

Another Exotic Nectar Source For New Zealand Birds

With around 185 species, *Puya* is one of the largest genera in the Pineapple Family, Bromeliaceae. Most *Puya* species are concentrated along the Andes mountain range of South America, some at altitudes up to nearly 5000 metres. Generally they are found in arid places and gravelly soil. Unlike most of the bromeliads, the species of *Puya* are strictly terrestrial.

Puya alpestris is one of the southernmost species of *Puya*. This plant has erect or widely spreading rosettes of linear leaves with coarse marginal spines that tend to tear rather than scratch. These spines are presumed to be a defence against browsing animals. The waxy looking, funnel-shaped flowers that appear in summer are borne on stems up to two metres long. The flowers are an unusual shade of deep metallic blue-green, and have bright orange pollen on the tips of their stamens. The flowers produce copious quantities of nectar.



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Puya alpestris is widely grown away from its natural habitat, including in some parks and specialised gardens in New Zealand. A group of these plants is growing in Brooklands Park in central New Plymouth. The flowers on most had finished by the time I began my observations at them on 29 January 2005, but two stems still bore a lot of fresh-looking flowers. All of the flowers had finished by 17 February.

I saw what was probably the same Tui (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*) each time feeding at many of the *Puya* flowers on four occasions between 30 January and 6 February. When feeding, the Tui stood on sterile portions of the flower stems, and poked its head into immediately adjacent flowers. This is the first time I have seen Tui feeding at *Puya alpestris* flowers. Apparently, Tui feed regularly at *Puya alpestris* flowers in a specialised garden near Wanganui whenever the flowers of that plant are available there, and Tui may well do so in other localities where these plants are growing.

I also saw Mynahs (*Acridotheres tristis*) and House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) feeding regularly, but separately, at the *Puya* flowers. For example, on 6 February I saw one or two Mynahs feeding at the flowers on six occasions, and one or two House Sparrows (both male and female) feeding at the flowers on twelve occasions during the two hours I had the plants under observation. There is no doubt that the Mynahs and House Sparrows were obtaining nectar from the *Puya* flowers. They, like the Tui, stood on sterile portions of the flower stems, and poked their head into immediately adjacent flowers. On one occasion, a Mynah had very obvious orange pollen over the whole of its forehead and around the gape area. At least one House Sparrow had some faint orangish pollen on its forehead, but the pollen was nowhere near as obvious on the House Sparrow as it was on the darker feathers of the Mynah's forehead. The *Puya* flowers, which were the only ones in the area with orange pollen, were the only flowers at which I saw Mynahs and House Sparrows feeding during the period of my observations.

I did not see any other birds feed at the *Puya* flowers. At least two Song Thrushes (*Turdus philomelos*) and up to five Blackbirds (*Turdus merula*) fed regularly on lawn close to the *Puya* plants, but I never saw any of them go near the *Puya* flowers. Bellbirds (*Anthornis melanura*) have been recorded feeding at the flowers of *Puya alpestris* in the Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust garden near New Plymouth (Medway *The birds of Pukeiti*, 2006), but I am not aware of any previously-published records of Tui, House Sparrows or Mynahs feeding on the nectar of that plant. It is not surprising that House Sparrows should seek nectar from *Puya alpestris* flowers, because they are known to feed on nectar from other flowers including those of flax (*Phormium tenax*), Pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*) and Kowhai (*Sophora* spp.). The only nectar Mynahs are recorded in the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic birds* (Volume 7B, 2006) as eating in New Zealand is that of flax (*Phormium* spp.), but I suspect they take nectar more widely than that.

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