

## Dreamland of mountains, glaciers, river valleys and alpine lakes

Mount Aspiring National Park straddles the southern end of the Southern Alps, of which the mountainous and glaciated heart is largely unspoilt wilderness. Wild landscapes survive within the flora and fauna of ancient Gondwanaland. The landmark peak from which the park derives its name was known to Māori as Tititea (glistening peak) hundreds of years before the arrival of Europeans, who named it Mount Aspiring in 1857. Comparable to Switzerland's Matterhorn, it was carved into a four-sided pyramid by ancient glaciers. Close to Wanaka and Queenstown, Mount Aspiring is the least developed and third largest of New Zealand's 14 national parks. Activities like tramping and climbing predominate, although fishing, hunting, kayaking and short walks are also popular.



Diverse contrast featuring Mt Aspiring

Photo: Y Sprey

## Getting there

Three settlements act as a gateway: Wanaka (117km from Queenstown via State Highway 6), Makarora (Haast Highway State Highway 6), and Glenorchy (68km north of Queenstown on the Queenstown-Glenorchy Road). Wanaka and Queenstown have airports with daily services from the main cities.

## Things to see - variety of natural highlights

*The touch of wet moss or riverbed shingle underfoot, the feel of a mountain breeze on a sweaty brow, the scent of wild flowers in the air, the carrying sound of a waterfall and the wild cry of a high-flying falcon.*

The park is renowned for its amazing diversity - mountains, alpine lakes, river valleys, waterfalls, glaciers, beech and podocarp rain forests, all accompanied by birdsong and the chance to see endangered flightless birds or rare native fish. Above the tree line, subalpine gardens of tussock, lichens and dainty flowering herbs survive against all odds. The mountainous and glaciated heart of the park is unspoilt and truly a wilderness. Special features include a glaciated schist landscape, extensive wilderness areas, the distinctive ultramafic rocks of the Red Hills Range, the horn of Mount Aspiring and the remnant ice sheets of the Olivine Ice Plateau. Mount Aspiring/Tititea is the highest mountain in the Park at 3033m. It rises 700m above the park's largest glaciers, the Bonar, Therma and Volta - three of over 100 glaciers in the region. Nearly all the landforms in the park have been influenced by intense glaciation. The Dart Glacier is the most studied in the park, but is retreating at a rate of about 50m a year.



Rob Roy Glacier

Photo: DOC

## Things to do – discover wilderness

Activities range from jetboat and aircraft scenic rides to extreme ice climbing. With over twenty huts in the park, it's possible to walk from one valley to another over spectacular mountain passes such as Rees Saddle linking the Rees/Dart, Gillespie Pass linking the Young/Wilkin, Harris Saddle on the Routeburn, and Cascade Saddle between the West Matukituki/Dart. Scrutinise Rob Roy glacier within 3-4 hours walk from the Raspberry Creek carpark, or wander from Dart Hut for the day along the lateral moraines of the Dart Glacier above 1500m.

Cherish the sounds of nature by taking a stroll through the rainforest flanking the Haast Pass/Tioripātea Highway (SH6). The highway offers easy access to river flats, gorges, waterfalls, towering peaks, and forest. It passes through 60km of the northern end of the park, and signs explain attractions along the way. Department of Conservation (DOC) Visitor Centres at Wanaka, Makarora, Haast and Queenstown provide up-to-date information on what to see and do along the road, along with displays on the region's natural and historic features. Several unsealed roads end short of the park boundary.

Besides driving in and around the park and exploring on foot, visitors can enjoy much of the park from water and air, by jetboat, plane or helicopter. **Jetboats** operate regularly on the Dart, Makarora, Matukituki and Wilkin Rivers and may be hired for trips on other rivers such as the Haast. Aerial sightseeing by **helicopter** or **fixed-wing plane** is available from Haast, Makarora, Wanaka, Queenstown and Glenorchy. **Guided expeditions** into the park include **tramping, mountaineering, hunting, fishing, canoeing, rafting** and **ski touring**.



Enjoy your journey  
Photo: J Kenney

## Longer walks

**Bridle Track, Haast Pass/Tioripātea Highway** A well graded (1.5 hours/4 km each way) walk through montane silver beech rainforest, following the original packhorse track, the first link between Otago and Westland.

