

Corybas cheesemanii

COMMON NAMES

helmet orchid, Cheeseman's spider orchid

BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | Not Threatened

[Jump to previous conservation statuses](#)

CATEGORY

Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Orchids

FLOWER COLOURS

Red/Pink, Violet/Purple

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Diminutive, winter to spring green perennial herb up to 25 mm tall when flowering, up to 220 mm tall when fruiting. Stem, leaves usually, and sometimes also the flowers completely or partially buried within leaf litter. **Tubers** spheroidal to ovoid, borne on greatly elongated lateral roots up to 200 mm away from current seasons plant. **Stem** erect buried within leaf mould. **Leaf** solitary, sessile, 10–20 mm long, pale green to green above, somewhat silvery-green below, orbicular, orbicular-cordate, sometimes leaf reduced to a small green scale. **Floral bract** smaller than the bright yellow-green ovary, and usually placed well below it. **Flower** 1–(2), placed directly over leaf. **Ovary** erect. **Perianth** 10–14 mm tall. **Dorsal sepal** helmet-like (galeate), arching completely over labellum, acute, dark pink, purple-grey, maroon, greyish white (mushroom grey) greyish-white flecked with purple, or completely white, fleshy. **Lateral sepals** subulate (needle-like), minute, usually obscured by dorsal sepal, visible only from the front between the spurs. **Petals** much smaller than sepals, usually not discernible. **Labellum** cream or white, forming a curved tube, with the anterior margin sharply and abruptly deflexed under the tip of the galea, as a semicircular papillose lobe; the lobe hiding a median pouch; at the base on either side of the labellum a narrow conical spur projects downwards between the petals and sepals. **Fruiting capsule** up to 20 mm long, cylindrical to ovoid, erect to suberect, borne on a greatly elongated stem.

SIMILAR TAXA

When in flower this species could not be confused with any other indigenous orchid. The small leaf, and autumn to winter flowering habit are distinctive features, as is this species penchant for growing in deep drifts of leaf litter, usually in dark, very shaded sites. Fruiting material can be confused with *Corybas cryptanthus* with which it often grows. However, *C. cryptanthus* lacks leaves and chlorophyll, and the narrowly cylindrical capsule is 20–30 mm long, purple-flecked and as it emerges it is bent toward the peduncle (stem), and often matures in a horizontal, rather than erect position.

DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. New Zealand: Manawatāwhi / Three Kings Islands, North Island, South Island, Chatham Islands.



Stokes Valley, Lower Hutt. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 29/06/2006, Licence: CC BY.



Corybas cheesemanii. Photographer: Kevin Matthews, Licence: CC BY-NC.

HABITAT

Coastal to montane (up to 1000 m a.s.l.). Usually found in tall scrub or forest, in dark shaded sites, partially buried in deep, moist, semi-rotted leaf litter, especially under kānuka (*Kunzea ericoides*, *K. robusta*, *K. serotina* and *K. tiregensis*) and beech (*Fuscopora* and *Lophozonia* spp.). Often associated with *Corybas cryptanthus*.

GENUS

Corybas

FAMILY

Orchidaceae

AUTHORITY

Corybas cheesemanii (Hook.f. ex Kirk) Kuntze

SYNONYMS

Corysanthes cheesemanii Hook.f.

TAXONOMIC NOTES

Considerable research is underway to investigate the validity of the segregate genera split from *Corybas* R.Br. by Jones et al. (2002). Whilst much of that work has yet to be published, on advice from Australian Orchidologists Peter Weston and Stephen Hopper (pers. comm., July 2011, November 2014), all of the segregate genera recognised for New Zealand by Jones et al. (2002) are returned to *Corybas* (see also Lyons 2014; Lehnebach 2016).

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

FLOWERING

May–September

FRUITING

November–January

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

Difficult—should not be removed from the wild.

ETYMOLOGY

corybas: Helmet flower

cheesemanii: Named after Thomas Frederick Cheeseman (1846 - 15 October 1923) who was a New Zealand botanist and naturalist who, in 1906, produced *The Manual of the New Zealand Flora*.

MANAAKI WHENUA ONLINE INTERACTIVE KEY

[Key to native orchids of New Zealand](#)

NVS CODE

CORCHE

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 54+2

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, TL 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 Data Deficient | Qualifiers: OL 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

Jones DL, Clements MA, Sharma IK, Mackenzie AM, Molloy BPJ. 2002. Nomenclatural notes arising from studies into the Tribe *Diurideae* (Orchidaceae). *The Orchadian* 13(10): 437–468.

<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/310769#page/2/mode/1up>.

Lehnebach C. 2016. New combinations and a replacement name for three New Zealand spider orchids (*Corybas*). *The New Zealand Native Orchid Journal* 139. 4–5.

Lyon SP. 2014. Molecular systematics, biogeography, and mycorrhizal associations in the Acianthinae (Orchidaceae), with a focus on the genus *Corybas*. PhD Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA.

<https://asset.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/UAXO3VHO6P7EH8Y/R/file-19145.pdf>.

Moore LB, Edgar E. 1970. Flora of New Zealand, Volume II. Indigenous Tracheophyta: Monocotyledones except Gramineae. Government Printer, Wellington, NZ. 354 p.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact Sheet prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange 14 April 2007: Description adapted from Moore and Edgar (1970).

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MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/corybas-cheesemani/>

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