

Eryngium undulatum

COMMON NAMES

sea holly

BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: Sp, CI, DPS, DPT, RR, SO

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CATEGORY

Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Herbs - Dicotyledons other than Composites

SIMPLIFIED DESCRIPTION

Prostrate, stoloniferous / rhizomatous plant of mostly coastal areas forming grey-green to grey patches in low turf. Summer leaves lanceolate to ovate, margins prickly and undulating. Flowers in umbels on short stems, subtending bracts grey, flowers white.

FLOWER COLOURS

White

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Tufted perennial, with stolons or rhizomes, forming patches up to c. 30 cm in diameter. Basal leaves of 2 forms: winter leaves entire, fistular, septate; summer leaves lanceolate to ovate or spatulate, long-petiolate, deeply spinose-serrate and often undulate, c. 5–12 cm long; non-rosette leaves similar but reduced. Capitula solitary on short peduncles lateral to stolons or arising from rosette, 5–10 mm diam.; involucre bracts 6–9, triangular, mostly 5–7 mm long; bracteoles similar to bracts but smaller. Flowers many (± 15 –20), white, 1–3 mm diam.; calyx teeth c. 1 mm long. Fruits comprising the two mericarps, each up to 3 mm long, scaly; scales <0.5 mm long with blunt tips.

SIMILAR TAXA

The Australian endemic *Eryngium vesiculosum* is superficially similar but is a taller suberect to erect rather than prostrate plant, with blue rather than glaucous or grey-green involucre bracts that are 4–8.5 mm long rather than 10–16 mm long, and mericarps that are longer (4 mm c.f. 2(–3) mm long).

DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. New Zealand: North Island (Manawatu and eastern Wairarapa coastline south), South Island (mainly east of the main divide).

HABITAT

Mostly coastal. Growing on sandy beaches, coastal gravels, lower drainage areas of rivers, and exposed headlands. Occasionally inland in similar habitats.

GENUS

Eryngium

FAMILY

Apiaceae

AUTHORITY

Eryngium undulatum P.W.Michael & Peter G.Wilson



Pencarrow, Wellington Harbour. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 09/02/1992, Licence: CC BY.



Pencarrow, Wellington Harbour. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 09/02/1992, Licence: CC BY.

SYNONYMS

New Zealand plants had long been referred to the Australian endemic *Eryngium vesiculosum*.

TAXONOMIC NOTES

It has long been appreciated that New Zealand plants may be an unnamed, endemic species. Recently Michael & Wilson (2025) examined the relationship between Australian *Eryngium vesiculosum* and New Zealand plants and concluded that they were different species. The New Zealand plant they considered as a new unnamed endemic which they described as *E. undulatum* (Michael & Wilson 2025).

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL

Spiny mericarps are dispersed by attachment and wind (Thorsen et al., 2009).

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING

FAC: Facultative

Commonly occurs as either a hydrophyte or non-hydrophyte (non-wetlands).

PLANT OF THE MONTH

This plant has been featured as a Plant of the Month – see [Trilepidea: NZPCN newsletter for April 2010](#) for the full story.

ETYMOLOGY

eryngium: From the Greek eryngion, a type of spiny-leaved thistle resembling sea holly

NVS CODE

ERYVES

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 64

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | Threatened – Nationally Vulnerable | Qualifiers: DP, RR, SO, Sp

2012 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: DP, SO, Sp

2009 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: DP, SO, Sp

2004 | Gradual Decline

[Jump to current conservation status](#)

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Otago: 2025 | Regionally Threatened – Regionally Critical | Qualifiers: CI, NR, 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

Michael, P.W.; Wilson, P.G. 2025: *Eryngium undulatum*, a new name for the New Zealand plant long known as *E. vesiculosum*. *Telopea* 29: 83–89. <https://doi.org/10.7751/telopea20306>

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

Description from Michael & Wilson (2025).

MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/eryngium-undulatum/>

PDF DATE

09 July 2026