Corybas iridescens

COMMON NAMES
spider orchid, big red

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2023 | Not Threatened
Jump to previous conservation statuses

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Orchids

FLOWER COLOURS
Green, Red/Pink

Flowering on road-side mudstone bank; Junction Road, Kaiiwi, Whanganui. Photographer: Colin C. Ogle, Date taken: 09/09/2018, Licence: CC BY-NC.

Flowering on road-side mudstone bank; Junction Road, Kaiiwi, Whanganui. Photographer: Colin C. Ogle, Date taken: 09/09/2018, Licence: CC BY-NC.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Terrestrial, tuberous, glabrous, summer-green herb forming extensive colonies. **Tuberoids** globose to ellipsoid on extended roots. **Leaf** solitary, fleshy, more or less subcoriaceous, usually spreading and held flat to the ground surface; shortly petiolate, petiole 3.0–10.0 × 1.5–3.0 mm; lamina 20–40 × 15–35 mm, or larger, ovate-oblong or bluntly wedge-shaped, often pandurate, squared and apiculate at apex, with apiculus decurved, rounded and cordate at base; midrib grooved above, ridged beneath; leaf colour dull dark green above with purple flecks on margins, on midrib, or overall, silvery beneath. **Flowers** 1–(2), 12–20 mm long, dark red-green, dominated by labellum, dorsal sepal and long filiform petals and lateral sepals; peduncle 4–5 mm long. **Ovary** 4–8 mm long, green or cream, purple-flecked, curved, subtended by two unequal floral bracts, the smaller 3–5 mm long, linear-subulate, terete the larger equal to or exceeding the ovary, 7–10 mm long, lanceolate, green flecked with purple. **Dorsal sepal** extending well past labellum 20–35 × 8–12 mm, narrowly ovate in outline when flattened, concave, cucullate and arching over the labellum tube, with apex usually recurved; green spotted and/or striped with purple. **Lateral sepals** 50–70 × 0.5–1.0 mm at widest point; filiform, greatly exceeding labellum; translucent white with purple striations, horizontal to suberect and projecting forwards and outwards; suberect to erect and spreading; channelled, and twisted. **Petals** 40–60 × 0.5–1.0 mm at widest point, slightly shorter than lateral sepals, filiform, greatly exceeding labellum, translucent white with purple striations, horizontal to suberect, projecting forwards and outwards; channelled, auriculate on the base of the column. **Auricles** short, projecting downwards and forwards, with apertures 1.5–2.5 mm across. **Labellum** conspicuous, dark red, maroon-red to almost black, sometimes striped with green at front, iridescent when wet; labellum tube 5–7 mm long, erect at first then abruptly deflexed through 160–180 degrees, and expanding into the lamina with a prominent bead-like callus in throat of tube at bend; lamina 10–20 × 10–15 mm, broadly ovate to orbicular; upper margins folded inwards, mostly overlapping; lower surface spreading, deflexed against ovary; with margins erose-papillose, and a long median apiculus; inner surface with dense, minute, retrorse papillae and ridged veins; throat of labellum tube high on lamina. **Column** 3–4 mm long, broadest and ridged at base, inclined backwards, minutely winged. **Stigma** scutiform to oblong, 1 mm diameter, concave. **Anther** 1 mm, purple-obtuse. **Pollinia** 4, united in pairs, 1.0 × 0.7 mm, oblong, mealy, yellow. **Capsule** 12–20 × 5–7 mm, elliptic, initially pale green later brown, on greatly elongated peduncle.

SIMILAR TAXA

Distinguished by the combination of shortly petiolate, broadly wedge-shaped, usually spotted leaves; broad dorsal sepal; subequal petals and lateral sepals; abruptly deflexed, dark red, almost black labellum, which is strongly iridescent when wet; and by the prominent bead-like callus at the entrance to the labellum tube.

DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. New Zealand: North Island, South Island, Chatham Islands.

HABITAT

Coastal to montane (up to 1100 m a.s.l.). Favouring base rich substrates, especially calcaerous mudstones, siltstones (both known as Papa rock), and limestone but also on basalt. Usually in, or near seepages or on the margins of slow-flowing streams

GENUS

Corybas

FAMILY

Orchidaceae

AUTHORITY

Corybas iridescens Irwin et Molloy,

SYNONYMS

Corysanthes iridescens (Irwin et Molloy) Szlach.; Nematoceras iridescens (Irwin & Molloy) Molloy, D.L.Jones et M.A.Clem.

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*.
Lehnebach (2016) made three combinations for those *Nematoceras* lacking valid names in *Corybas*. This action now enables the full transfer of *Nematoceras* back to *Corybas*. However, as of writing, a formal publication rejecting the segregation of *Corybas* by Jones et al. (2002) has yet to be published. Lehnebach cites an unpublished PhD (Lyon 2014) that indicates this move is imminent.

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

FLOWERING

August–November

FRUITING

October–January

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

Difficult—should not be removed from the wild.

ETYMOLOGY

corybas: Helmet flower
iridescens: Becoming iridescent (from the Latin iridis, meaning the rainbow)

MANAAKI WHENUA ONLINE INTERACTIVE KEY

Key to native orchids of New Zealand

NVS CODE

CORIRI

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 36

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | Not Threatened
2012 | Not Threatened
2009 | Not Threatened
2004 | Not Threatened
Jump to current conservation status

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Otago: 2025 | Regionally Not Threatened 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

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.

Molloy BPJ, Irwin JB. 1996. Two new species of *Corybas* (Orchidaceae) from New Zealand, and taxonomic notes on *C. rivularis* and *C. orbiculatus*. *New Zealand Journal of Botany 34(1)*: 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/0028825X.1996.10412686.

ATTRIBUTION

Description based on Molloy and Irwin (1996).

MORE INFORMATION

https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/corybas-iridescens/

PDF DATE

09 July 2026