**Rob Roy Valley, West Matukituki** The valley is a good entry point to an area of spectacular alpine scenery, snowfields, glaciers, sheer rock cliffs and waterfalls. A popular half-day (3-4 hours/10 km return) walk from Raspberry Creek carpark crosses the West Matukituki River via a swing bridge, climbs through a small gorge into beech/tawhai forest, then into subalpine herb fields which offer spectacular views of Rob Roy Glacier perched above sheer valley walls.

**Routeburn Flats, Routeburn Valley, Glenorchy** Walk the first leg of the famous Routeburn track. From the carpark at the Routeburn shelter cross the swing bridge to the well-formed, easy graded track (2 hours/6.5 km each way) through red/mountain/silver beech forest alongside a gorge to grassy river flats. Past Sugarloaf Stream the track is a remnant of the old bridle path built in the 1870s and climbs directly to Bridal Veil Stream.



Blue Pools

Photo: DOC

## Culture and history



Dart River Māori encampment about 400 years ago

Māori were here first, searching for food and pouāmu (greenstone). Greenstone trails along mountain passes are still in use today such as Haast Pass/Tioripātea on State Highway 6 (the major road between Wanaka and Haast). Mt Aspiring National Park is included in the Te Wāhīpounamu South West New Zealand World Heritage Area - a global concept that identifies natural and cultural sites of world significance ... places so special that protecting them concerns all people.

The concept of Tōpuni comes from the traditional Ngāi Tahu custom of rangatira (chiefs) extending their mana (power and authority) over areas or people by placing their cloak over them. It is an enduring symbol of the tribes' commitment to conserving areas of high natural and historic values, as well as ensuring an active role for Ngāi Tahu in the management of these areas. Tōpuni protect three peaks in the park. Tititea/Mount Aspiring (the highest peak in the park) plays an important role in many of Ngāi Tahu's stories and legends. The second highest peak in the park, Pikirakatahi/Mt Earnslaw, stands as guardian over the pouāmu resource and marks the end of a trail, with the tohu (marker) to the pouāmu resource sitting opposite on Te Korokā/Cosmos Peak. When viewed from the right vantage point, Te Korokā/Cosmos Peak resembles a reclining giant, with the pouāmu exiting the mountain from the mouth of the giant. Captain Cook's men were informed, while moored in Dusky Sound, of the giant in the interior that emits pouāmu from his mouth. Staging camps for the retrieval of pouāmu were located at the base of the mountain. Pouāmu transported back to coastal settlements was fashioned into tools, ornaments and weapons.

## Tramps

**Routeburn Track – Great Walk** (3 days/32 km). NZ's most popular transalpine track, well-graded and well-marked, linking the Hollyford and Routeburn Valleys via Harris Saddle (1,255m). The Great Walks are DOC's premier walking tracks, through some of the best scenery in the country. Huts and tracks are of a higher standard than other tramping tracks and the Routeburn Track has a hut booking system.

**Rees-Dart Track** (4-5 days/62 km). A loop track through the Rees and Dart River valleys. Rees Saddle is the highest point at 1,447m. A side trip to the Dart Glacier is recommended. Spectacular mountain scenery, forest and alpine vegetation, rivers and the Dart Glacier are all significant features of the track.

**Cascade Saddle** (1-2 days/17 km). Links with the Rees-Dart track after beginning at Aspiring Hut in the Matukituki Valley. This challenging alpine route is for experienced trampers only.

**Gillespie Pass Circuit** (3-4 days/58 km). A loop track from Makarora linking the Young, Siberia and Wilkin Valleys via Gillespie Pass (1490m). Impressive mountain views on the main divide. A day trip to view the icebergs on Lake Crucible is a must.

**Mt Brewster** (1-2 days/6 km). From Fantail Falls near Makarora on SH6, climb up a good track for 3-4 hours above the bush line to find the hut on a prominent snow grass ridge. Superb views of Mt Brewster (2,423m), the Brewster glacier, Makarora Valley, Mt Aspiring and sunsets over the West Coast are your reward. The summit of Mt Armstrong is a demanding 2 hour walk from the hut.

**West Matukituki Valley** (3-4 days). From Aspiring Hut (2-3 hours from Raspberry Creek carpark), challenging trips can be made to Cascade Saddle, Liverpool Hut and French Ridge hut. Easy walks discovering the valley floor contrast the steep climbs up either side of the valley through and beyond the bushline. Mt Aspiring (3,033m) is climbed from the valley.

