Coprosma acerosa

COMMON NAMES
sand coprosma, tātaraheke

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2023 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: CI, PD
Jump to previous conservation statuses

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Trees & Shrubs - Dicotyledons

SIMPLIFIED DESCRIPTION
Sprawling yellowish small-leaved shrub inhabiting coastal areas. Twigs orange, slightly fuzzy at tip. Leaves narrow, small, with dark line down middle on the underside, in clusters of pairs scattered along twigs. Flowers tiny, with long protruding threads. Fruit white to pale blue, often flecked.



North Otago, fruit. Photographer: John Barkla, Licence: CC BY.



Piwhane / Spirits Bay, Te Paki. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 07/11/2007, Licence: CC BY.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Low-growing, shrub with slender flexible, sprawling to prostrate, interlacing branches and branchlets, forming a more or less cushion-like mass up to 2 m across, and occasionally up to 2 m tall when supported (mostly low in stature). **Branchlets** numerous with orange-brown bark, pubescent when young. **Leaves** in opposite pairs or fascicles, on yellowish petioles. **Stipules** rounded-obtuse to broadly triangular, more or less pubescent, ciliolate, sometimes with 1 or more tiny dark denticles. **Lamina** coriaceous, yellowish green, linear obtuse, 7–12 × 1–1.5–(2) mm; midrib alone evident. **Flowers** solitary, terminal on short branchlets; male flower with calyx non-existent or vestigial, corolla funnelform, lobes ovate-oblong, subacute, more or less equal to tube; female flower with acute, narrow-triangular calyx-teeth; corolla funnelform, lobes narrow-oblong, obtuse. **Drupe** translucent, very pale to pale blue, often with darker flecks, globose, subglobose or broadly oblong, approximately 5–7 mm diameter.

SIMILAR TAXA
Coprosma brunnea more open habit, less leaves, only found inland in South Island, not thought to overlap naturally due to habitat requirements.
Coprosma rugosa is a taller and much more upright shrub with stiff, erect branchlets.
Coprosma intertexta is bushy but not stiffly erect; the leaves are sharp-tipped in outline and usually red-margined.
Plagianthus divaricatus has alternate, not opposite, leaves or leaf clusters, dark brown bark and dark green leaves.

DISTRIBUTION
Endemic. North Island, South Island, Stewart Island/Rakiura and Chatham Islands

HABITAT
Coastal sands throughout distribution.

THREATS
Rapidly becoming scarce in large parts of its range through dune reclamation, competition from marram grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) and browsing by lagomorphs. Seems to respond well to control of weeds and lagomorphs.

GENUS
Coprosma

FAMILY
Rubiaceae

AUTHORITY
Coprosma acerosa A.Cunn.

TAXONOMIC NOTES
Wilson & Galloway (1993) suggest prostrate forms known as *C. brunnea* do not represent a distinct species.

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
(September)–October–November

FRUITING
February–March–(July)

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL
Fleshy drupes are dispersed by frugivory (Thorsen et al., 2009).

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING
UPL: Obligate Upland
Rarely is a hydrophyte, almost always in uplands (non-wetlands).

CULTIVATION
A natural hybrid exists, *C. acerosa* × *C. repens* which is known as *C.* '×Kirkii' and is often for sale in commercial nurseries.

ETYMOLOGY
coprosma: From the Greek kopros 'dung' and osme 'smell', referring to the foul smell of the species, literally 'dung smell'
acerosa: From the Latin acus 'sharp', meaning sharp or pointed

MANAAKI WHENUA ONLINE INTERACTIVE KEY
Key to Coprosma species of New Zealand

NVS CODE
COPACE

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 44

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES
2017 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: PD
2012 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: DP
2009 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: DP
2004 | Not Threatened
Jump to current conservation status

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Auckland: 2025 | Regionally Threatened – Regionally Vulnerable | Qualifiers: DPS, DPT, PF, RF, RR 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 Threatened – Regionally Endangered | Qualifiers: DPT, PF, RF, RR 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

Allan HH. 1961. Flora of New Zealand, Volume I. Indigenous Tracheophyta: Psilopsida, Lycopsida, Filicopsida, Gymnospermae, Dicotyledones. Government Printer, Wellington, NZ. 1085 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.
Wilson HD, Galloway T. 1993. Small-leaved shrubs of New Zealand. Manuka Press, Christchurch, NZ. 305 p.

ATTRIBUTION

Description adapted by M. Ward from Allan (1961) and Wilson & Galloway (1993).
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MORE INFORMATION

https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/coprosma-acerosa/

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