

## Park Nature - Mistletoe

High above the stark winter landscape, round balls of mistletoe hang like huge ornaments in the tops of the some of the older trees. These slow-growing clumps find the micro-climate around the parks to be especially inviting, providing some of the best places in London to see it, particularly at this time of year.

The UK is located at the northern edge of the plants' range, and only one of the estimated 1500 species worldwide – European mistletoe (*Viscum album*) – is found domestically, mostly in the southwest Midlands.

Although most commonly found on apple trees, mistletoe grows particularly well on the park's Limes and Hawthorns, supporting a variety of insect species, including the aptly named "Mistletoe Bug" (*Hypseloecus visci*). This sap-sucking bug was first discovered in a number of British sites, including both Bushy and Home Parks in 2003.

Mistletoe grows as a parasite, relying on host trees and shrubs for water and mineral nutrients. Technically mistletoe is a semi-parasite as it has green leaves which it can use to photosynthesise, so that it is not totally reliant on the host. Despite its parasitic nature, mistletoe does little harm to the host.

There are concerns that mistletoe is in decline in the UK, although research is underway to assess the level of the problem.

*Find out more at the Friends Mistletoe Walk with Tyrrell Marris and Graham Dillamore on Sat. 13 Feb. Meet at 11.00 a.m. at the Lion Gate, Hampton Court Palace*

### FACT BOX

More than half of the UK's mistletoe is found on cultivated apple trees, particularly those growing in old commercial orchards and gardens.

Mistletoe is toxic to humans, but its leaves and berries provide food and nesting material for birds, butterflies and bees.

Despite its close association with Yuletide kisses, the origins of the word 'mistletoe' aren't thought to be very romantic. Acknowledging that the plant is commonly spread by bird droppings, the Anglo-Saxon translation of mistletoe actually means "dung on a twig."