

# Nature Notes

## Dwarf Mistletoe



The Dwarf Mistletoe of the Kimberley Nature Park is not similar to the European mistletoe used at Christmas for inviting kisses. Our mistletoe is a parasite that lives on Western Larch and Lodgepole Pine and causes rapid and contorted growth of tree branches which are often called witches' brooms.

The bulk of Dwarf Mistletoe lives under the host tree's bark. Its root-like system derives the carbohydrate, mineral and water nutrients that the plant needs to survive from the vascular system of the tree. A severe Dwarf Mistletoe infection can result in reduced tree growth, premature tree mortality, and less seed and cone development. While it can be a serious forest-borne disease agent for commercial forests, dwarf mistletoe also provides important ecological benefits. Dwarf Mistletoe broom structures are used by wildlife, especially birds and small mammals, for nesting, roosting and resting. Many species of birds, mammals, and insects feed on dwarf mistletoe plants or on mistletoe-infested tissues.



*Witches' brooms on larch.*  
(Photo - Kent Goodwin)



*Flowering dwarf mistletoe on pine twig in KNP.* (Photo - Kent Goodwin)

Each Dwarf Mistletoe plant is either male or female and each female plant produces a single seed. This fruit is unusual in that it builds up hydrostatic pressure internally when ripe and shoots the sticky seed up to speeds of 80 kilometers an hour to a maximum of around 10 meters. Many of these seeds fail to land on a suitable host but just as many do succeed. Other sticky seeds are transported further distances on the feet of squirrels and feathers of birds.

Dwarf Mistletoe can be found here and there throughout the Nature Park. Be sure to look up and notice a witches' broom the next time you're passing through the woods!

Visit [www.rockies.net/kimberley/naturepark](http://www.rockies.net/kimberley/naturepark) for a hard copy or more information about Nature Park events.