, they are not as prolific in healthy forest. New research has revealed that, in fact, they play ‘a key role in the ecology of Australian woodlands. . . .When mistletoe was removed from experimental sites a third of the bird species disappeared.’

As bird watchers know, mistletoe, with its good food and shelter, is a great place to find a range of birds including, of course, the mistletoe bird. Other research showed that the large amount of fertilising litter dropped by mistletoe affects insect numbers and, in turn, the birds which feed on them. Dr David Watson, a plant biologist, says that ‘in undisturbed bush. . . .the more mistletoes present, the greater the resources available for our native animals, making the plants an important indicator of the area’s health.’



Creeping Mistletoe



Drooping Mistletoe

Both of the mistletoes in our district grow mostly on eucalypts or wattles. The sticky seeds are eaten by birds, and dispersed by sticking to branches after being passed out undigested in their droppings. The lance-shaped leaves mimic the host plant. Butterflies such as the Wood White butterfly lay eggs on both species, and the caterpillars feed on the leaves. Possums, gliders and even koalas feed on mistletoe.

Drooping Mistletoe *Amyema pendula* subsp. *pendula* is quite widespread in our district and hangs in dense distinctive clumps in the host trees. The leaves are 3.15mm wide and up to 40cm long, are browner than the host plant, and the stems are a dull brown. The flowers hang in lovely pendulous red and green clusters. A close look will reveal that they are usually in groups of three with the central flower being stalkless. The round to oval-shaped berries are yellowish-green.



Creeping, close up of flower

Creeping Mistletoe *Muellerina eucalyptoides* is quite rare here and has greener, thick, blunt, leaves which are more bunched (less droopy) than Drooping Mistletoe. They are also wider growing up to 7.20 mm, and shorter being up to 20cm long. The flowers are also red and green but hang in looser clusters. The fruit is pear-shaped. Another significant difference is that it has multiple attachments to the branch and sends runners, which look like roots, along the host’s branches.



Drooping, close up of flower

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