

Schoenus vacillans

BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

INTERIM CONSERVATION STATUS

2024 | Threatened – Nationally Critical | Qualifiers: DP | Interim | Shepherd, LD, Ford, M, & Perrie, LR. (2024)

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CATEGORY

Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Sedges

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Tufted perennial. Culms erect, flaccid, ± terete, striate, glabrous but sometimes scabrid distally on involucral bracts, 100–390 (– 500) mm long (inc. inflorescence), 0.4– 1.0 mm diameter, 2–4 (– 8) nodes. Leaves with blade 40–135 (– 200) mm long; sheath wine-red, striate, ± shining; mouth glabrous; ligule ± present or absent. Inflorescence of 4–6(– 8) nodes, 50–250 mm long, 40–73% of culm length; 1–8 spikelets per node, in diffuse clusters; proximal involucral bract 35–110 (– 160) mm long. Spikelets sessile or stalked singly, rarely in stalked sub-clusters of 2; (1? –) 2 (– 3?) flowered, 3.3–4.8 mm long. Glumes (4 –) 5–6, usually light to medium brown with hyaline margin, rarely dark red brown, and usually with prominent pale midvein that occasionally has a green centre; midvein usually scabrous. Fertile glumes 2.6–3.4 mm long. Hypogynous bristles 4–6, much shorter than nutlet. Stamens 3. Nutlets trigonous, obovoid to subglobose, 1.0– 1.4 mm long, 0.6–0.8 mm wide, 3-ribbed, reticulate-pitted, white, with prominent apical beak.

SIMILAR TAXA

Schoenus vacillans is easy to recognise, in the field, the culms of *Schoenus vacillans* seem to be a darker green and more flaccid than the lighter green and more erect culms of *S. apogon*.

The inflorescences of *S. vacillans* are diffuse, being comparatively long (more than 40% of the total culm length), with 4 to 6 nodes (rarely up to 8), and only up to 8 spikelets per node. Within an inflorescence node, the spikelets are sessile or singly stalked, and only rarely in stalked pairs. By contrast, *S. apogon* has shorter inflorescences (usually less than 32% of the total culm length), usually only 1 to 3 nodes, and up to 40 spikelets per node. The spikelets can be in stalked sub-clusters of up to 15. The spikelet clusters of at least the distal inflorescence nodes appear hemispherical, an appearance that is entirely lacking in *S. vacillans*.

The glumes of *Schoenus vacillans* are light to medium brown with hyaline margins, and usually with a prominent cream midvein (around the keel). In *S. apogon*, the glumes are usually dark red brown with hyaline margins.

The midvein area can be paler, and is occasionally narrowly cream, but then only proximally. At a distance, the inflorescence 'heads' of *S. apogon* usually appear much darker than those of *S. vacillans*.

Furthermore, the nutlets of *Schoenus vacillans* have a prominent apical beak that is short or absent in *S. apogon*. In *S. vacillans*, the hypogynous bristles are much shorter than the nut they surround, whereas they are similar in length or longer in *S. apogon*.



Waimā, Northland. Photographer: Marley Ford, Date taken: 10/05/2024, Licence: CC BY.



Waimā, Northland. Photographer: Marley Ford, Date taken: 10/05/2024, Licence: CC BY.

DISTRIBUTION

North Island: Northland (Taipa, Warawara, Waimā, Tutamoe), Auckland (Coromandel, Te Aroha), Taranaki (Whitecliffs), central North (Ruapehu, Ohakune).

HABITAT

Schoenus vacillans appears to prefer shady, often damp sites on the sides of gullies, creeks, and banks. Some records are from recently-disturbed sites such as old slips. In contrast to, *S. apogon* which occurs in open, grassland-like habitats including lawns and pasture, on banks or terraces at forest margins, and in gumland. Most collection sites are from mountain ranges (including the Kaimai Range, Coromandel Range, Tutamoe Range, Waima Forest and Warawara Forest), but a specimen from Taipa was collected at an elevation of only 50 m (AK 212198).

THREATS

Few of the records have been made within the last 30 years, and known populations are small. For example, a recent survey at Waima Forest by Marley Ford found 6 populations but most contained only 1–2 plants and the largest population, which was on a large slip, comprised only approximately 30 plants. The other five populations were found along tracks and smaller disturbed areas. Only a single site is known at present from the Coromandel Range, with some 40 plants in regenerating forest along an eroding 40 m stretch of a popular walking track. The apparent preference of *S. vacillans* for regenerating slip sites may complicate its in situ conservation, with existing plants at risk from further slips or from the loss of habitat with regeneration and succession. With fewer than 250 mature plants currently known, *Schoenus vacillans* meets the criteria of Nationally Critical, albeit with the qualifier Data Poor (de Lange et al. 2018). It is likely that further populations of *S. vacillans* exist in remote, difficult to access areas, such as the steep gullies of the Coromandel and Kaimai Ranges. We hope that our reinstatement of *S. vacillans* as a distinct species prompts searches for previously recorded populations as well as new populations

GENUS

Schoenus

FAMILY

Cyperaceae

AUTHORITY

Schoenus vacillans Kirk

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

ETYMOLOGY

schoenus: Rush

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | Not Evaluated

[Jump to current conservation status](#)

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

de Lange PJ, Rolfe JR, Barkla JW, Courtney SP, Champion PD, Perrie LR, Beadel SM, Ford KA, Breitwieser I, Schönberger I, et al. 2018. Conservation status of New Zealand indigenous plants, 2017. New Zealand Threat Classification Series 22. Wellington: Department of Conservation.

Shepherd, LD, Ford, M, & Perrie, LR. 2024. Genetic and morphological analyses support the reinstatement of *Schoenus vacillans* (Cyperaceae) as distinct from *S. apogon*. *New Zealand Journal of Botany*, 1-16.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet prepared by Marley Ford (24 August 2024). Brief description, Distribution, Habitat, Features, and Similar taxa sections copied and adapted from Shepherd et al. (2024).

NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION

Please cite as: Ford, M. (Year at time of access): *Schoenus vacillans* Fact Sheet (content continuously updated). New Zealand Plant Conservation Network. <https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/schoenus-vacillans/> (Date website was queried)

MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/schoenus-vacillans/>

PDF DATE

06 June 2026