Epilobium brunnescens subsp. brunnescens

COMMON NAMES
creeping willowherb

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

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

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Herbs - Dicotyledons other than Composites

FLOWER COLOURS
White

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Matted, creeping herb forming patches up to 2 m across. Stems light brown, with well-marked lines of strigillose hairs running down from margins of petioles, very rarely glabrous. Flowers arising individually from the leaf axils, the stems continuing to grow and root beyond the point where flowers are produced. Leaves opposite, firmly membranous; dull green often with a red or brown-tinge, bearing 0-1(-2) obscure laterial veins either side of midrib; lamina 1.5-13.0 × 1.5-12.0 mm ovate to broadly ovate, apex rounded to obtuse, base obtuse to truncate, entire, rarely with 1-2(-4) weakly developed teeth on each margin; petiole often absent, if present then 0.5-6.0(-7.0) mm long. Flowers usually drooping at anthesis (rarely erect). Ovaries green or coppery, 6-22 mm long; subglabrous or sparsely hairy, indumentum comprised of appressed eglandular or erect glandular or eglandular hairs; borne on a glabrous pedicle, 7-55(-80) mm long; flowers falling when pedicel elongation is complete. Sepals not keeled, 1.5-3.4(-4.0) × 0.9-1.2 mm, glabrous, occasionally bearing sparse, appressed eglandular or erect glandular or eglandular hairs. Petals white, (2.3)-3.2-7.0 × 1.8-5.0 mm, notch 0.9-1.4 mm deep. Anthers yellow, 0.4-0.75 × 0.3-0.6 mm, filaments of longer anthers 0.9-2.5 mm long, those of shorter 0.5-2.1 mm. Style white, 1.2-3.2 mm long; stigma white, clavate, 1.0-1.3(-2.55) × 0.6-0.9 mm, surrounded by anthers at anthesis. Capsule glabrate or sparsely hairy, indumentum of appressed eglandular or erect glandular or eglandular hairs running along lines of dehiscence, 12-60 mm long, borne on a glabrous pedicel (16-)35-80(-120) mm long. Seeds brown, 0.75-1.2 × 0.2-0.4 mm, obovoid, minutely papillose; coma 4-7 mm long, readily detaching or persistent.

Kaiwharawhara Stream, Wellington. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 08/01/2007, Licence: CC BY.

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SIMILAR TAXA
Epilobium brunnescens subsp. brunnescens is most likely to be confused with E. nerteroides with which it often grows, and E. nummlarifolium. Epilobium nerteroides is distinguished from E. brunnescens by its smaller and looser (less matted) growth habit; subglabrous stems, glabrous ovaries, and flowers which fall before pedicel elongation has completed. From Epilobium nummularifolium, E. brunnescens differs by the leaf shape (ovate to broadly ovate c.f. broadly ovate to oblate) and texture (firmly membranous to almost fleshy (so scarcely wilting when picked)), c.f membranous (wilting readily when picked)). In Epilobium brunnescens, the pedicel usually completes elongation before the flower drops off, whereas the flowers drop before pedicel elongation has completed in E. nummularifolium. The capsules of Epilobium brunnescens are glabrate to very sparsely hairy, whereas those of E. nummularifolium are copiously invested in grey-strigillose hairs. Finally Epilobium brunnescens subsp. minutiflorum though treated as a subspecies of E. brunnescens merits species rank. The two subspecies are often sympatric / syntopic, and are morphologically distinct from each other.

DISTRIBUTION
Endemic. New Zealand. North, South, Stewart, Chatham, Auckland, Campbell and Macquarie Islands. Naturalised in the British Isles and the Guernsey Islands.

HABITAT
Widespread in open ground, especially along the sides gravelly river beds and on damp rock faces. Uncommon in the northern North Island, and as a rule more common in montane areas of that island. A species preferring areas of high rainfall so less common in the eastern South Island.

GENUS
Epilobium

FAMILY
Onagraceae

AUTHORITY
Epilobium brunnescens (Cockayne) P.H.Raven et Engelhorn subsp. brunnescens

SYNONYMS
Epilobium pedunculare var. brunnescens Cockayne.

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
October - April

FRUITING
December - May

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Easily grown from seed and rooted pieces. Inclined to become weedy.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING
FACW: Facultative Wetland
Usually is a hydrophyte but occasionally found in uplands (non-wetlands).

ETYMOLOGY
epilobium: From the Greek epi- ‘upon’ and lobos ‘a pod’, the flowers appearing to be growing on the seed pod.
brunnescens: Pale brown

NVS CODE
EPIBRU

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
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
Raven, P.H.; Raven, T.E. 1976: The genus *Epilobium* in Australasia. New Zealand DSIR Bulletin 216. Wellington, Government Printer.

ATTRIBUTION
Fact sheet prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange (30 December 2019). Description adapted from Raven & Raven (1976).

MORE INFORMATION
https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/epilobium-brunnescens-subsp-brunnescens/

PDF DATE
25 May 2026