

# Pterostylis tristis

## BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

## CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: Sp, DPR, DPS, DPT

[Jump to previous conservation statuses](#)

## CATEGORY

Vascular

## STRUCTURAL CLASS

Orchids

## FLOWER COLOURS

Brown, Green

## DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Diminutive orchid mainly of short tussock grassland. Plants rather stout, 20–100 mm tall when flowering. **Stem** more or less hidden by conspicuous leafy bracts. **Rosette leaves** fleshy to fleshy-coriaceous, numerous, these 5–15 × 3–10 mm; brown-green, dark to yellow-green, somewhat glaucous, rhombic, more or less alveolate, lamina tapering into a broadly winged petiole. **Cauline leaves** similar but smaller and sheathing. **Inflorescence** a raceme of 1–6–(8) flowers, each partially enclosed within a sheathing floral bract; perianth green, greenish to brownish-green with pale stripes. **Dorsal sepal** 5–10 mm, broad, apiculate; lateral sepals slightly shorter, almost completely fused into a flat, apically bidentate lamina, this strongly deflexed in fully opened flowers. **Petals** shorter than dorsal sepal, the anterior minutely (but distinctly) denticulate. **Labellum**, short and squat, broadly obtuse, extended backwards into a smoothly rounded appendage with a low, somewhat thickened median ridge. **Column** short and broad; wings broader than long, ciliate over most of the free margins; stigma broadly ovate.

## SIMILAR TAXA

Could only be confused with the South Island endemic *Pterostylis tanypoda*, from which it differs in its darker, often brownish-green rather than glaucous foliage, and its usually brownish-green rather than uniformly green flowers whose labellum base possesses a backward (reflexed) or decurved appendage, rather than a prominent forward-pointing knob.

## DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. New Zealand: North Island (scarce being known from a few old gatherings made between the Rangipo Desert and Hawke's Bay), South Island (east of the main ranges from North Canterbury south), Stewart Island/Rakiura (known from one old record).

## HABITAT

Lowland to subalpine (confined to upper montane to subalpine in the North Island). A species of open ground, usually in short tussock grassland within intermontane basins, along river flats and terraces, and also in open ground within grey scrub. It may also grow within mainly exotic pastures and along roadside verges, in loose gravel or shingle, or within sparsely vegetated gaps amongst boulders.



Photographer: Melissa Hutchison, Date taken: 18/10/2014, Licence: CC BY-NC.



Growing in montane grassland, Taringatura Hills, Southland. Photographer: Jesse Bythell, Date taken: 11/12/2014, Licence: CC BY-NC.

## THREATS

An easily overlooked orchid of mainly short tussock grasslands. Herbarium data suggests that it is naturally uncommon and biologically sparse. However, it is very easily overlooked. Plants have been found growing in pastures dominated by exotic grasses and also along roadside verges. In the North Island it needs to be surveyed for, as it the areas in which it was recorded retain plenty of suitable habitat and the species is probably still there. Over all the exact conservation status of this species requires a more critical field survey.

## GENUS

*Pterostylis*

## FAMILY

Orchidaceae

## AUTHORITY

*Pterostylis tristis* Colenso

## SYNONYMS

*Hymenochilus tristis* (Colenso) D.L.Jones, M.A.Clem. et Molloy

## TAXONOMIC NOTES

Jane *et al.* (2010) following an rDNA (ITS)-based analysis of the segregate genera erected for *Pterostylis* R.Br. by Szlachek *et al.* (2001) and Jones *et al.* (2002) found no support to continue their recognition. This view is followed here.

## ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

## ENDEMIC GENUS

No

## ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

## FLOWERING

September–January

## FRUITING

October–April

## LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL

Minute seeds are wind dispersed (Thorsen *et al.*, 2009).

## PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

Difficult—should not be removed from the wild.

## ETYMOLOGY

**pterostylis**: Winged column

## MANAAKI WHENUA ONLINE INTERACTIVE KEY

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

## NVS CODE

PTETRI

## CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 52

## PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: DP, EF, Sp

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

2009 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: DP, EF

2004 | Sparse

[Jump to current conservation status](#)

## REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Otago: 2025 | Regionally Threatened – Regionally Vulnerable | Qualifiers: DPS, DPT, PF, Sp 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

- Colenso W. 1886. A description of some newly-discovered and rare Indigenous plants: being a further contribution towards the making known the Botany of New Zealand. *Transactions and Proceedings of the New Zealand Institute* 18: 256–287.
- Janes JK, Dorothy AS, Vaillancourt RE, Duretto MF. 2010. A new classification for subtribe Pterostylidinae (Orchidaceae), reaffirming *Pterostylis* in the broad sense. *Australian Systematic Botany* 23: 260–269. <https://doi.org/10.1071/SB09052>.
- Jones DL, Molloy BPJ, Clements MA. 1997. Six new species of *Pterostylis* R.Br. (Orchidaceae) from New Zealand. *The Orchadian* 12(6): 266-281.
- Jones DL, Clements MA, Molloy BPJ. 2002. A Synopsis of the Subtribe *Pterostylidinae*. *Australian Orchid Research* 4: 129–146.
- Moore LB, Edgar E. 1970. Flora of New Zealand, Volume II. Indigenous Tracheophyta: Monocotyledones except Gramineae. Government Printer, Wellington, NZ. 354 p.
- 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>.
- Szlachekto, D.L. 2001: Genera et Species Orchidalium 1. *Polish Botanical Journal* 46(1): 11–26.

## ATTRIBUTION

Fact Sheet prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange (14 April 2007). Description based on Moore & Edgar (1970) (as *Pterostylis mutica*) and Colenso (1886) (as *P. tristis*).  
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## NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION

Please cite as: de Lange, P.J. (Year at time of access): *Pterostylis tristis* Fact Sheet (content continuously updated). New Zealand Plant Conservation Network. <https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/pterostylis-tristis/> (Date website was queried)

## MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/pterostylis-tristis/>

## PDF DATE

25 May 2026