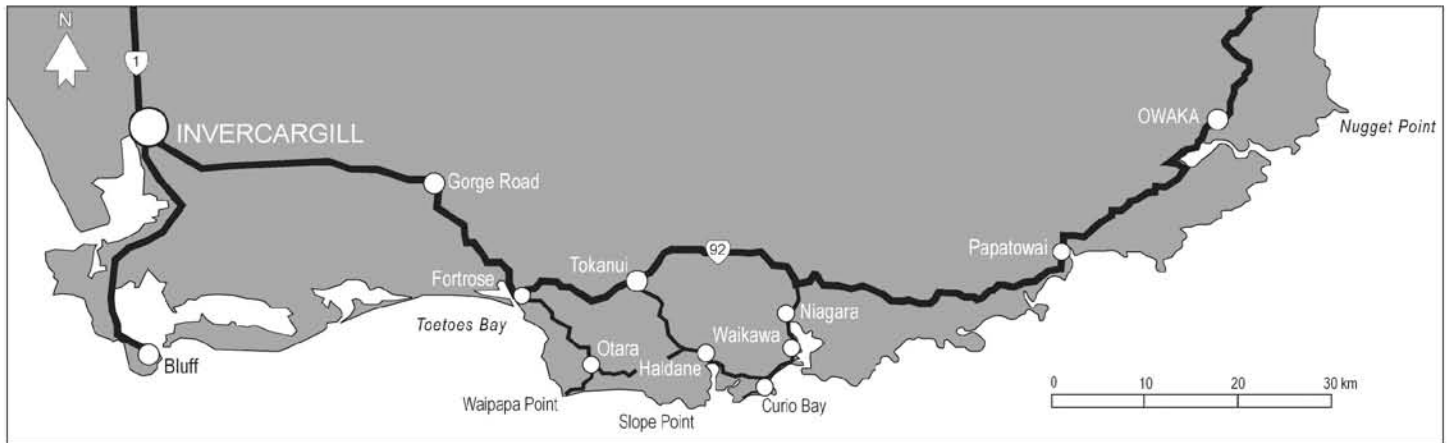


Curio Bay/Porpoise Bay



Curio Bay and Porpoise Bay/Te whanaga aihe are situated on the Catlins coast, about 88 kilometres south-east of Invercargill and seven kilometres south of Waikawa. Curio Bay is signposted from the Southern Scenic Route, which follows State Highway 92 through the Catlins from Invercargill to Balclutha. Visitors can either travel via Otara with the option of stopping at Waipapa Point or the more direct route through Tokanui and Waikawa. Much of the road between Otara and Curio Bay is unsealed.

History

The whole of the Catlins was an important area for Maori. Forest birds, cabbage tree sugar, fish, cockles, pipis, eels and lamprey (which were caught on the first full moon in spring), were important food sources. Waikawa harbour was a seasonal campsite.

The first Europeans in the area were sealers and whalers. A short-lived whaling station was established just inside Waikawa Harbour entrance in 1838. It was abandoned by 1844.

Waikawa developed as a timber port in the 1880s and in 1889 had a pub, a couple of stores and a blacksmiths shop. The main communication with the outside was by coastal steamer which shipped timber to Dunedin.

Today the main activities in the area are based around a small fishing fleet at Waikawa, farming and tourism.

Hector's Dolphins/Papakanua

Visitors to Curio Bay during the summer and autumn can sometimes see Hector's dolphins/Papakanua playing in the surf.

The Hector's dolphin is one of the smallest and rarest marine dolphins in the world with a population of just over 7000. These dolphins are found only in NZ inshore waters; mainly around the South Island, particularly Te Waewae Bay, West Coast and Banks Peninsula.

Hector's dolphins feed close to shore, favouring shallow, often discoloured water to catch mullet, arrowsquid, red cod, stargazers and crabs. Over winter they remain in the same general area but further off shore, usually within eight kilometres.

They live to about 20 years, with females giving birth to a single calf every two or three years, from about the age of seven to nine years. At most they will produce four or five calves in a lifetime.

The greatest threat to the species is gillnets in which the dolphins can be caught and drowned. Their low reproductive rate is insufficient to compensate for such losses.

