

Wonders of Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park



Canterbury

Containing the spectacular high peaks of the Southern Alps/Kā tiritiri o te Moana, Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park is full of unusual inhabitants and is the site of many unlikely events. Here is a collection of weird, wacky and wonderful stories from this distinctive alpine national park.

Wacky wildlife

- Governors Bush is home to a rare flatworm known to scientists as *Ooperipatus viridimaculata*. These creatures entrap their prey by spitting a sticky substance up to 50 centimetres away. The flatworm then bites the prey, injecting it with lethal saliva that dissolves the prey's inner contents.
- Alpine scree wētā are found living at altitudes of

more than 3,100 metres in the park. They have a chemical similar to anti-freeze in their bodies, which allows them to survive over winter when everything around them is frozen solid. Scree wētā on each mountain range differ slightly in colour and pattern, although the populations are not genetically distinct.

- The tiny rock wren also lives high in the alpine zone, between 1300 – 2500 metres. The birds brave the wicked winters by living under the snow in spaces between rocks and plants.

Kelman Hut



- The Mount Cook lily is actually a buttercup – the second largest in the world. Early Māori women wove the large leaves into cloaks that were used as raincoats.
- Climbers crossing a crevasse near Tasman Saddle Hut one day were stunned to see a pukeko run across the ice in front of them. It is likely the bird was blown up in high winds from the West Coast. In 1999 a possum was seen in a similar spot, and no one knows how it got there.
- Not to be outdone by the pukeko and possum, a few years ago climbers and helicopter pilots reported seeing a chamois climbing along and over the summit ridge of Mount Tasman, our second highest peak.
- The kea (left) is one of the most intelligent birds in the world. In 1973 keas locked two climbers securely inside Mueller Hut after observing the men opening and closing the door all day. When the men retired for the night, the kea slid the bolt across just as they had seen the men doing. It took the climbers an hour to jostle the door open.



Human feats and misfortunes

- Freda du Faur was the first woman to climb Aoraki/Mount Cook (1910), and she did so in a skirt. She wore leggings underneath and hob-nailed boots on her feet.
- In 1906 Scottish mountaineer R.L. Low slipped and fell near Rudolph Glacier. He crawled for three days to a bivvy rock at De la Beche corner. A carrier pigeon carried by his rescuers was used to convey the good news that he was alive and to request further help. The pigeon chewed the message off en route from Lake Tekapo to the Hermitage, but luckily, Low was rescued successfully, and a pigeon was again used to convey the message of his safe return.
- Sir Edmund Hillary's first ascent was of Mt Ollivier on the Sealy Range, the start of an illustrious climbing career that culminated in the first-ever successful climb of Mt Everest.
- In 1982 Mark Inglis and Phil Doole spent 13 nights trapped just below the summit of the middle peak of Aoraki/Mount Cook in a shrund nicknamed 'Middle Peak Hotel'. Both climbers lost their legs to frostbite when they were eventually rescued. Both Inglis and Doole continue to climb with prosthetic limbs today.
- Peter Dickson became the first person to mountain bike off Aoraki/Mt Cook in 1986. He carried his bike to the summit in pieces, assembled it, and rode it off the summit. His plans to ride from the summit to the valley floor were thwarted when he sustained a puncture on a crampon.
- Peter Gazley spent 12 hours buried in an



Freda du Faur Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park Collection



avalanche on the Hooker Glacier before being discovered. His rescuers had given up hope, when one of them found him while relieving himself. Unfortunately, Gazley died several years later in another avalanche while snow caving on Ball Pass.

- The toilet at Kelman Hut was designed to separate solid wastes from fluids. It had to be redesigned when male patrons reported that their genitals stuck to the metal divider in freezing temperatures!

A changing landscape

- Ball Glacier was the site of the first ski field rope tow in New Zealand, and in 1933 the first Amateur NZ Ski Championships were held here. Today, the Ball Glacier has shrunk so much that skiing here is unthinkable.
- In the early 1900s the Mueller Glacier was at least 100 metres above its present height. The surface was so good for walking that the glacier was used as a bridge and sheep were driven across it to graze the slopes of the upper Hooker Valley.
- The Tasman Glacier Lake only began forming in the 1980s. Prior to that, the Tasman River ran straight from the snout of the glacier and only small sinkholes could be found in the ice. Today the lake is growing by the day and motorised boat tours enable tourists to explore the icebergs that float on the lake.

Further information

For more information on the natural and historic values of Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park, contact the Aoraki/Mount Cook Visitor Centre, phone (03) 4351186 or visit www.doc.govt.nz

