

Carex fretalis

COMMON NAMES

curly sedge

BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: Sp, DPS, DPT

[Jump to previous conservation statuses](#)

CATEGORY

Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Sedges

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Stiffly erect, tufted light yellow-green sedge with distinctly much curled and twisted leaf apices. **Culms** 100–150 × 0.5 mm, terete, glabrous, often elongating at maturity and becoming somewhat pendant toward the apex; basal sheaths light brown. Leaves more or less equal, or somewhat > culms, 1 mm wide, plano-convex, margins scabrid towards the very strongly cirrhose apex. **Spikes** 4–7; single terminal male spike rather slender; remaining spikes female, 10–25 × 4–5 mm, more or less oblong, more or less distant, erect, the uppermost sessile or shortly pedunculate, the lowest on a slender, pendant peduncle up to 10 mm long. **Glumes** (excluding awn) usually slightly < or equal to utricles, ovate-acuminate, hyaline though closely dotted with red brown striae, the cream midrib thickened and prolonged to an awn as long as glume or longer. **Utricles** 3.5 × 1 mm, plano-convex, ovoid, turgid, buff brown to tawny-yellow or tan, usually with distinctly paler nerves; scarcely narrowed to a glabrous beak, crura conspicuous, sometimes scabrid on margins; stipe relatively thick, 0.5 mm long, pale brown. **Stigmas** 3. **Nut** 1.5 mm, dark grey, trigonous, oblong-obovoid.

SIMILAR TAXA

Very closely related to *Carex comans* Bergg., from which it differs by the usually pale yellow-green leaves with strongly curled (cirrhose) apices, and light brown, never purple-brown basal sheaths. The inflorescence tends to be shorter and more stiffly erect and the spikes fewer, broader and with larger, usually glabrous utricles, which have a scarcely narrowed, usually glabrous beak rather than the distinct, and very scabrid beak seen in *C. comans*.

DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. South Island, Southland (Foveaux Strait area, Bluff Hill, Centre Island) and Stewart Island/Rakiura. Naturalised in Tasmania (where it is erroneously known as *C. comans* Bergg.).

HABITAT

A coastal species of relatively, exposed, open, damp, peaty ground, often overlying beach gravels. At Bluff Hill it has invaded surrounding pasture and is locally common along the track sides leading to the summit. On Stewart Island it often grows along tracks sides within the coastal portions of their routes, and is said to spread aggressively following fires or in heavily grazed areas.

THREATS

Carex fretalis is perhaps least common in the Southland part of its range but it is abundant over large parts of Stewart Island/Rakiura. However, it is declining because of habitat loss.



Waituna, Southland. Photographer: Rowan Hindmarsh-Walls, Date taken: 05/06/2016, Licence: CC BY-NC.



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GENUS

Carex

FAMILY

Cyperaceae

AUTHORITY

Carex fetalis Hamlin

SYNONYMS

None

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

FLOWERING

October–December

FRUITING

October–August

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL

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

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

Easily grown from fresh seed and by the division of established plants. It is this species which is the original *Carex comans* cv. 'Frosted Curls' popular in cultivation, which was first discovered by Terry Hatch of Joy Plants, Pukekohe on Bluff Hill and mistakenly assigned to *C. comans* Bergg. However, over the last decade much of what is sold as cv. 'Frosted Curls' is now, ironically, the green form of *C. comans* s.s. *Carex fetalis* does well in cultivation in a moist, free draining sunn situation or in semi-shade. It is naturalised in Tasmania.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING

FAC: Facultative

Commonly occurs as either a hydrophyte or non-hydrophyte (non-wetlands).

ETYMOLOGY

carex: Latin name for a species of sedge, now applied to the whole group.

fetalis: Belonging to a strait

MANAAKI WHENUA ONLINE INTERACTIVE KEY

Key to indigenous and naturalised Carex in New Zealand

NVS CODE

CARFRE

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = c.60-64

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: DP, Sp

2012 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: Sp

2009 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: DP

2004 | Range Restricted

Jump to current conservation status

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Otago: 2025 | Regionally At Risk – Regionally Declining | Qualifiers: DPR, NR 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

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.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange (8 September 2006). Description adapted from Moore & Edgar (1970)

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MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/carex-fretalis/>

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