

Collospermum hastatum - the “Widow Maker”

David Medway, May 2008

Collospermum hastatum, also known as Kahakaha or Perching Lily, is an endemic New Zealand member of the Asteliaceae family. It occurs, mainly as an epiphyte on trees, in lowland areas of the North Island and northern South Island. It is known as a “nest epiphyte” because of the build-up of spongy root and soil matter around its base. Plants can grow into large and very heavy masses which are frequently perched on branches high up in tall trees. Those masses often fall to the ground and continue to grow there. It is because of the potential danger posed to humans by such a falling mass that *Collospermum hastatum* was known to men working in New Zealand forests in years past as the “Widow Maker”.

Collospermum hastatum is dioecious, having male and female flowers on separate plants. The flowers appear in panicles from January to March. The numerous small fruits, which ultimately turn red, ripen from March to August. They contain many black seeds which are surrounded by a thick, fleshy aril.

Collospermum hastatum is very common throughout Pukekura Park and Brooklands where it grows as an epiphyte on numerous trees, both native and introduced. I have often observed Tui (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*), in particular, and New Zealand Pigeons (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*) eating fruits of this plant there in April - June. I have also seen House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), Blackbirds (*Turdus merula*) and Mynahs (*Acridotheres tristis*) occasionally eating them.

I have not found any records in the ornithological literature of Tuis or New Zealand Pigeons eating the fruits of *Collospermum hastatum*. My observations at Pukekura Park and Brooklands indicate that the fruits of this plant, when available, are actually a favoured source of food for those birds which, presumably, are effective dispersers of its seeds.

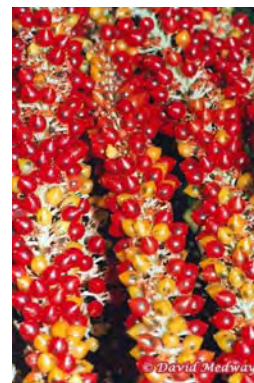
Pukekura Park Collospermum hastatum photos: click on a photo to view a larger image, use Back button to return



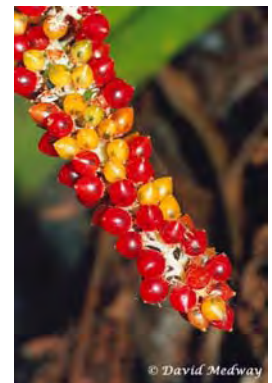
© David Medway
Collospermum hastatum on Pukatea
(*Laurelia novae-zelandiae*)



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Ripe *Collospermum hastatum* fruits.
Brooklands
May 2002



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Ripe *Collospermum hastatum* fruits.
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Close up of ripe
Collospermum hastatum
fruits. Brooklands
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