Porpoise Bay is unique in that it is the only place where dolphins come so close to the shore without being enticed by people feeding them. The Porpoise Bay population

Below – Hector's dolphin.
Right – Yellow-eyed penguin. Photos: DOC



is small, consisting of fewer than 20 resident animals. They use the bay to raise their young, feed and rest. If this small group is to survive we must not disturb them. Do not feed the dolphins. When swimming or kayaking do not approach them - they will come to you if they want to. Always enter the water at least 50 metres away from any dolphin. They have sensitive skin so don't touch them.

Yellow-eyed Penguins/Hoiho

Lucky visitors may see yellow-eyed penguins/hoiho that nest in the area around Curio Bay/Waikawa. They are one of the rarest penguins in the world with an estimated total population in New Zealand of between 6000 and 7000. The population has declined because of the clearance of coastal forest in which the penguins nest and introduced predators such as stoats, ferrets and dogs. Stock may also sometimes disturb their nests.

Eggs are laid in September/October and both parents incubate and help rear chicks. Birds usually leave the nest for the sea in the morning, returning late afternoon or early evening.

The penguins moult between February and April when they are particularly vulnerable to disturbance.

Yellow-eyed penguins are very timid birds and will either leave the area or 'freeze' at the sight of people.

Please give them space, do not give chase or follow them or get between them and their destination.

New Zealand Fur Seals and Sealions

New Zealand fur seals and sealions regularly haul themselves out of the water along the Catlins coastline. Both species spend considerable time ashore with seals usually found on rocky shorelines and sealions on sandy beaches.

The NZ fur seal was hunted early last century for skins until no colonies were left on the mainland. The population is now estimated to be around 50,000 - a quarter of the original population.

Adult fur seals sometimes leave small pups on the beach while they are away fishing. The pups should not be disturbed.

Sealions may be very aggressive during December - February which is their breeding season. For safety keep at least 30 metres away from them.

Dogs and people are seen as a threat by seals and sealions, particularly if their escape route to the sea appears to be blocked. Although they may look placid they are powerful, wild predators that can move quickly and can be very dangerous if they are approached. All dogs should be kept on a lead and well away from seals and sealions.

Other Wildlife

Blue penguins nest in burrows around Porpoise Bay, while Stewart Island shags can be seen on rock stacks below the headland and muttonbirds/titi in groups off shore. White-fronted terns can also be seen around the bays.

Fossil Forest

The fossilised remains of an ancient forest is exposed at Curio Bay during low tide. This is one of the most extensive and least disturbed examples of a Jurassic fossil forest in the world and stretches about 20kms from Curio Bay south west to Slope Point.

180 million years ago the Curio Bay area was a broad forested coastal floodplain. During this time, (known as the middle Jurassic period), New Zealand was part of the eastern margin of the ancient super-continent known as Gondwana. North of Curio Bay, most of future New Zealand was beneath the sea.

The forest predominantly consisted of trees forming a low canopy over an undergrowth dominated by ferns.

Massive sheet floods of volcanic debris, perhaps triggered by heavy rain on a barren volcanic mountain, are believed to have destroyed the forest. The forest eventually grew back only to again be flooded by volcanic debris. This happened at least four times over a period of about 20 000 years. The sequence of events is clearly recorded by distinct bands of fossilised tree stumps and wood exposed today in the cliff face.

In the millions of years, since the sediments were buried deeply and impregnated over time with silica minerals, eventually turning the wood to rock. In some places fern fronds and leaves have been preserved as fossils within the mudstone rocks.

About 100 million years ago New Zealand split away from Gondwana and slowly drifted north.

Over the last 10,000 years New Zealand's current coast line has been formed and the sea has eroded away the layers of sandstone and clays - exposing tree stumps and logs.

This internationally important site can be explored at low tide. Souvenir hunters have removed some of these rare fossils over the years and this practice is discouraged. **Leave the fossil forest undisturbed for others to enjoy. Dogs are not permitted on the fossil forest.**

A viewing platform and information panel has been provided overlooking the fossil forest.

Visitor Information

A sheltered campsite with toilets, showers and a store is situated on South Head, the headland separating Curio Bay from Porpoise Bay.

Porpoise Bay with its beautiful sandy beach is popular for swimming and surfing.

Note: It is an offence to disturb or harass any native wildlife.

DOC HOTline
0800 362 468
Report any safety hazards or
conservation emergencies
For fire and search and rescue call 111



Sealion. Photo: DOC