

## SPECIES FEATURE

### KAHUKURA

#### NZ RED ADMIRAL BUTTERFLY *Vanessa gonerilla*

The red admiral butterfly or kahuhura, which means 'red cloak' in te reo Māori, is one of New Zealand's loveliest endemic insects.

Several generations of eggs are laid over spring and summer, preferably on the endemic tree nettle ongaonga *Urtica ferox*, though the exotic scrub nettle *Urtica incisa* will do in a pinch. Eggs are laid singly, typically on a leaf near its stalk and often on the side of a stinging hair. They are green and barrel-shaped with 9 vertical ribs. Eight to nine days after the egg is laid the larva eats a hole in the top and climbs out. After the first 10 days of grazing the caterpillar is 2.5mm long. The caterpillars undergo 5 instars, which are the periods between moults. They are initially dull brown with white specks and a black head, but change colour with each moult to better enhance their camouflage. Spines along their backs, also known as setae, grow from small and simple to long and branched. For added protection against the elements and predators, in case living among stinging nettle is not enough, caterpillars make tents with folded leaves held in place with silk. When they have eaten themselves out of house and home, they move to a new leaf and repeat the process. By 4-6 weeks of age, the caterpillar has grown up to 36mm and is ready to pupate. Pupa vary in colour, depending on the palette that provides the best camouflage, from greyish-yellow to purple-brown with metallic gold spots. After pupating for 2-3 weeks, the beautiful 'red cloaked' butterfly, or imago, emerges. Red admiral butterflies have a 50-60mm wingspan. Females are larger than males. The imago feed on the nectar of houhere (lacebark) and hebe. Red admiral butterflies are relatively long-lived. Early season generations live 4-6 months while later ones overwinter and may live up to 9 months.

Written by Katherine Chamberlain



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