

SPECIES FEATURE

PIRITA | MISTLETOE

The Brook Waimārama Sanctuary has, or plans to reintroduce birds, reptiles, amphibians and even snails. The introduction of deer, goats and possums and a loss of native browsers like giant moa, has changed the composition and dynamics of plants in the forest eco-system.

One such plant, that is increasingly rare or absent in much of Aotearoa's forests has thick juicy leaves that have generally kept away from hungry moa through an interesting tactic. Its seed is pooped out by a passing korimako in the canopy of a beech tree where it germinates on the bark of the tree. Its roots run along the tree and pierce beneath the bark where it taps into the tree's vascular network. With sugar and water in abundance it grows and grows into a lush round topiary bush. Around Christmas, a traffic light of colours emerges from the unsuspecting canopy. The flowers are guarded with petals, only allowing entry by those who have the code to get in - these exclusive VIPs are the honeyeaters: korimako and tūi, and native bees who use a twisting motion to release the petals with explosive results. These showy mistletoes or pirita in te reo, have become rare. Their palatable leaves make them a prime target for the brushtail possum. These endemic species are still present at the Sanctuary to some extent. The green mistletoe, a species found in abundance at the motor camp, is the least threatened. Red mistletoe has been found in some small numbers in the highest points of the Sanctuary. The plants that are found are in their full glory without any intruder to strip them down to their parasitic roots.

One tantalising plant was found by our weeding team leader, we suspect it to be a white mistletoe. We want to know the extent of these plants within the Sanctuary, whether we have more species than we first thought or whether some will need reintroduction.

Our best bet is to ask our volunteers to keep an eye out and take pictures of mistletoes they see and note down where they were found. We can then map out these populations and let our volunteers know of our findings. Chelsea has made an information booklet on mistletoes, if you're interested, ask for a copy!

Mistletoes are having a hard time in the wild as most are declining. The Brook Waimārama Sanctuary offers a safe haven for these and other plants to thrive as they once did.



Above, yellow mistletoe, photo credit: John Barkla



Above, green mistletoe germinating on lancewood, photo credit: Taylor Davies-Colley



Red mistletoe in The Sanctuary,

Compiled by Henry Hart