

# Carex lessoniana

## COMMON NAMES

rautahi, cutty grass

## BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

## CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | Not Threatened

[Jump to previous conservation statuses](#)

## CATEGORY

Vascular

## STRUCTURAL CLASS

Sedges

## DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Rhizomatous; robust, 0.5–1.5 m tall, bright green to dark green. **Culms** 1.5–5.0 mm diameter, triquetrous, scabrid on the edges; basal sheaths dull brown or red-brown, margins shredding into fibres wrapped round the culm. **Leaves** numerous usually much > culms, 3.5–8.0 mm wide, double-folded, margins scabrid. **Spikes** 6–20, pendulous on filiform peduncles, or upper spikes erect, sessile; upper 3–6 spikes male, sometimes mixed with female flowers, solitary or the lower geminate, 2–4 mm diameter, glumes hardly awned; remaining spikes female, usually with male flowers at the top, geminate, ternate or occasionally quinate, lowermost spikes 20–90 × 4–7 mm, upper spikes progressively smaller. **Glumes** (excluding awn) < utricles, narrow-ovate, obtuse, truncate or emarginate with a hispid awn of variable length, red-brown with a light brown, 3-nerved midrib, margins narrow, hyaline. **Utricles** 2.6–3.8 × 1.3–2.3 mm, ovoid to oblong, saccate, inflated or unequally compressed, 6–10-nerved on each face, olive green, becoming greenish brown or red-brown, soft, margins glabrous; beak very narrow, c. 0.2 mm long, orifice entire, rarely slightly bidentate. **Stigmas** 2. **Nut** c. 1.5 mm long, in lower half of utricle, biconvex, orbicular-ovoid or obovoid, brown.

## SIMILAR TAXA

*Carex lessoniana* is allied to *C. coriacea* Hamlin, *C. ternaria* Boott, and *C. geminata* Schkuhr. From all these species it can be distinguished by the compact inflorescences, with wider, though smaller, initially erect spikelets (the basal few are always pendulous), and by distinctly beaked utricles. However, in some specimens the beak can be minute. *Carex ternaria* is unlikely to be confused because it is confined to the Chatham and Subantarctic islands outside the range of *C. lessoniana*. *Carex lessoniana* and *C. geminata* often overlap ecologically, although *C. lessoniana* is more common in wetter and/or more acidic habitats—such as peat bogs. Only rarely do the ranges of *C. lessoniana* and *C. coriacea* overlap, and then only in the south-eastern limits of its range.

## DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. New Zealand: North Island (widespread), South Island (more common in the northern half, sporadic further south).

## HABITAT

Coastal to lowland (rarely montane). Usually on the margins of peat swamps, or in very wet alluvial forest.



*Carex lessoniana*, Howarth wetland, Te Aroha. Photographer: John Smith-Dodsworth, Licence: CC BY-NC.



*Carex lessoniana*, Howarth wetland, Te Aroha. Photographer: John Smith-Dodsworth, Licence: CC BY-NC.

## GENUS

Carex

## FAMILY

Cyperaceae

## AUTHORITY

Carex lessoniana Steud.

## SYNONYMS

Carex polystachya A.Rich.

## ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

## ENDEMIC GENUS

No

## ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

## FLOWERING

October–December

## FRUITING

December–April

## 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. Although a wetland species *C. lessoniana* will grow well in most soils and moisture regimes. Does best in partial shade.

## WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING

FACW: Facultative Wetland

Usually is a hydrophyte but occasionally found in uplands (non-wetlands).

## ETYMOLOGY

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

**lessoniana:** Named after René Primevère Lesson who was a 19th century French botanist and surgeon

## MANAAKI WHENUA ONLINE INTERACTIVE KEY

[Key to indigenous and naturalised Carex in New Zealand](#)

## NVS CODE

CARLES

## 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.

Otago: 2025 | Regionally At Risk – Regionally Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: DPR, DPS, DPT, NR, Sp 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. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ppees.2009.06.001>.

## ATTRIBUTION

Fact Sheet prepared by P.J. de Lange (10 August 2006). Description adapted from Moore and Edgar (1970)

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## MORE INFORMATION

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

## PDF DATE

25 May 2026