

Species Action Plan

Mistletoe



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“...Mistletoe held in the beaks of the phoenix is a medieval sign of medicinal remedies...” (From a description of the Armorial Bearings of the London Ambulance Service)

1. Aims

- To ensure the conservation, enhancement and greater awareness of London’s mistletoe for current and future generations.
- To ensure that this cultural emblem is more widely recognised as a London species.

2. Introduction

Mistletoe (*Viscum album*) was included in the London Biodiversity Audit on the basis of its rarity, cultural value and ease of monitoring. Though London is outside its stronghold areas in the south-west Midlands, the species has many cultural links to the capital. It may never have been very common here, but it has a long history in herbal medicine and seasonal traditions.

Mistletoe is a parasitic plant of deciduous trees that produces milk-white berries. Its London sites are mostly in open landscape habitats, such as trees in parks, gardens and streets.

3. Current Status

Mistletoe's status in London today is reasonably well-known, though many sightings need further study and confirmation. The national mistletoe survey run by Plantlife and the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI) in the 1990s provided a lot of new data (Briggs, 1995 & 1999).

The species is scarce in the Greater London area. A large number of boroughs have good or reasonably reliable records of the plant, but in most there are only a handful of records – sometimes just one plant per borough. The full list includes Barnet, Bexley, Bromley, Croydon, Harrow, Ealing, Enfield, Greenwich, Haringey, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Kingston, Lambeth, Merton, Redbridge, Richmond, Sutton, Wandsworth and Westminster. The most central records are in Lambeth (a single plant on a maple tree) and in Westminster (a single plant on an ornamental *Malus* tree).

Most mistletoe in London today grows in man-made habitats – little suitable natural habitat occurs – and the vast majority of London records are from trees in parks and gardens. Elsewhere in the country the plant also grows on trees in orchards, hedgerows, churchyards, cemeteries and linear features such as watersides and roadsides. London's principle stronghold seems to be in the Bushy Park and Hampton Court areas of Richmond, and a thriving colony around Myddelton House and Forty Hall in Enfield.

The main host trees for mistletoe in urban areas are cultivated apples, hybrid limes, hawthorn, hybrid poplars, maples, willows and false acacia. Many other tree species can also be hosts. The parasitic mistletoe is, in turn, host to four species of specialist mistletoe-dependant insects. The current status of these insects in London is unknown.

There appears to be potential for more mistletoe in London – there are many suitable host trees in many suitable habitats such as parks, gardens, small estates, nature reserves and roadsides. Some of the populations in parks and estates may be relics of populations established by herbalists.

Studies of mistletoe in other cities may help our understanding of the plant in London. Some cities, such as Cheltenham, located in the heart of mistletoe's main UK distribution, have far more mistletoe than in the capital. Research on mistletoe in some continental cities may help – especially where these, like London, are outside of the species' main range (Briggs, 2003).

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Species

4.1 Management practice

Existing forestry and tree management practice in boroughs, parks authorities etc may be unsympathetic – for example, being a tree parasite, the species is sometimes pruned out.

There is neglect of some mistletoe colonies and possibly a loss of management techniques. For example, traditional 'sustainable' harvesting, which controlled infestations whilst allowing their survival, may be no longer practised.

4.2 Theft

Mistletoe 'rustling' may be on the increase because of its seasonal value.

4.3 Omission from habitat creation schemes

Mistletoe is often omitted from otherwise suitable habitat creation schemes. Examples include Community Orchard schemes, which often fail to include mistletoe planting.

5. Current Action

5.1 Legal status

Mistletoe receives the same protection as all other wild plants in the UK through the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981, as amended). Therefore, it may not be uprooted (which would include pulling down whole plants) without the permission of the landowner. The felling of host trees may be prevented by Tree Preservation Orders.

5.2 Mechanisms targeting the species

These current actions are ongoing. They need to be supported and continued in addition to the new action listed under Section 7.

