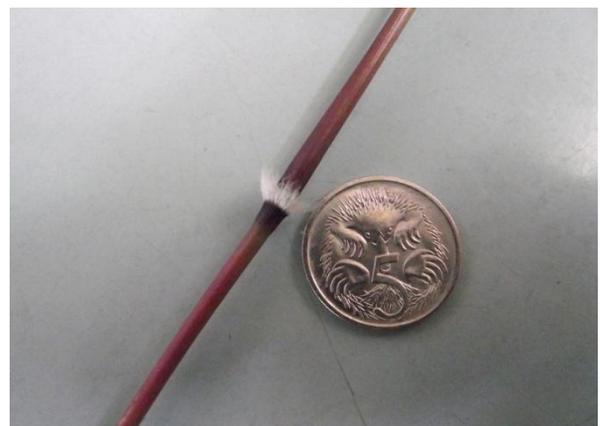


Sorghum leiocladum: a stunning grass

To find a population of the grass *Sorghum leiocladum* within our coastal region, a person would have to be very lucky or very knowledgeable. Once an important component of native grasslands, its occurrence has been significantly depleted by grazing stock, pasture improvement and land clearing. Today it occurs mainly on the remnant woodland verges of little-used roads, often accompanied by *Themeda australis* (Kangaroo Grass); once these back roads are improved and/or widened, it will mean that this beautiful grass species will almost certainly disappear from public access lands, and probably from privately owned farmlands and pastures as well.



Commonly called Wild Sorghum, this grass belongs to the same genus as the cultivated grain crop Sorghum. Wild Sorghum is a tufted warm season perennial (it has its main growing and flowering periods in the warmer months) with flowering stems to one metre high. A unique and charming feature is the row of white hairs to 0.5mm long around each node of the flowering stem, exactly like an upside down ballerina's tutu.



The spikelets – that is, the flowering parts that contain anthers and styles, and therefore the subsequent grain – are on branches in a loose spiral around the top of the stem. The spikelets are a stunning bronze colour that gleams and shines in sunlight; this colour is a dead giveaway to the presence of the grass.

Sorghum leiocladum was first named *Andropogon australis* subspecies *leiocladus* by an Austrian botanist named Eduard Hackel in 1889. The next name was *Sarga leioclada*, bestowed by an American botanist R. E. Sprangler. However, an early 20th century botanist, Charles Edward Hubbard, eventually placed it in the genus *Sorghum*, retaining the species name *leiocladum*, and that is where it remains today. The generic name *Sorghum* was taken from the Northern Hemisphere grass of the same name (the derivation is obscure); *leiocladum* is a combination of two Greek words – *leio* meaning smooth, and *clados*, meaning a growing shoot – referring to the smooth stems.

Wild Sorghum has enjoyed a good growing and flowering season this spring, but all known sites are on road verges and thus in danger of being bulldozed in the name of road ‘improvements’. An old population near the Moruya cemetery has expanded, another site was recently noticed along Dwyers Creek Road, again in Moruya, and a third near the cattle yards on the Congo Road just after it leaves the Princes Highway at Bergalia. I hope that there are other sites just waiting to be discovered.

The tufts and the grain are only of moderate quality for grazing stock. Young growth is palatable, but deteriorates at maturity, while mature plants have hard stems high in silica. However, because the storage organs and growing points are located above ground, it is readily overgrazed in a native pasture. Nevertheless, Wild Sorghum is part of the biodiversity of our temperate grasslands, and as such should be cherished. We grass people admire it for its beauty.

Jenny Liney