

Common Name/Scientific name: Mistletoebird / *Dicaeum hirundinaceum*

Occurring throughout mainland Australia, Mistletoebirds are often seen restlessly flitting about in the canopy of trees, or flying overhead while uttering a strident tzew. Their preferred food is the berries produced by mistletoe. The seeds within these fruits pass intact through the birds' digestive system and are excreted in sticky strands that adhere to branches, where they germinate. In this manner, mistletoe is spread from tree to tree, providing extra habitat for the species which rely on it to survive.



Description: The small Mistletoebird is the only Australian representative of the flowerpecker family, Dicaeidae, and is also known as the Australian Flowerpecker. Males have a glossy blue-black head, wings and upperparts, a bright red throat and chest, a white belly with a central dark streak and a bright red undertail. Females are grey above, white below, with a grey streak on the belly, and a paler red undertail. Young birds resemble females but are paler and have an orange, rather than dark, bill. These birds are swift and erratic fliers, moving singly or in pairs, usually high in or above the canopy.

Where seen in the gardens: The Mistletoebird is found wherever mistletoe grows throughout mainland Australia, and is important in the dispersal of this plant species. In the gardens, you can see mistletoe plants growing on many eucalypt trees in forested areas.

Feeding & Behaviour in the gardens: The Mistletoebird is highly adapted to its diet of mistletoe berries. It lacks the muscular gizzard (food-grinding organ) of other birds, instead having a simple digestive system through which the berries pass quickly, digesting the fleshy outer parts and excreting the sticky seeds onto branches. The seed can then germinate quickly into a new plant. In this way, the Mistletoebird ensures a constant supply of its main food. It will also catch insects, mainly to provide food for its young.

Nesting: The Mistletoebird builds a silky, pear-shaped nest with a slit-like entrance, made from matted plant down and spider web, which is suspended from a twig in the outer foliage of a tree. The female alone builds the nest and incubates the eggs, while both sexes feed the young.

Similar Species in the gardens: Male Mistletoebirds may superficially resemble Red-headed Honeyeaters (only found in Northern Australia) or Scarlet Honeyeaters in having a red and black colouring, but these two honeyeaters have red heads, while the Mistletoebird has a black head, lacks their long, curved bills, while also being stockier and smaller overall. Mistletoebirds may also be distinguished from the red robins (*Petroica* species) by having a much shorter tail, a totally dark head (no contrasting cap or spot) and a red undertail.

Note: Mistletoe plants are parasitic, somewhat unusual, and very interesting. The relationship between bird and plant is certainly worth a little research!