5.2.1 Survey

The national mistletoe survey in the 1990s (Briggs, 1995 & 1999) raised the plant's profile significantly and gave rise to much public interest. This survey, though complete, still continues informally. It is largely concerned with data gathering.

5.2.2 Indirect habitat management

Various campaigns promoting conservation of traditional orchards (e.g. Common Ground's projects) or conservation of parkland and veteran trees may be indirectly helping mistletoe.

6. Objectives, Actions and Targets

Most of these actions are specific to this species. However, there are other, broader actions that apply generically to a number of habitats and species. These are located in a separate 'Generic Action' section which should be read in conjunction with this document. There are generic actions for Site Management, Habitat Protection, Species Protection, Ecological Monitoring, Biological Records, Communications and Funding.

Please note that the partners identified in the tables are those that have been involved in the process of forming the plan. It is not an exclusive list and new partners are both welcomed and needed. The leads identified are responsible for co-ordinating the actions – but are not necessarily implementers.

Objective 1 Collate and maintain data on mistletoe in London

Target: Complete database covering all existing data, plus a mechanism for recording new data, by the end of 2001

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
1.1 Determine past and present distribution in London – collating all existing data, validating as needed and including in local databases	Achieved 2001	LWT	LNHS, BSBI
1.2 Establish monitoring system for London populations	2004	LNHS	GIGL, BSBI, LWT, RP

Objective 2 To prevent loss of mistletoe plants and populations in London

Target: No future loss of mistletoe populations in London

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
2.1 Review possible alternative protection measures and policies	Achieved 2002	GLA	EN
2.2 Ensure that at least two colonies are protected by TPOs	2005	National survey co-ordinator	GLA, LA
2.3 Provide landowners with information about mistletoe conservation and management	2004	GLA	LA, RP, LWT, CG

Objective 3 To increase mistletoe populations in London

Target: 20 new or restored populations by 2005

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
3.1 Select new sites for establishing mistletoe populations and identify those sites to make up 'first round'	Achieved 2001	LWT	GLA, LA, LNHS, RP, WWT, CG, RBG
3.2 Establish mistletoe at 'first round' sites	2005	LWT	GLA, LA, LNHS, RP, TFL, WWT, CG, Landowners

Objective 4 To increase knowledge and understanding of mistletoe and its ecology in London

Target: Several studies completed and ready for promotion by 2003

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
4.1 Review existing knowledge of mistletoe in other UK and European cities	Achieved 2001	National survey co-ordinator	
4.2 Remain informed as further knowledge of mistletoe arises from studies in other UK and European cities	2004	National survey co-ordinator	
4.3 Establish the status of mistletoe-associated species in London – obligate insects and berry-eating birds	2005	LNHS	
4.4 Promote results of these and other studies to increase awareness of mistletoe	Annually	Working Group	

Relevant Action Plans

London Plans

Woodland; Private Gardens; Wasteland; Churchyards and Cemeteries; Parks, Amenity Grasslands and City Squares; Black Poplar; Hedgerows Statement; Railway Linesides Audit; Farmland Audit; Open Landscapes with Ancient/Old Trees Audit; Ponds, Lakes and Reservoirs Audit.

National Plans

None.

Key References

Briggs, J (1995). Mistletoe - distribution, biology and the National Survey. *British Wildlife* 7(2), 75-82.

Briggs, J (1999). *Kissing Goodbye to Mistletoe? The results of a national survey aimed at discovering whether mistletoe in Britain is in decline*. Published by Plantlife and BSBI.

Briggs, J (2003) *Christmas curiosity or medical marvel? A seasonal review of mistletoe*. *Biologist* (2003) 50 (6).

Abbreviations

BSBI – Botanical Society of the British Isles
 CG – Common Ground
 GLA – Greater London Authority
 GIGL – Greenspace Information for Greater London
 LTOA – London Tree Officers Association

LNHS – London Natural History Society
 LWT – London Wildlife Trust
 RP – Royal Parks
 TFL – Trees for London
 UDP – Unitary Development Plan
 WWT – Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust

Contact

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