



Cook's Scurvy Grass (nau)

Lepidium oleraceum

Cook's scurvy grass was once widespread around the coasts of New Zealand. However, today it is mainly found only on offshore islands. Few plant species in New Zealand have declined as dramatically as this one. Find out more about this fascinating herb.

Quick Facts

Not a grass at all, but a fleshy leaved herb.

Belongs to same plant family as cabbages, cauliflowers and broccoli.

Captain Cook gathered great quantities of this plant to use a vegetable for his crew.

What does it look like?

Cook's scurvy grass is a fleshy-leaved herb that grows up to 50 cm tall, forming a small bush. Stems have many branches and tend to be woody at the base.

Leaves: Bright green, oval, with toothed (jagged) edges.

Flowers: Small, white and arranged in clusters along branchlets or at tip.



Where does it grow?

Was once widespread along rocky parts of the New Zealand coast. It prefers fertile soils on coastal slopes of tussockland, shrubland, gravel beaches and rocky shorelines. It is often found amongst the nesting and roosting sites of sea birds and seal colonies.

Today, Cook's scurvy grass is mainly confined to offshore island sites. These islands stretch from the Kermadec Islands north of the North Island, to the subantarctic islands south of the South Island. Remaining mainland populations can only be found at two North Island sites and some locations on the south-east coast of the South Island.



Cook's scurvy grass in Southland

In the Southland Conservancy there are several hundred plants growing in 17 different sites. Sites include the islands of Foveaux Strait and around Stewart Island, to the Antipodes and Auckland Islands. It has never been found on the Fiordland Coast.

There are at least three different forms of Cook's scurvy grass in Southland, which are likely to be classified as separate species in the future:

1. True Cook's scurvy grass is found on the northern Muttonbird Islands and through much of NZ in small, local populations.
2. The second form is found on the southern Muttonbird Islands and Snares Islands.
3. The third form is found on Antipodes Island (and Chatham Island).



Link with Captain Cook

When Captain Cook visited New Zealand in the 1700s he collected what's now called Cook's scurvy grass by the dinghy load. It was collected from all around the coast of New Zealand during their travels and used as a vegetable. The vitamin C found in its leaves proved to be a valuable remedy for the disease scurvy – caused by a lack of vitamin C in the diet.

Why is it threatened?

Few species have declined as dramatically as Cook's scurvy grass. It faces many threats, including:

- Browsing animals, including domestic stock, deer, possums, rabbits and invertebrates.
- Insects and diseases that affect the cabbage family, including downy mildew, cabbage white butterfly, cabbage aphids, leaf miners, slugs and snails.
- Loss of sea bird and seal colonies from our coasts.

There is a strong association between sea bird colonies and Cook's scurvy grass. These animals would have disturbed the soil (making seed germination easier), kept weeds down, helped disperse seeds and brought in nutrients. New Zealand's sea birds have declined dramatically since human settlement and the introduction of predators such as stoats and rats.

What's being done?

A recovery plan has been written covering New Zealand's 'coastal cress' species, including Cook's scurvy grass. The goal of the plan is *"to ensure that viable populations of all extant (wild) coastal cress species are restored and self-sustaining in the wild throughout the natural range of these species"*.

In Southland, priority is to be given to confirming sites where Cook's scurvy grass can be found, and determining the health of these populations. It's also important to establish ex-situ (off-site) populations as an insurance against populations in the wild becoming locally extinct. Cook's scurvy grass is currently growing in the Southland Threatened Plant Garden.

Find out more

Visit the Southland Threatened Plant Garden to find out more about Cook's scurvy grass and other threatened plants in Southland.

Garden is open by prior arrangement:
Phone 213 1161