Carex capillacea

COMMON NAMES
sedge

BIOSTATUS
Native

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2023 | Threatened – Nationally Vulnerable | Qualifiers: Sp, DPR, DPS, DPT, SO

Jump to previous conservation statuses

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Sedges

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Diminutive, shortly rhizomatous, somewhat flaccid, tufted, matted bright green to yellow-green sedge of damp forest hollows, river terrace wetlands and cushion bogs. **Culms** 4–10–30 × 0.5–0.7 mm, usually curved (sickle-shaped), plano-convex to terete, smooth; basal sheaths light brown or grey-brown. **Leaves** < culms, up to 0.5 mm wide, plano-convex to involute, yellow-green, glossy, margins finely scabrid near the acute apex. **Inflorescence** solitary, terminal spike 5–8 × 3–4 mm, ovate, usually ebracteate, sometimes with the lowermost glume bractiform; female flowers 6–10–(12), male flowers in a terminal spikelet 3 mm long. **Glumes** < utricles, ovate, obtuse, pale brown, midrib green. **Utricles** 2 × 1 mm, plano-convex or biconvex, ovoid, green, membranous, nerved, margins glabrous, beak c. 0.5 mm long, crura truncate or notched, glabrous, stipe absent or wanting. **Stigmas** 3. **Nut** 1.5 mm long, pale cream, bluntly trigonous, ovoid, surface distinctly reticulate pitted; style-base persistent.

SIMILAR TAXA
Within the New Zealand species *C. capillacea* is the only species placed within Section Capitellatae of Subgenus Carex and of all the New Zealand carices it is most likely to be confused with the four species of Subgenus Primocarex (*C. acicularis* Boott in Hook.f., *C. enysii* Petrie, *C. allanii* Hamlin and *C. pyrenaica* var. *cephalotes* (F.Muell.) Kük.) all of which possess a unispicate inflorescence. From these carices *C. capillacea* is readily distinguished by its bright-green to yellow-green, somewhat flaccid, matted habit, and by the sessile, membranous utricles which are rarely longer than 2 mm. As the spikelet is usually ebracteate it could be confused with *C. pyrenaica* var. *cephalotes* but that species has distinctly coriaceous, stipitate utricles 2.5–5 mm long.

DISTRIBUTION
Indigenous. North and South Islands. In the North confined to the Volcanic Plateau (the Waimarino Plain), and the Moawhango. In the South Island more widespread from Nelson and western Marlborough south to Lakes Te Anau, Manapouri, Hauroko and east to Lumsden. Probably more widespread as it is easily overlooked. Also known from Australia, New Guinea, Malesia, China, Japan and India.



In cultivation. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 21/10/2007, Licence: CC BY.



In cultivation. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 21/10/2007, Licence: CC BY.

HABITAT
Favouring cushion bog, sphagnum bog, seepages, flushes and the margins of ponds, pools, tarns and on seasonally flooded river terraces within montane forest, scrub, and tussock grassland.

THREATS
Biologically sparse and naturally uncommon. This species has a somewhat disjunct distribution. It does not appear to be threatened at the majority of the known sites but it is vulnerable to competiion from weeds.

GENUS
Carex

FAMILY
Cyperaceae

AUTHORITY
Carex capillacea Boott

SYNONYMS
Carex rara subsp. capillacea (Boott) Kük., C. wallii Petrie

ENDEMIC TAXON
No

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
October–December

FRUITING
October–July

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL
Nuts surrounded by inflated utricles are dispersed by granivory and wind (Thorsen et al., 2009).

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Easily grown from rooted pieces, divisions of whole plants, and fresh seed. An attractive small sedge with rather unusual solitary spikes. Does best in a small pot kept permanently moist. Dislikes prolonged dry conditions and humidity.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING
OBL: Obligate Wetland
Almost always is a hydrophyte, rarely in uplands (non-wetlands).

ETYMOLOGY
carex: Latin name for a species of sedge, now applied to the whole group.
capillacea: From the Latin capillus ‘hair’ or ‘thread’, meaning hair-like or thread-like

MANAAKI WHENUA ONLINE INTERACTIVE KEY
Key to indigenous and naturalised Carex in New Zealand

NVS CODE
CARCAP

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = c.60

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | Threatened – Nationally Vulnerable | Qualifiers: DP, SO, Sp
2012 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: SO, Sp
2009 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon
2004 | Sparse
Jump to current conservation status

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Otago: 2025 | Regionally Threatened – Regionally Endangered | Qualifiers: DPR, DPS, DPT, PF, RR Help
Current regional threat status assessments prepared according to Crisp et al. (2025) are displayed when available. The 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

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

Description adapted from Moore and 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/carex-capillacea/

PDF DATE

02 October 2026