

Birds carry sticky parasite seeds

Sentinel Sept 1987
 Editor's Note: This is second part of a two-part article on mistletoe.

By Andy Romanyak

How does mistletoe get started on a tree? Original infection is by seed, birds being the principle carriers. Mature desert mistletoe has tiny yellow-green non-petalous flowers of separate sexes (dioecious) sunken in the joints of the spikes. At evening time the staminate (male) flowers are very fragrant and their apple-like scent can be at a considerable distance. The nectar attracts honeybees and other insects.

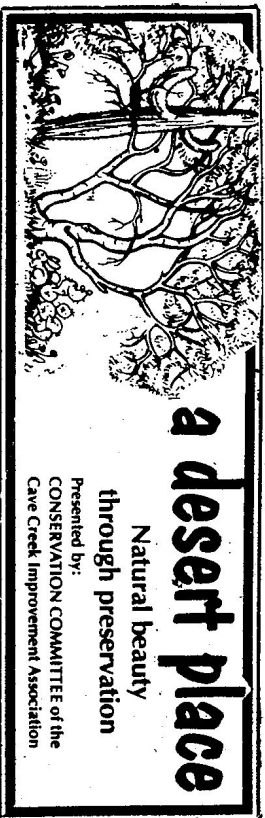
During winter months, after the host tree has shed its leaves the handsome red to coral-pink berries (in some rare varieties white) approximately 1/8 inch in diameter are a major food for phainopeplas and to some extent bluebirds, robins, thrashers and desert quail. The small plumbaceous gnatcatcher, as well as the verdin, often builds its nest in the center of dead clumps of this mistletoe.

The single seed in each berry is surrounded by a viscous substance that makes it stick tightly to anything it touches. Birds that feed on berries get the seeds stuck on beak, feet and feathers and

subsequently carry them to other trees, near or distant. The seeds that are eaten pass through unharmed and are deposited on branches thoroughly fertilized. Once in contact with the branch, it germinates and develops its peculiar

infestation.

If it becomes necessary to remove the parasite after it has produced its berries, careful consideration should be given to the disposal of these cuttings. In order to prevent further dispersal of these sticky seeds, the



a desert place

Natural beauty
 through preservation

Presented by:
 CONSERVATION COMMITTEE of the
 Cave Creek Improvement Association

pseudo-roots (haustoria) which insidiously and irresistibly penetrate bark and wood. The resulting seedling parasite grows slowly but very tenaciously.

Safeguarding or protecting trees and shrubs is virtually impossible. Practical control measures for already inflected trees is drastic removal by sawing, scraping, cutting and chiseling between the time the tree sheds its leaves and the parasite beings producing berries. Cutting or scraping off visible parts, although preventing fruiting, has no effect on the root system which can send out new shoots often at a considerable distance from the original point of

cut material should be burned. However, in the light of present local municipal ordinances banning burning of refuse, it could be collected in large plastic refuse bags and disposed of at the municipal dump.

All tools, equipment, shoes, gloves and items of clothing should be inspected and cleaned of all adhering berries.

It is best to cut off the infected branch a foot or so behind the affected area towards the main trunk. This eliminates roots and all. Extensive infestation of many branches may require radical topping of the crown: if it is to the

trunk, removal of the entire tree may be necessary to protect other nearby trees.

Even thoroughly-cleaned trees are no guarantee against reinfection by seed possibly brought from great distances. Constant vigilance is necessary to removing pruning the first signs of new growth, however tiny.

It has been reported that if a branch is too important to cut off, it is possible to cut and scape the mistletoe as closely as possible and wrap the branch at the point of the infestation with a black polyethylene band. Exclusion of light could eventually cause the mistletoe roots to die.

Encouraging results have been reported for the hormonal weed killer, used as a spray when the host is dormant. Trunk injections or boric acid, copper sulfate and other inorganic substances have also yielded promising results.

Recent inquires regarding mistletoe prompted this timely article. If you have any questions about the desert, please write: "A Desert Place" in care of the *FootHills Sentinel*, P.O. Box 1569, Cave Creek, Ariz. 85331, or leave the comments at the office.