



New Zealand's mistletoes, some of which are notable for their brightly-coloured flowers, are becoming scarce in many regions and extinct in some. This article links mistletoe decline to the spread of possums.

A European mistletoe, *Viscum album*, is traditionally remembered for its supposed mystical powers (as will be familiar to readers of Asterix books), and for its romantic connotations at Christmas. However, the term mistletoe can be used more widely for any plant in the family Loranthaceae which is a perching parasite of other trees and shrubs. Processing green leaves for stems, mistletoes presumably synthesise their own carbohydrates but must obtain water and minerals from their host plants.

Where have all the mistletoes gone?

by Colin Ogle¹ and Peter Wilson²



Milford Sound and Mitre Peak form a backdrop to an isolated silver beech tree with a large, flowering mistletoe (*Peraxilla colensoi*) plant, 5 January 1985.

Photo: R. H. Taylor.

New Zealand's mistletoes

Six of the nine endemic species are much-branched shrubs with somewhat leathery leaves in opposite pairs. Some have conspicuous, red or yellow flowers (*Peraxilla*, *Alepis*, *Trilepidea*) while in others (*Ileostylus*, *Tupeia*) they are small and greenish-yellow.

The three remaining native mistletoes are members of the genus *Korthalsella*. All are small herbs with semi-succulent, green, flattened or rounded stems, and only vestigial leaves. Their flowers are minute.

All our mistletoes have fleshy fruits with a single seed embedded in a sticky matrix, making them well-suited to bird dispersal.

The decline of mistletoes

Formerly, the species with brightly coloured flowers were widespread and abundant in New Zealand, at least in beech forests, as noted by Potts (1882), Field (1885), and Laing and Blackwell (1906). More recently, the red-flowered

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