

# l y B l u e s



The upper surfaces of the wings are bright lilac blue in the male, edged with dark grey. Apart from the banding on the fringes, the two species are not readily separated in this view. Wingspan is about 20-25 mm. Note the absence of any discrete black spots on the upper surface, distinguishing these from the copper butterflies.

mention of a second species, with an Australian distribution, does not come until some years later (1869 for the pied stilt and 1878 for the common blue). Does this imply that the more widely dispersed Australian species had just arrived in New Zealand, or had it previously been overlooked? We cannot be sure. Like fossil discoveries, the first record simply means that the animal was there but it tells nothing about when it arrived.

## No butterflies reported

However, with our present knowledge of blues and their status as our most common butterflies both inland and on the coast, it comes as a surprise that no blue butterflies (of either species) were reported from New Zealand until nearly 100 years had elapsed since the date of the first butterfly discoveries (Cook's Endeavour voyage, 1769-70). At the time when the southern blue (*Zizina oxleyi*) was described from a specimen taken (we think) in Nelson, no fewer than six kinds of butterfly, including red and yellow

admirals, the tussock and two coppers, were known from this country.

Why did blues, especially the common blue, get overlooked for so long?

The probable answer is that they were nowhere near as common nor as widely distributed as they are today. For the explanation of this we can turn to what was happening as European farming got underway. Flocks of sheep were spreading across the land occupying the open, non-forested area. Major forest clearance came later but during the early sheep-farming phase the spread of domestic grazing animals must have been accompanied by the spread of exotic pasture grasses and clovers. Our records are not at all clear on exactly when the different pasture species were introduced but it was the clovers that affected the blue butterflies. Today it is these ubiquitous pasture legumes that serve as larval foodplants for both species of blue butterfly, hence accounting for their common status. In the past, before these plants were introduced, it was unlikely that any native foodplant was

suitable for the common blue but we do know that the endemic southern blue larvae can feed on native broom (*Carmichaelia* spp.). Thus in pre-European New Zealand the southern blue was restricted to open habitats with native brooms whereas the common blue was unlikely to have occurred at all.

The present situation is that the common blue (*Zizina labradus*) is abundant throughout the North Island in exotic grasslands. It prefers mosaics of grass and shingle and its larval foodplants are introduced clovers, trefoils and lucerne. In the South Island it is limited to the Nelson area, northern Marlborough and the West Coast. Our endemic southern blue occurs through the drier regions of Canterbury and Otago, becoming scarce in the far south. Its favourite haunts are stony lakeshores and riverbeds where it is associated with Fescue grassland and matagouri communities. Larvae are normally found on clovers. The two species hybridise extensively where their populations meet in Marlborough and