



wing nut

Greg Roughan meets Rob Jones, a collector turned conservationist who's doing his bit for our butterflies

Butterflies are charming for lots of reasons. For one, they seem pointless. Bees pollinate crops and make honey, and flies get rid of poo, but to the layperson – especially the kind who sits staring out the window at the garden, fretting about the October tax change, then sees one flit over the fence – butterflies seem purely decorative.

Their names are charming too. Lepidopterists go wobbly at the thought of seeing a Purple Emperor, or any of the others among the big four:

the Mountain Apollo, the Large Tortoiseshell and the Camberwell Beauty which, outside of Britain, is known as the Mourning Cloak.

New Zealand butterflies and moths are likewise graced with pretty names. There's the Red Admiral (above), known in Maori as the Kahukura or "red cloak"; and the Yellow Admiral, aka the Kahukowhai or "yellow cloak". There's the Common Blue, Painted Lady and Forest Ringlet, and the dusky green Puriri moth, which lives just two short days.

But when was the last time you saw anything other than a Monarch or a Cabbage White? If your last sighting of a Red Admiral is a distant memory, it's likely due to the introduction of the *Pteromalus puparum* wasp in 1932, reckons butterfly enthusiast Rob Jones. Jones works in real estate by day, trades on money markets at night, and in his spare time plants trees on Auckland's Mt Eden to attract rare birds and sneaks butterfly-friendly weeds into gardens >>

Nettles' stings are said to have killed horses

Rob Jones holds a Monarch butterfly and Emperor Gum moth – keepsakes from his days as a collector

The Long-tailed Blue

“All it would take to snuff out the whole colony is one overzealous sprayer or council trimmer”

to help boost their populations. A former butterfly collector, he says the wasps pounce on Red and Yellow Admiral caterpillars and lay eggs inside them, or drills holes into their chrysalises.

P. puparum was brought into the country by government entomologists to help control the Cabbage White butterfly, but the outcome hasn't been good for our poor natives: Admiral caterpillars get eaten alive too. Thanks to the added attention of another tiny introduced wasp (*Echthromorpha intricatoria*) there are up to 49 percent fewer Admirals around than before the influx.

Another big reason for the decline in native butterflies is the destruction of their food. It's ironic that our most attractive butterflies eat some of our nastiest plants, and the more conscientious gardeners are, the less chance they have.

Admirals lay their eggs exclusively on nettles – Yellows like *Urtica incisa* and *Urtica urens*, while Reds prefer *Urtica ferox*, or tree nettle, one of our more fierce stinging plants. In 1961 a lightly dressed hunter stumbled into a stand of tree nettles in the Ruahine Ranges and, unable to get medical attention, he died five hours later. The stings are also said to have killed horses.

Nevertheless, Jones is happy to have them in his garden, although since his wife Angela (granddaughter of celebrated bird photographer Geoff Moon) is rightly concerned for the safety

HOW TO BRING BUTTERFLIES TO YOUR BACKYARD

- Grow plants that provide nectar, such as *Buddleia*, sunflowers, lavender, Sweet William and snapdragons.
- Grow caterpillar food: pohuehue or mingimingi for Copper butterflies, swan plants for Monarchs, and nettles for Admirals. Put on some gardening gloves and steal nettles from a park or friendly farmer. They often grow under pine trees where stock poo keeps them fertilised. The little ones have a mild sting. Check with your local native plant nursery to see if they have tree nettles, and handle them with care.
- If you have to use insecticides in your garden, spray selectively to avoid killing caterpillars and butterflies.
- Keep the wasps away by bringing chrysalises inside when you find them (just snip off the branches they're attached to, positioning them so the chrysalises remains hanging). You can release the butterflies once they've hatched, and it's a great lesson for kids.

of visiting children, his nettle patch is restricted to one corner. Jones says those who want to encourage butterflies should plant nettles down the side of their house, with chicken wire as protection. A friend has turned his patch into part of his home's security: he leaves the bathroom window open when he goes out and “if he got burgled,” says Jones, “he wouldn't call the police, he'd call an ambulance!”

In a similar vein, Jones, who's part of conservation group Friends of Maungawhau/ Mt Eden, grows nettles on historical sites such as kumara pits, with the council's blessing. As well as discouraging people from damaging the sites and providing food for butterflies, the nettles boost the population of quail and pheasants on the mountain by providing them with a place to hide from dogs.

Jones is also involved with Forest & Bird, and carries out his own work on the sly – a suitcase of caterpillars here, a plantation there. His enthusiasm for creating habitats for animals and insects is infectious. So is his concern about how delicate those habitats can be. Jones believes he and his friends are the only safety net Mt Eden's population of Red Admirals has. “All it would take to snuff out the whole colony is one overzealous sprayer or council trimmer.”

But nettles aren't the only way to bring winged visitors to your garden. Plants in the *Muehlenbeckia* family are important hosts for Copper butterflies. Flowering shrubs like *Buddleia*, or Butterfly Bush, are an important food source. If you are brave enough to grow nettles, putting them in pots so they can be moved indoors once the caterpillars make their chrysalises will stop the burgeoning butterflies being eaten by wasps.

Who knows, maybe Jones' passion could catch on. After all, from *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to *The Silence of the Lambs* (yes, Jones has a Death's Head Hawkmoth mounted in his cabinet – a throw-back to his collecting days), butterflies and moths have long been a metaphor for change. Jones' hope is that he can repopulate our butterfly-scarce cities one backyard at a time: a butterfly flaps its wings in Mt Eden, and across the country, whole gardens light up. ■