Bulbophyllum pygmaeum

COMMON NAMES
pygmy tree orchid, bulbophyllum

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

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

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Orchids

FLOWER COLOURS
White

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Epiphytic or rupestral, rhizomatous, perennial forming widely spreading or diffuse mats up to 200 mm or more in diameter. **Rhizomes** heavily branched and intertwined, vermiform, pale pink to white, more or less fleshy, spongy; roots numerous slightly finer than rhizomes otherwise every similar. **Pseudobulbs** 3–5 mm diameter, green, bright green to pale green, globose, rugose, becoming deeply furrowed and wrinkled with age; each bearing a single leaf arising from the top within a somewhat prominent circular rim. **Leaf** subsessile to shortly petiolate up to 1.5 mm long; lamina 4–10 × 2–4 mm, dark green to green (rarely reddish green), oblong-ovate to almost orbicular, apex obtuse, upper surface minutely scabrid; undersides prominently keeled. **Flower** solitary, located on the terminus of a greenish valvate capsule comprising the ovary; peduncle arising from base of pseudobulb, up to 2.5–3.5 mm long at flowering, usually elongating in fruit. **Floral bract** 1–(2), campanulate-tubular to funneliform, membranous, hyaline or pale white. **Pedicel** very short (0.5–0.7 mm long), coarsely hirsute; ovary ovoid-ellipsoid, coarsely hirsute, splitting lengthwise at dehiscence. **Perianth** 1.5–2.0 mm long, white. **Sepals** minutely hairy, dorsal sepal shorter than lateral sepals. **Petals** broad, almost meeting behind column. **Labellum** ovate-oblong, obtuse, more or less thickened, roofing over pouch formed by lateral sepals and column foot. **Column** barely as long as its foot; wing not exceeding anther.



Spent flower and leaves. Bushy Park, Whanganui. Apr 2012. Photographer: Colin C. Ogle, Licence: CC BY-NC.



Leaves. Bushy Park, Whanganui. Apr 2012. Photographer: Colin C. Ogle, Licence: CC BY-NC.

SIMILAR TAXA
Bulbophyllum pygmaeum could be confused with *B. tuberculatum* but that species has a less diffuse, more compact growth habit; much larger dark green to maroon green, erect, ovoid to ovoid-ellipsoid pseudobulbs; larger and longer, linear-oblong leaves (up to 50 × 5 mm), usually more than one flower; and flowers that have orange to red labella, and white or pale cream petals and sepals. The leaves and ovary of *B. tuberculatum* lack the minute, coarse hairs that are a feature of *B. pygmaeum*. The ovary of *B. tuberculatum* does not at maturity split to become valvate, nor does it retain the flower remnants on the uppermost valve.

DISTRIBUTION
Endemic. New Zealand: Manawatāwhi / Three Kings Islands, North Island, South Island, Stewart Island/Rakiura.

HABITAT
Coastal to montane. Mostly epiphytic on forest tree trunks and branches, sometimes on fallen logs, and found as a also rupestral on rocks, cliff faces or banks.

GENUS
Bulbophyllum

FAMILY
Orchidaceae

AUTHORITY
Bulbophyllum pygmaeum (Sm.) Lindl.

SYNONYMS
Ichthyostomum pygmaeum (Sm.) D.L.Jones, M.A.Clem. et Molloy

TAXONOMIC NOTES
The generic distinction of *Ichthyostomum* from *Bulbophyllum* was always considered unclear and many botanists did not accept the division. Recently Australian orchidologists have rejected this genus and returned to a broader circumscription of *Bulbophyllum* (P. Weston pers. comm. 2014). This view is accepted here.

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
December–January

FRUITING
January–May

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL
Minute seeds are wind dispersed (Thorsen et al., 2009).

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Easily grown in a hanging basket in standard orchid mix. Often can be strapped to a tree trunk and provided it is kept moist during the drier months it grows readily. This species does best in semi-shade. Should not be removed from the wild.

PLANT OF THE MONTH
This plant has been featured as a Plant of the Month – see Trilepidea: NZPCN newsletter for April 2013 for the full story.

ETYMOLOGY
pygmaeum: Pigmy

MANAAKI WHENUA ONLINE INTERACTIVE KEY
Key to native orchids of New Zealand

NVS CODE
BULPYG

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 38

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES
2017 | Not Threatened
2012 | Not Threatened
2009 | Not Threatened
2004 | Not Threatened
Jump to current conservation status

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Auckland: 2025 | Regionally Not Threatened | Qualifiers: DPS, DPT Help
The regional threat classification system leverages off the national assessments in the NZTCS, providing information relevant for the regional context. Auckland conservation status information is sourced from the "Conservation status of vascular plant species in Tāmaki Makaurau / Auckland" Simpkins E et al. (2025) report.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Moore LB, Edgar E. 1970. Flora of New Zealand, Volume II. Indigenous Tracheophyta: Monocotyledones except Gramineae. Government Printer, Wellington, NZ. 354 p.
Thorsen MJ, Dickinson KJM, Seddon PJ. 2009. Seed dispersal systems in the New Zealand flora. *Perspectives in Plant Ecology, Evolution and Systematics 11*: 285–309. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ppees.2009.06.001.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact Sheet prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange 14 April 2007. Description adapted from Moore & Edgar (1970). Some of this factsheet information is derived from Flora of New Zealand Online and is used under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 New Zealand licence.

MORE INFORMATION

https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/bulbophyllum-pygmaeum/

PDF DATE

08 July 2026