

## **Small Wings – Big Impact**

### ***Muehlenbeckia* – a Lepidoptera hero**

Every person working in open spaces knows the versatility of our native *Muehlenbeckia* (sometimes referred to as pōhuehue). It is less well known that the plant provides habitat for several moths and butterflies (*Lepidoptera*).

*Muehlenbeckia* spp. appear extensively throughout the country. Much favoured in planting/landscaping in both public spaces and private gardens, they also appear naturally in locations from low lying areas to high alpine zones. There are over twenty species, including five of which are endemic to NZ. Forms vary from ground cover to shrubs to climbers. They are generally hardy, tolerating drought, coastal conditions and wind. Maintenance is low key for most. They are often used to suppress weeds and aid in erosion control. As well as aesthetic appeal, they offer food and shelter to many – birds, lizards and insects including moths and butterflies.

Two species (*M. complexa* and *M. axillaris*) are much favoured by our diminutive but beautiful **copper butterflies** (*Lycaena* spp). Our Biodiversity Officer, Brian Patrick, records about 45 species of Lepidoptera that require *Muehlenbeckia* as part of their lifecycle, including the **pōhuehue owlet** (*Meterana coelena*) and **emerald pug moth** (*Pasiphila muscosata*). *Muehlenbeckia* spp. also produce subtle, small but fragrant flowers that are popular for both day-active and nocturnal invertebrate pollinators of all varieties.

*M. complexa* and *M. axillaris* are relatively easy to establish. Note that in both instances it is important there is some hard surface close by – like gravel, rocks, cobblestones, concrete paths, hard bare ground – for the butterflies to bask in the sun. If trimming becomes necessary, consider leaving prunings so that any caterpillars present can return to the plant. New and favourable habitat will normally see moth and copper butterfly populations establish within a couple of years.

The Moths and Butterflies of NZ Trust encourages councils to incorporate *Muehlenbeckia* in planting projects for these important pollinators. Regional-specific information should be sought from local nurseries/suppliers.

### **Copper Butterflies**



Photo by Rob Herd

There are many sub-species of this diminutive and beautiful butterfly. The exact number is currently unknown and is the subject of ongoing scientific research\*. Some coppers occupy coastal habitats while others occupy mountainous terrain including alpine zones, grassland and braided rivers.

\*The species is the subject of MBNZT Butterfly Discovery Project

<https://www.nzbutterflies.org.nz/project/butterfly-discovery-project/>

## Pōhuehue Owlet



Photo by William Brockelsby

There are multiple species of owlet moths but this particular one takes its name from the Māori name for *Muehlenbeckia*, its host plant.

The colouring of the adult moth is yellow to brown, with a greenish tinge along the front edge of its forewing. Prominent spots upon its wings are also a feature.

It is widespread in the North Island and in the eastern side of the South Island, with a wingspan of 35-40mm.

## Emerald Pug Moth



Photo by Carey Knox

A nocturnal species, there are more than thirty endemic species of pug moth in NZ. The emerald pug moth is reasonably common and widely distributed across the country. While not always green in colour the moth has intricate, pretty markings on its wings. Its wingspan is between 15-30mm

This document is a guide, further information is welcomed – email [trust@nzbutterflies.org.nz](mailto:trust@nzbutterflies.org.nz)