

Mistletoe Information Sheet N^o2: *Is mistletoe rare?*

Information about *Viscum album*, the native mistletoe of Britain & Northern Europe



Mistletoe Matters

www.mistletoe.org.uk

Is mistletoe rare in the UK?

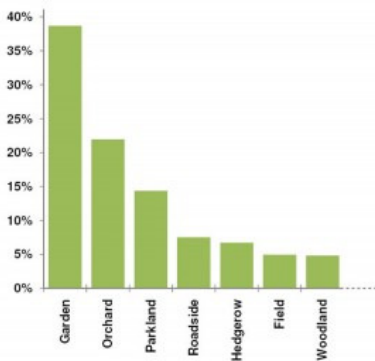
Since the 1990s National Mistletoe Survey, which investigated whether mistletoe in Britain was threatened by the ongoing loss of apple orchards (its favourite habitat) there has been a widespread general belief that mistletoe is rare.

And yes, mistletoe in Britain is, generally, rare. There is very little in most parts of the country, and it is only abundant in the south-west midlands. But that relative rarity in much of Britain may be to do with climatic preference and may have always been the case – it shouldn't be automatically interpreted as a decline



Apple Orchard loss

Any decline due to apple orchard loss is only likely to be detectable in the south-west midlands where both mistletoe and apple orchards are abundant. There is certainly ongoing loss of both (mistletoe and apple orchards) in this area and that is an ongoing cause for concern – but it is, arguably, 'just' a significant decline in abundance not a threat to the species *per se*.



Other habitats are not threatened

There are other factors to consider too, especially in areas outside mistletoe's main range. In those areas it is commonest in garden and parkland habitats, and unlike apple orchards there's no threat to these habitats.

Evidence suggests mistletoe may actually be increasing in these areas and habitats.

Remaining apple orchard quantities increasing (temporarily)



Plus there's the management factor – in older apple orchards in the main mistletoe 'zone' some mistletoe-bearing trees are becoming so neglected that mistletoe is increasing dramatically.

This is only a short-term gain though – those neglected trees are dying and will be gone, taking their mistletoe with them, within a decade or two.

Biodiversity value



Factoring in biodiversity and commercial issues complicates this further. The biodiversity value of mistletoe is considered relatively high, with several rare insect species relying on it.

But it isn't known how much mistletoe is optimal for these species – with some evidence that they survive well in isolated mistletoe colonies and might dislike crowded mistletoe-laden trees.

Commercial concerns



From the commercial angle the ongoing loss of mistletoe in apple orchards is significant, as most of the Christmas mistletoe comes from these sources (it is not usually abundant enough or sufficiently reachable in other habitats and hosts).



Conclusions

Drawing general conclusions for mistletoe rarity is difficult. There are several key points to consider, including;

- **mistletoe is rare or scarce in many areas**
- **mistletoe is abundant, sometimes unsustainably so, in others**
- **mistletoe quantity is declining alongside apple orchard loss**
- **loss of apple orchards only really affects mistletoe in its core growing area**
- **mistletoe distribution is not affected by apple orchard loss**
- **mistletoe distribution may be changing, possibly increasing**
- **optimal quantities of mistletoe for maximum biodiversity is not yet understood**
- **loss of apple orchard mistletoe will reduce the seasonal mistletoe crop**

Further reading:

Briggs, J (2011) Mistletoe - a review of its distribution, conservation and insect associates, British Wildlife 23:1 (Oct 2011); 23-31

Briggs, J (2011) Mistletoe (*Viscum album*); a brief review of its local status with recent observations on its insect associations and conservation problems, Proc Cotts Nat Field Club, XLV (II), 181 193

Briggs, J (2008) Mistletoe - an ancient specialist of orchards and groves, Orchards and Groves; their history, ecology, culture and archaeology, Conference Proceedings, Sheffield Hallam University