Eryngium undulatum

COMMON NAMES
sea holly

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2023 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: Sp, CI, DPS, DPT, RR, SO
Jump to previous conservation statuses

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.

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

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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 spathulate, 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.; involucral 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 involucral 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

SYNONYMS
New Zealand plants had long been refereed 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

13 July 2026