Eleocharis sphacelata

COMMON NAMES
kutakuta, spikes of doom, bamboo spike sedge, tall spike sedge

BIOSTATUS
Native

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

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Sedges

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Rhizome 10–15 mm diameter, stout and lignaceous, creeping. **Culms** 0.3–1.2 m long, 4–12 mm diameter, usually close-packed, linear with obvious internal transverse septa set at regular intervals of 10–100 mm, apices blunted-ended unless fertile. **Basal sheaths** grey. chartaceous with an oblique orifice. **Roots** 2 mm diameter, red-brown, in a group of up to 5 from the base of each culm. **Spikelet** 20–70 × 5–10 mm, cylindrical with an acute apex. **Glumes**: lowest glume sterile, almost completely surrounding base of spikelet, very short; upper glumes numerous, imbricate, 6–8 mm long, obovate-oblong, obtuse, not keeled but with a strong median nerve and numerous fine lateral nerves. **Hypogynous bristles** 6–10, usually greater than nut, with rather large, sparse, retrorse teeth. **Stamens** 3. **Style** 3-fid, occasionally stigmas 2, or all connate to the apex. **Nut** 2.0–2.5 mm long (excluding persistent style-base), orbicular, biconvex, the surface covered with hexagonal reticulations, pale brown, surmounted by the persistent, dark brown, conic, swollen base of the style.

SIMILAR TAXA
None. Easily distinguished from other species of *Eleocharis* by the much large soft, hollow, transversely septate culms. Could be confused with sterile specimens of *Machaerina articulata* but that species has much longer (up to 2 m), dark green to almost brown green, rigidly firm culms with acute rather than blunt-ended apices.

DISTRIBUTION
Indigenous

HABITAT
Coastal to lower montane (but mainly in lowland areas). Preferring sunny situations where it usually grows in still deep water such as along lake and pond margins often amongst raupō (*Typha orientalis* C.B.Presl), *Machaerina articulata* (R.Br.) Koyama. Rarely bordering slowly flowing streams and rivers, or in burn pools and damp depressions within peat bogs.

GENUS
Eleocharis

FAMILY
Cyperaceae

Eleocharis sphacelata. Photographer: Wayne Bennett, Licence: CC BY-NC.

AUTHORITY
Eleocharis sphacelata R.Br.

SYNONYMS
None

ENDEMIC TAXON
No

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
August–December

FRUITING
November–May

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL
Bristly nuts are dispersed by water and possibly wind and attachment (Thorsen et al., 2009).

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Can be tricky. Fresh seed germinates best if allowed to float on water overlying potting mix, gradually reduce the water level so that the germinating plants can naturally “float” on to the underlying soil. Plants do best if their rootstock is submerged.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING
OBL: Obligate Wetland
Almost always is a hydrophyte, rarely in uplands (non-wetlands).

CULTURAL USE/IMPORTANCE
The long culms, when dried, were sometimes used by Māori for tukutuku panels.

ETYMOLOGY
eleocharis: Charm of the swamp
sphacelata: Diseased (appearance of the spike)

NVS CODE
ELESPH

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 100

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES
2017 | Not Threatened | Qualifiers: SO
2012 | Not Threatened
2009 | Not Threatened
2004 | Not Threatened
Jump to current conservation status

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Auckland: 2025 | Regionally Not Threatened | Qualifiers: DPS, DPT Help
The regional threat classification system leverages off the national assessments in the NZTCS, providing information relevant for the regional context. Auckland conservation status information is sourced from the "Conservation status of vascular plant species in Tāmaki Makaurau / Auckland" Simpkins E et al. (2025) report.
Otago: 2025 | Regionally Threatened – Regionally Vulnerable | Qualifiers: DPS, DPT, 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

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.

ATTRIBUTION

Description adapted from Moore and Edgar (1970)
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MORE INFORMATION

https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/eleocharis-sphacelata/

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