

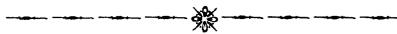
**The Spanish moss** (*Tillandsia usneoides*) in the lemon tree (Fig.1 above, AK 254 267) is to show an oddity in the Bromeliaceae most unlike a pineapple – and not for the birds. This grey, pendulous, moss-like monocot now dangles from blackbirds' nests in other trees and in branches where it got caught up on the way. The smart Mt Albert blackbirds discovered the ideal nesting material, or got got avian messages from Mexico where it is not only an epiphyte and used for nesting material, but dangles from the telegraph wires as well. There are no mosquitoes breeding in this bromeliad. Water is held in air spaces among the scaly, blotting-paper leaves.

If *Tillandsia* becomes truly naturalised as it probably will, this will add another life-form to our naturalised flora. No other alien monocot growing here is mossy, without roots, living off dust and moisture in the air.

*Tillandsia usneoides* is said to have the geographic span of the whole Bromeliaceae family, between roughly 35° S and 35° N in the Americas.

It is sometimes known as old man's beard, a name given to our similar looking lichen *Usnea*. The likeness provided the specific name, meaning "like *Usnea*".

There is a sequel. Returning from a few days away I found the lemon tree stripped of every strand of Spanish moss. Expensive nesting material this! The equivalent amount on sale at Kings Plant Barn had a \$149 price tag on it. About half was retrieved from six blackbirds' nests in my backyard. Not only had they stolen the supply from the lemon tree but from other nests. One nest was made almost entirely of Spanish moss; I didn't expect to have to keep it in a cage for protection.



## And speaking of moss ... *Sphagnum* in Auckland

Jessica Beever & Geoff Davidson

Not only is 'Spanish moss' moving around town, as described by Alan Esler in the article above. We have noted short-distance dispersal of the real moss, *Sphagnum cristatum*, at Oratia Native Plant Nursery. *Sphagnum* cultivated in plastic trays has been scattered by birds, blackbirds and/or thrushes, and has become established nearby. Will this be the first documented case of a moss becoming a garden escape?

Curiosity as to whether *Sphagnum cristatum* occurs naturally in the Auckland region led to a search of the holdings at the Auckland Museum herbarium, AK. This revealed very few records of *Sphagnum* from the Auckland Ecological Region, and most of the specimens were named only to genus. Identification reveals three species, and *Sphagnum cristatum* is

indeed a native of Auckland. It has a 1973 record from Puhinui 'near the Westfield withholding paddocks', and, much earlier, an undated T.F. Cheeseman record from St John's Lake, the site of the present-day Lake Waiatarua. This was a local botanical hunting ground early this century before it was drained. We've seen no sign of *Sphagnum* in or around the present-day reconstructed lake, and perhaps it is now too eutrophic a wetland to harbour this moss, but it's worth keeping an eye out for its re-emergence there. *Sphagnum falcatum*, a delicate feathery species, is an uncommon plant in the Waitakere Ranges.

A third species, also robust, but differing from *S. cristatum* in its tubular, rather than hooded leaf apex, is *Sphagnum subsecundum*. This was collected by Ewen Cameron in 1994 under manuka, also at Puhinui, (ThurLOW's Farm), eastern Manukau Harbour.

### Reference

Esler A.E. (2001) Spanish moss on the move. *Auckland Botanical Society Journal* 56(2): 87-88

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