

## Mistletoebird

Robyn Howard

When one walks along the boardwalks at the Wetlands Sanctuary, the numbers of mistletoes in the canopy announce that the Mistletoebird frequents the area. It is quite a tiny bird (10 to 11 cm), yet has piercing calls varying between single, two or three notes, to a song of six or eight notes. The male has striking blue-black, red and white plumage, whilst the female is more conservatively coloured in greys and white with a reddish-pink undertail. Juveniles resemble females, but have an orange beak rather than black.

Foods consist of insects, berries, pollen and spiders. The digestive system of the Mistletoebird allows food to pass through quickly, maybe 10 minutes or up to 35 minutes. Thus when mistletoe fruit are consumed, there is insufficient time for the digestive juices to break down the sticky residue surrounding the seed. When defecating, the birds wiggle their vents against a branch, allowing the seed to adhere. Under favourable conditions, the seed will sprout and commence taking sustenance from the host plant. The relationship is beneficial to both the mistletoe and the mistletoebird – the mistletoe spreading its genes and the bird increasing its food sources.

The Mistletoebirds inhabit most areas of the sanctuary, and are readily spotted in the Casuarinas and Mangroves.

The nest is beautiful, soft, and purse-shaped, suspended from a thin branch. I watched the photographed female work hard retrieving crushed plant material and weaving it with spider web, testing the structure for shape, strength, comfort and size. The male was in the vicinity but seemed to make little contribution. The nest was situated in a stunted Orange Mangrove. As with many nestings, it was unsuccessful and when I returned a week later, the nest had been predated and was in the mud at the base of the tree.



Male Mistletoebird (Photo Mary Hynes)

Female during nest-building (Photo R Howard)