

Karaka fruits as a source of food for birds in Pukekura Park and Brooklands

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In my article “Karaka fruits and Tui in Pukekura Park and Brooklands”, which appeared in the last issue (June 2010) of this *Magazine*, I mentioned that I spent a total of about 26 hours throughout the 2010 Karaka (*Corynocarpus laevigatus*) fruiting season specifically observing birds feeding at Karaka fruits in the Park. I recorded my observations of Tui (*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*) feeding on the flesh of those fruits in the Park, and concluded that my few records of them doing so suggest that Karaka fruits are not a prime source of food for Tui there.

During my study, I saw several other bird species feed at ripe Karaka fruits much more often than did Tui. They were the Silvereve (*Zosterops lateralis*), Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*), Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), Blackbird (*Turdus merula*), and New Zealand Pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*). Of these species, apparently only the Blackbird and New Zealand Pigeon are recorded in the published literature as feeding on Karaka fruits (*New Zealand Journal of Ecology* 34(1)(2010): 66-85).

All of the species I observed fed at fruits on the trees, but the Mynas, House Sparrows, and Blackbirds also fed at fallen fruits on the ground. With the exception of the pigeons, they all pecked at and ate the flesh of the fruits. I never saw any of them attempt to swallow a whole fruit. The pigeons swallowed whole fruits, but even they sometimes found a fruit too large to swallow and ejected it after unsuccessfully attempting to get it down.

I recorded the number of birds of each species that I saw feeding at Karaka fruits both on and under the trees I observed. I obtained a total of 225 feeding records apportioned between the species as follows - Silvereve (79), Myna (52), Starling (36), House Sparrow (23), Blackbird (22), New Zealand Pigeon (11), and Tui (2). On two occasions I saw an adult House Sparrow repeatedly pick flesh from Karaka fruits and feed it to an accompanying well-grown immature, and on one occasion I saw an adult Blackbird doing likewise. My many feeding observations suggest that, with the exception of the Tui, ripe Karaka fruits in the Park are an important source of food for these birds when they are available.

New Zealand Pigeons are well-known dispersers of Karaka seeds. I believe that Blackbirds must also effectively disperse them. Blackbirds are widely distributed and abundant throughout New Zealand. They feed mostly on the ground, including very commonly on the forest floor. I have never seen a Blackbird attempt to swallow a whole Karaka fruit, but I have often seen them in the Park on the forest floor under a Karaka tree pecking at and eating the flesh of fallen fruit and sometimes, when they are disturbed, I have seen them carry the whole fruit off further into the under-story. During my recent study I saw a Blackbird fly out of a Karaka tree carrying a large fruit in its bill over an open grassed area and into a patch of forest about 60 metres away. No doubt Blackbirds transport Karaka fruits varying distances in this manner much more often than is noticed.

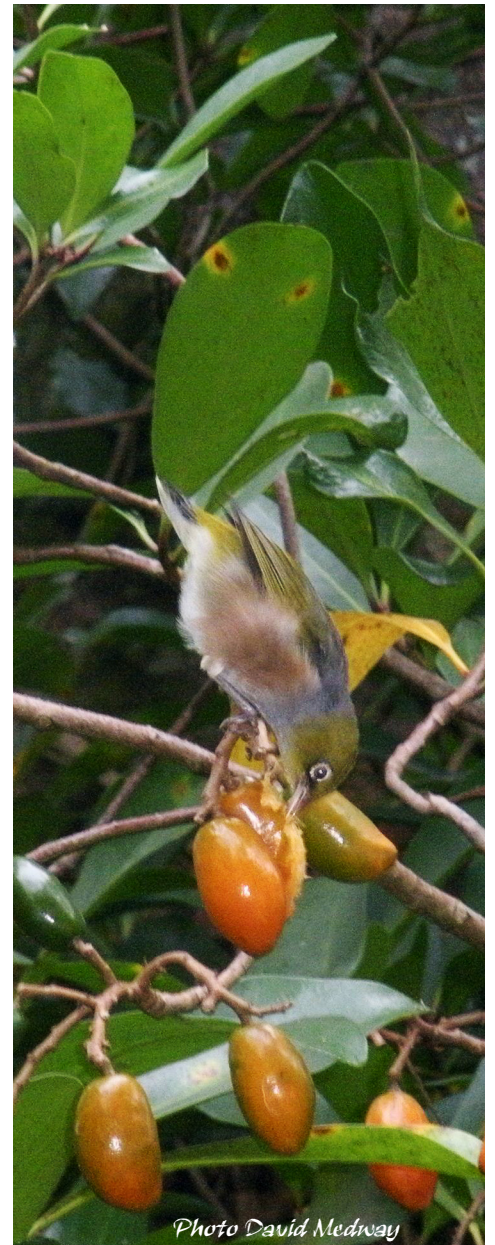


Photo David Medway