

## Himalayan Dogwoods as a Food Source for Birds

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The Himalayan Dogwood (*Cornus capitata*: Family Cornaceae) is a hardy, small to medium-sized evergreen tree, native to the Himalaya region, which is often found growing in parks and gardens in the warmer regions of the North Island. In spring, it bears a great profusion of small, greenish-coloured flowers, each surrounded by four large, creamy-white bracts that make this dogwood a very attractive tree. Its fruits, which likewise are borne in great profusion, generally begin to ripen in early autumn. They are round and strawberry-like, hence the frequently-used alternative common name of Strawberry Tree for this plant. The fruits are green at first, becoming a deep orange-red when mature. Each consists of pulpy flesh with about 20-25 seeds embedded throughout.



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Many mature Himalayan Dogwoods grow in a scattered fashion throughout the 52 hectare Pukekura Park in central New Plymouth. Their ripe fruits - which, for whatever reason, were about one month later in ripening this year than they were in 2002 - are a principal and valuable source of food for a variety of birds, both native and introduced, in autumn-early winter.

Blackbirds and Starlings are the introduced species most frequently seen feeding on ripe Himalayan Dogwood fruits in Pukekura Park, but Mynahs and House Sparrows regularly use them as a food source. Song Thrushes have also been seen feeding on them and, on one occasion, an Eastern Rosella (uncommon in this locality) did so. Silvereyes are the most common native species using ripe dogwood fruits as a food source, but observations in Pukekura Park confirm that those fruits are also used daily by Tui (Bellbirds are absent from the park) and New Zealand Pigeons as a principal food source in autumn-early winter.

Usually, no more than two Tui will be feeding on fruits at the same time in the same Himalayan Dogwood. On one occasion, very exceptionally, as many as twelve Tui were seen feeding together for a short while at the fruits of a single tree. Tui pick at the flesh of fruits which have often been opened by other birds, principally by Blackbirds and Starlings. Pigeons usually feed singly at the fruits. They sometimes swallow smaller fruits whole, but they generally pick at the flesh.

The Himalayan Dogwood is readily raised from its seed. It is no wonder seedlings of the plant are prolific in suitable areas in the vicinity of fruiting trees when so many birds are ingesting the plentiful seeds embedded in the pulp of its fruits.



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It seems to be quite widely-known that, at least in some areas, the endemic Tui and New Zealand Pigeon feed on ripe fruits of the Himalayan Dogwood, but that fact does not seem to have been recorded in the ornithological literature. For instance, Himalayan Dogwood fruits are not mentioned as a food source for those species in the definitive *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds*.

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