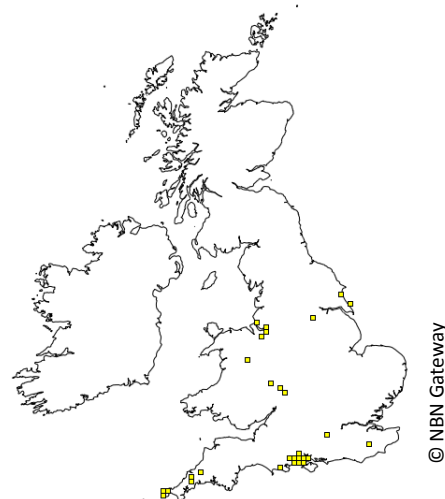


## Coral Necklace - *Illecebrum verticillatum*

### Current Status

Coral Necklace is a rare flowering plant which is restricted to a few sites in southern and south-west England and borders of Wales (Figure 1). It is a beautiful and unmistakable species with long trailing red stems and clusters of white flowers resembling beads threaded along a necklace. With the loss of heathland in the last century and a decline in grazing management, Coral Necklace has undergone a major decline across its range. However, the species is still locally abundant in the New Forest and on Bodmin Moor, and has recently colonised the Dorset, Wealden and Thames Basin heaths. This suggests that habitat creation and the instigation of appropriate management could significantly benefit Coral Necklace and extend its range further.



**Figure 1.** Current distribution of Coral Necklace in the UK.

### Habitat Requirements

Coral Necklace can be found in a range of different heathland habitats, though three factors seem to be key to its survival:

- Winter wet habitats, such as temporary ponds and seasonally flooded depressions in track ways,
- Very short and/or open vegetation created by grazing animals,
- Mildly acid substrate on sandy soils - often where a thin layer of mud has collected to locally impede the drainage.

Coral Necklace is most frequently found in seasonally-flooded hollows and pools in heathland and heath grasslands; and in seasonally-flooded track ways across heathlands or within conifer plantations on previously heathland sites.

Ideally, Coral Necklace needs heavy levels of disturbance from grazing animals, such that occurs on the edges of temporary ponds, at pinch points created through heather or gorse, or along trackways. However, the site as a whole will experience extensive grazing (i.e. grazing over a large area with moderate to low numbers of animals).



**Figure 2.** Coral Necklace habitat in summer (top) when flowering plants are present and winter (bottom) showing seasonal inundation and heavy poaching.

### Threats

- **Loss of grazing** - in the UK there has been a significant post war reduction in land used for extensive low level grazing (i.e. common land). Understanding and support for traditional, small farming economies is essential for species like Coral Necklace.
- **Land use changes** - particularly urban encroachment and intensification of agriculture, has resulted in the loss of semi-natural habitat, habitat fragmentation and isolation and deterioration of habitat quality.
- **Pollution** - agricultural and urban run-off has led to declines in freshwater quality, resulting in nutrient enrichment, and the loss of species adapted to low nutrient environments.
- **Changes to hydrology and a 'tidying-up' of the countryside** - both manmade and through climate change which has resulted in the loss of seasonally fluctuating ponds and trackway pools.
- **Invasive species** - Such as New Zealand Pigmyweed *Crassula helmsii*, which occupies and outcompetes sensitive plants like Coral Necklace.

# Coral Necklace - *Illecebrum verticillatum*

## Identification



### Key Features:

- Creeping plant
- Hairless, thread-like, red stems
- Tiny oval grey-green leaves (2-6mm long) in pairs
- Whorl like clusters of tiny white flowers (2-3mm long) 5 small petals and 5 stamens
- 8-12 flowers per whorl
- Flowers have 5 thick corky white sepals (the outermost leaves that surround the petals of a flower)

Tiny white flowers



Small oval leaves

Thin red stems

## Species you might find in the same habitat ...

**Water Purslane** - This creeping plant also has a reddish stem. The flowers of Water Purslane are smaller than that of Coral Necklace (only 1mm) and its leaves are larger (10mm).

**Knotgrass** - Like Coral Necklace, Knotgrass grows along the ground and has white flowers which occur along the stem. However, Knotgrass has green stems and its leaves are larger.



Water Purslane growing alongside Coral Necklace.



Knotgrass growing alongside Coral Necklace.