



The Red Postman (*Heliconius erato ssp. syrbia*) is the most commonly observed butterfly in Rarotonga. This was not always the case, as the species was introduced here in 2016 by Landcare Research (NZ) entomologists as a biological control agent for the red passion vine (*Passiflora rubra*). The invasive vine is smothering native plants and is thought to have contributed to the recent extinction of the Rarotongan endemic shrub *Acalypha wilderi*. The red postman (*Heliconius erato*) is found in most of South America and as far north as southern Texas, however, the Rarotongan variety is a sub-species from Ecuador. Adults have a wingspan of 6.7 to 8.0 cm and are mostly iridescent dark blue with a single red stripe on each forewing, while hindwings have a row off-white D-shaped markings on the trailing edge. Larvae are creamy-white in colour with long black hairs protruding from orange dots and a yellow or creamy coloured head. The body of caterpillars also have a rows or black dots, some that merge into a black stripe on their side.



Adult Red Postman butterfly feeding on Blue Rat's-tail pollen (photo: Mike Bowie)

Red Postman larvae (photo: Mike Bowie)

Adult butterflies can live several months by feeding on pollen. Their favourite pollen source in Rarotonga is Blue Rat's-tail (*Stachytarpheta cayennensis*), while Tātārāmoa (*Lantana camara*) is another favoured pollen flower. The female butterflies need pollen for egg production. Small (1.5 x 0.9mm), yellow and conical shaped eggs are usually laid near the tips of red passionfruit stems. Mature larvae reach between 20 and 30mm in length before pupating. The pupae are brown and resemble a dead curled up leaf. When these butterflies emerge from pupae in their home countries they eventually join a communal roost at night as an anti-predator response. It's unknown if this happens here in Rarotonga. In the long-term it's hoped that this useful biocontrol agent will reduce the effects of invasive red passion vine on other native and endemic plant species.

