

Invasion of Blue Moon butterflies in Taranaki

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Introduction

Blue moon butterfly, *Hypolimnas bolina nerina* (Fabricius 1775), invasions originating from tropical Australia are an irregular occurrence in New Zealand (Ramsay & Ordish 1966, Gibbs 1980).

The species is very common in Australia, where it is known as the common or varied eggfly (Fig. 1). Although distributed widely in the eastern half of this large continent, it is only known to breed in coastal Queensland, the far north of Western Australia and the Northern Territory (Braby 2004). During the dry season in tropical Australia (April to September), with its usual host plants having died off, adults disperse to other parts of Australia. It is in these years of large numbers of butterflies dispersing southwards that it turns up in New Zealand (Gibbs 1980). Elsewhere, the species is distributed from India to the Cook Islands.



Figure 1. The Blue moon butterfly *Hypolimnas bolina nerina* (Fabricius 1775).

Results and Discussion

During May and June 2004 at least 43 blue moon butterflies of both sexes were recorded in various parts of Taranaki, particularly within the city of New Plymouth. One blue moon had been recorded much earlier on 24 February by Ed McCutcheon in New Plymouth, but it is likely that this record is not part of the main invasion. These latter records began on the 4 May and continued consistently through May, but then slowed considerably until the final records on 10 and 18 June. By the 11 May the butterflies were recorded as reasonably common and particularly lethargic, allowing close-up photography (Daily News 11 May 2004 and Midweek newspapers of 19 May 2004). On the 8 May, about 12 individuals were recorded flying at Kawaroa Park, New Plymouth, underlining the unusually high number of butterflies involved in this particular invasion. Other Taranaki localities where the butterflies were recorded include Onaero, Te Henui Walkway, Oakura, Te Henui Stream, Bell Block, Awakino Heads and Tarurutangi.

Elsewhere during this timeframe, blue moon butterflies were recorded from the Manawatu by Ian Andrew on the 13 May and by two other observers a week or so earlier. Another specimen was seen in Rotorua by Brendon Christensen, and David Medway observed a blue moon in New Plymouth feeding for at least 30 minutes on the flowers of *Camellia irrawadiensis*.

Blue moons were not the only Australian tropical butterflies observed in New Zealand during the first half of 2004. Painted lady, *Cynthia kershawi*, and Lesser Wanderer, *Danaus chrysippus*, butterflies were observed in Taranaki from late February to early May. Lesser wanderers were also seen in Thames by Roger Gass in late March.

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References

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