**Wilkin Valley Track** (3-4 days/56 km). A good track into the mountainous heart of the park, with at least one crossing of the Wilkin River at Kerin Forks Hut. To access the second hut at Top Forks, traverse grassy flats and patches of beech forest. A day trip to the three glacial lakes in the north branch is highly recommended. Views in the U-shaped valley of Mt Pollux and Mt Castor leave you in awe. Aircraft landings in this valley are permitted.

## Vegetation

The main divide splits the park into western (wetter) and eastern (drier) catchments. Hence vastly different plants exist in the east and west, especially in the lowland and montane forest zones. Small areas of rimu, mataī, miro and kahikatea-dominated podocarp forest can be seen at the Roaring Billy short walk, and the Makarora Bush nature walk beside the Makarora Visitor Centre. Beech/tawhai forests dominate below the bush line. The lower Dart, Rees, Routeburn and West Matukituki Valleys boast 30-35m tall red beech/tawhero. Silver/tahina and mountain/tamauka beech can survive winter snowfalls at higher altitudes. Above the treeline, slopes are dominated by snow tussock grasslands and herbfields with mountain buttercups, daisies, and ourisias.



Alpine buttercup near Gillespie Pass

Photo: J Kenney

## Birdlife

At least 37 native bird species have been recorded in the park. The most common in the west are bellbird/korimako, tūī, kererū and South Island kākā. The rivers of the interior attract whio/blue duck, while grassy flats usually harbour paradise shelduck/pōtakitaki. The park's mountain birds include the mischievous keas, known for investigating packs and tents. The other is the rock wren/tuke with its tame behaviour and endearing hopping dance. The endangered yellowhead/mōhua, rifleman/titipounamu, and yellow-crowned parakeet/kākāriki inhabit forests in the Matukituki, Dart, Makarora and Wilkin Valleys. Towards evening, moreporks/ruru may be seen and heard. Several critically endangered tokoeka (south island brown kiwi) are monitored by DOC within the Haast Tokoeka Bird Sanctuary, between the Waitotō and Arahata Rivers south of Haast.

## Other animals

New Zealand has no animals that are harmful to humans. Introduced animals within the park include whitetail deer, chamois, red deer, and Himalayan tahr. Introduced brown and rainbow trout are found in the lower Route Burn and brown trout in Lake Howden. Threatened native long-tailed bats/pekapeka roost in mature red beech forests around Makarora, East Matukituki Valley, and the Routeburn. Bats are New Zealand's only native land mammal.



Rock wren

Photo: DOC



Kea

Photo: C Mosen

## Climate – four seasons in one day

Summer is the best time to get out and about, but be prepared – the weather is notoriously changeable, and even the brightest summer day can end in snow flurries. Mountaintops often experience freezing conditions year round, and many of them have permanent snowfields and glaciers. Annual rainfall varies from 300mm in Central Otago to over 8000mm in the Southern Alps. Access to the park is available all year round, depending on current backcountry conditions.

## Huts

Opened in 1949 and constructed of local schist rock, Aspiring Hut in the West Matukituki Valley is the most magnificent of the park's huts. This is one of five huts in the park owned by the New Zealand Alpine Club and managed by DOC. Located beneath Cascade Saddle, en route to Mount Aspiring/Tititea, it opened up the valley for climbers and trampers. You can reach it in a two hour walk from the Raspberry Creek carpark (one hour's drive from Wanaka). A warden is in residence from late October to late April, providing cooking gas, firewood, and back country and weather information. A camping area and flushing toilets are located nearby.

The Routeburn track is very popular and classified as a Great Walk. Huts on Great Walks require pre-booking during the summer. Numerous huts exist within the park, which don't require pre-booking. Established camping areas exist on many tracks. Ask at the DOC Visitor Centre about the backcountry hut pass.



Aspiring Hut

Photo: DOC

## Short walks – signposted off Routeburn Rd, Glenorchy

**Lake Sylvan, lower Dart Valley** A flat walk, 40 minute one way (2.5 km) or 1 hour 40 minutes returning (5 km) via the tramline loop, through mixed mountain/silver beech forest to a glacial lake containing brown trout and numerous small native fish. This is an Operation Ark site where DOC staff work to protect the endangered mōhua/yellowhead.

**Routeburn Nature Walk** This 45 minute, 2 km walk crosses the Routeburn swing bridge and takes a winding path down from the main track onto the valley floor, where you pass through beautiful red beech/tawhero dominated forest.

# Mount Aspiring National Park



Grandeur of scenery - the Southern Alps



Cover Photo: Lake Wanaka Tourism

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