



# Mistletoe and mischief

**M**istletoe and its namesake the mistle thrush share a surprisingly complex and not altogether comfortable relationship...

A crisp, cold and clear morning on Nomansland Common and all is perfectly silent and still...save for one sound – the powerful, far-carrying song of the mistle thrush.

The frozen landscape seems to bounce his song back and echo it far and wide. In the distance I hear another answer with not a sound inbetween; the land is bathed in their music and theirs only.

I can't help admiring the mistle thrush and I feel its joy as it finally takes centre stage when all else is quiet.

The bird is nothing much to look at – an oversized song thrush but without the rich warm browns in its plumage.

Its alarm call is an unpleasant rattle often issued when in a squabbling flight with its siblings. However, it is fearless when defending its nest or under attack from a predator and altogether made of sterner stuff than its cousins, the song thrush and blackbird.

It reminds me of the ring ouzel, that hardy bird of the high moor; and has earned the name of 'stormcock' for its defiant singing from a lofty, swaying perch on the heights of storm.

As its name suggests it is of course appropriate that the mistle thrush should find full voice at this time of year. The tree from which it sings is quite likely to bear bunches of mistletoe whose berries are good food for the thrush.

However, in eating them, the mistle thrush becomes an unwitting participant in the deceptive history of this crafty plant!

Known best to us as that 'excuse for a kiss', mistletoe sprigs are brought into the house at Christmas and hung up high in the hope that a seasonal kiss might be forthcoming under it.

Any crafty kiss-seeker should be aware, however, that the tradition is quite strict: only a kiss on the cheek is permitted and the number of kisses is limited to the number of berries on the sprig!

The 'craftiness' of mistletoe does not stop there though for it is a parasitic plant, growing out of a host tree's branch and making use of the

tree's water and mineral supply. The vibrant green bushes of treetop mistletoe produce succulent white berries that in turn catch the eye of the mistle thrush.

But this food is not for free for the thrush, as the mistletoe, not content to enlist only the help of its host tree, also makes demands of the hungry thrush.

Each berry contains extremely sticky seeds that cling to the bird's beak. In order to be free of this nuisance the thrush will most likely rub its beak back and forth vigorously on a neighbouring branch or even tree to wipe off the stickiness. This of course effectively plants the seeds for new sprigs of mistletoe to emerge in time.

The mistle thrush's participation in the mistletoe's future has not always been without risk though.

The sticky potential of the mistletoe's seeds did not escape the notice of bird trappers in the past and was one of the traditional sources of 'birdlime', a sticky substance placed on branches in order to stick and thereby trap small birds for eating or sale.

The Dutch humanist Erasmus saw the irony in the mistle thrush's enjoy-



■ A mistle thrush.

Picture: STEVE ROUND PHOTOGRAPHY

ment of the mistletoe berries when he included the Latin proverb "Turdus malum sibi ipse cacat" in his early 16th century collection of sayings.

Translated as "the thrush himself excretes his own trouble" Erasmus saw how in eating the sticky seeds the mistle thrush supplied trappers with the substance that they needed to trap him! In other words, the thrush unwittingly "sowed the seeds of his own destruction".

The mistle thrush perhaps has the last laugh though partly, in that the

practice of bird liming is now thankfully largely illegal, but also perhaps in the fact that birdlime was made by chewing the berries into a pulp. The berries are poisonous and it is difficult to imagine that the chewer did not suffer some ill effects!

Whatever the case, the mistle thrush continues to thrive and enjoy mistletoe berries and maybe that accounts for the sheer burst of joy in his song at this time of year!

I hope you get to hear it...and I hope you got your kiss under the mistletoe!