Anthoxanthum fuscum

COMMON NAMES
seabird holy grass

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2023 | Not Threatened
Jump to previous conservation statuses

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Grasses

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Robust or somewhat lax, aromatic, tufted grass often forming stout tussocks in or near seal haul outs or sea bird nesting grounds. **Leaf-sheath** glabrous, more or less striate. **Ligule** 3–5 mm, chartaceous, hairy, erose to variously lobed. **Leaf-blade** 300–750(–800) × 9–12 mm, tapering, lower surface glabrous, upper surface scabrid on the main (prominent) ribs; margins thick, toothed. **Culm** 0.6–1.5 m, internodes glabrous, ridged. **Panicle** 150–380 mm, erect; branches 1–2 at each node, glabrous, naked below, spikelets densely crowded above; pedicels scabrid or villous. **Glumes** subequal, membranous with wide scarious margins and tips, ovate-lanceolate, acute, galbrous, keeled; upper 7–9 mm, 3-nerved. **Florets** included by glumes, brown to dark brown at maturity. **Male florets** with lemma 6–8 mm, oblong-ovate, lobes 1–1.25 mm, erose and scarious-tipped, sparsely finely scabrid, long hairs at base, margins sparsely long-ciliate; awns 3–7 mm, slender, straight or slightly curved, insertion 1-2 mm below apex; palea 5–6 mm, membranous, keels ciliate; lodicules 0.5–1 mm, ovate, acute, irregularly 1-2-lobed, glabrous; callus hairs to 1 mm; anthers 2.5–3.5 mm. **Perfect florets** with lemma 5 mm, narrow-ovate, glabrous, apex minutely hairy, mucro 0-0.5 mm; palea about equal to lemma in length, keel toothed to base, ovate-lanceolate; lodicules 0.5 mm, glabrous; anthers 1.5–2 mm; ovary 1 mm, stigma-styles 5–6 mm. **Seed** 2–2.5 × 0.75 mm. **Spikelets** sometimes vivaporous.

SIMILAR TAXA
Superficially similar to *Anthoxanthum redolens* and *Anthoxanthum brunonis*, species with which it may on occasion grow. It is distinguished from both (usually) by its much taller, robust tufted habit. In perfect flowers of this species the florets are distinctly awned, their lemmas are scarcely bearded, and the awns of the male florets are inserted near the lemma apex rather than near the base.

DISTRIBUTION
Endemic. Kapiti Island, South Island (western and southern coasts from Westport), Stewart Island/Rakiura, Chatham Islands, Antipodes Islands and Campbell Island/Motu Ihupuku.

HABITAT
Coastal. Associated with seal haulouts, and seabird roosts and nesting areas. Mainly found on offshore islands. On the Chatham Islands it has been gathered well inland from peat lake margins.

Habitat - on seepages above spray zone. Ocean Bay, Rekohu ' Chatham Island. Photographer: Peter J de Lange, Date taken: 09/02/2021, Licence: CC BY.

Flowering inflorescence - Otoi Creek, Rekohu /

THREATS
A local endemic, sparsely distributed throughout its range. As a species of guano-rich habitats it is quite likely that it has undergone some past range contraction, and in the South Island this may even be continuing. Naturally Uncommon and Biologically Sparse.

GENUS
Anthoxanthum

FAMILY
Poaceae

AUTHORITY
Anthoxanthum fuscum (Zotov) de Lange & C.J. James

SYNONYMS
Hierochloe fusca Zotov

TAXONOMIC NOTES
The distinction between this species , *Anthoxanthum redolens* and *Anthoxanthum brunonis* needs further study. The three have the same chromosome number and nrDNA ITS sequences and appear to intergrade. Kapiti Island plants in particular are vegetatively rather different from the robust tufted grass more typical of this species in the rest of its range. Nevertheless the late Dr H. E. Connor (pers. comm. 2006) has advised that the floral distinctions hold, and that in his revision of the genus he is likely to maintain all three species (see comments in de Lange & James 2024).

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
November–January

FRUITING
December–April (–June)

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Easy from fresh seed and the division of whole plants. Prefers a damp, fertile soil in full sun.

CULTIVATION
Occasionally offered by specialist native plant nurseries

ETYMOLOGY
fuscum: Brown tinged with grey or black

MANAAKI WHENUA ONLINE INTERACTIVE KEY
Key to the grasses of New Zealand

NVS CODE
HIEFUS

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 84

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | Not Threatened
2012 | Not Threatened
2009 | Not Threatened | Qualifiers: DP
2004 | Sparse
Jump to current conservation status

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Otago: 2025 | Regionally Data Deficient Help
The regional threat classification system leverages off the national assessments in the NZTCS, providing information relevant for the regional context. Otago conservation status information is sourced from the "Conservation Status of Indigenous Vascular Plants in Otago, 2025" Jarvie S et al. (2025) report.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

de Lange P.J., James C.J. 2024. New combinations in *Anthoxanthum* (Poaceae) for Aotearoa / New Zealand taxa earlier placed in *Hierochloe*. *Ukrainian Botanical Journal, 81(4)*: 259–262. https://doi.org/10.15407/ukrbotj81.04.259
Edgar E, Connor HE. 2000. Flora of New Zealand. Vol. V. Grasses. Christchurch, Manaaki Whenua Press. 650 p.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet prepared for NZPCN by Peter J. de Lange 30 August 2000. Description modified from Edgar and Connor (2000).

MORE INFORMATION

https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/anthoxanthum-fuscum/

PDF DATE

27 May 2026