

Large-leaved milk tree, ewekuri, in the Wellington Region

Chris Horne¹ and Barbara Mitcalfe²

The mainly tropical and subtropical mulberry family, Moraceae, comprises about sixty genera, including *Streblus* (formerly *Paratrophis*). *Streblus* includes about ten species and is found in the Pacific Islands, the Philippines and New Zealand. Our three species are endemic.

Streblus banksii (ewekuri, tōwai, pukariao, türepo (Beever 1987)) is a spreading, canopy tree growing to 12 m, with a short, stout trunk to 60 cm d.b.h., which when injured exudes the milky sap of trees of this genus. It is found in lowland forests from sea level to 450 m altitude, from Mangonui south to the Marlborough Sounds (Salmon 1980). ‘In colonial days, the trunk of the tree was cut or bruised to release the sap. This was used by settlers as a substitute for milk, hence the English name’ (Riley 1994).



Figure 1. Ewekuri in fruit, E.C. Russell Reserve, Waikanae. Photo: Barbara Mitcalfe.

The species is regarded by the Department of Conservation in Wellington Conservancy as a high priority for protection and species recovery work (Empson and Sawyer 1996). Threats to its existence in the wild include rats, possums and the fact that it is dioecious. Other threats in the wild include:

- Wind damage to trees, lack of regeneration, children playing and damaging trees; Raroa Reserve

¹15 Boundary Road, Kelburn, Wellington 5.

²28 Kaihuia Street, Northland, Wellington 5.

- Eventual overshadowing by pines; Gear Homestead
- Wind damage to forest canopy; Rangi's Bush
- Wind damage to forest remnant and stock present; Paekakariki site
- Severe wind damage and a lack of regeneration; Queen Elizabeth Park
- Competition from pest plants; Otaki site

Given the rarity of the large-leaved milk tree, it is always a thrill to find a seedling, sapling or tree. One was found on 4 August 1995 by Dr Philip Simpson when, with him and John Sawyer, we botanised an indigenous forest remnant on the farm owned by Mr and Mrs Parkin, Ohariu Valley, Wellington. Another is a multi-trunked tree found by Chris in Beacon Hill Reserve, Strathmore, on 17 August 1996, near the south end of the Miramar Peninsula. They are two of a few naturally occurring plants surviving in remnants of Wellington city's former forests. This year, during a comprehensive survey for Wellington City Council, Geoff and Matt Park have found others in Heke Street Reserve, Ngaio, in Khandallah, and two in Kaiwharawhara Valley.

Another tree was found by Chris on 14 November 1995 in Lowry Bay Scenic Reserve on the east side of Wellington Harbour. Might there be others in the city or between the Eastern Bays and Wainuiomata?

Ken Wright, Biosecurity Officer, Wellington Regional Council, has seen two ewekuri in Upper Hutt, one in Domain Bush, Trentham Memorial Park, one in California Park and a huge one, c. 18 m tall and 70 cm d.b.h., in E.C. Russell Reserve, Waikanae.

On 27 April 1997, we had the great pleasure of finding three ewekuri in Raumati Escarpment Scenic Reserve, above SH 1 and the NIMT railway, east of Raumati South, Kapiti Coast. Barbara found the first two trees, and Chris the third. Our reason for being there was to enable us to comment with first-hand knowledge, on the Draft Management Plan for the reserve. It was not a hunt for ewekuri, but finding them made the visit so much more memorable! Our visit to the two northernmost remnants in the reserve lasted about an hour and was restricted to the uppermost parts. We think that a thorough survey of the reserve's five forest remnants is warranted to see if there are any seedlings, saplings or more trees present, and to ascertain their sex. We wonder if recruitment is inhibited by rodents, possums or rabbits, or whether it is about to begin, following the erection of fences a few years ago to exclude stock.

Ewekuri has been recorded in the following Ecological Districts: Aorangi: 3 sites, Cook Strait: 7, Foxton: 15, Manawatu Plains: 3, Tararua: 15, Wairarapa Plains: 3, and Wellington: 26. Those records, some of which go as far back as 1905, show that though *Streblus banksii* is widely scattered around Wellington Conservancy, it is very uncommon in the Wairarapa (DOC 1997). Its continued existence in the wild is uncertain, although it is regenerating on Mana Island, on Kapiti Island, and at a couple of mainland sites.

The species is now being cultivated from seed collected on Mana Island for

use in ecological restoration projects throughout Wellington. Examples include Lower Hutt Forest and Bird's plantings on Matiu/Somes Island, and Department of Conservation plantings on Mana Island.

Information about occurrences of the species in the wild may be sent to the Department of Conservation on Species Record Forms. It is used by the Department and the Wellington Plant Conservation Network to determine which plants will be used to provide cuttings or seed for establishing the species at other sites, and to identify places where the species may be legally protected.

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