Walking tracks in Aoraki / Mount Cook

Aoraki / Mount Cook National Park

Department of Conservation
Te Pāpa Atawhai
Welcome to Aoraki / Mount Cook National Park

Aoraki / Mount Cook National Park (70,696 ha) is Aotearoa New Zealand’s great alpine park, boasting the highest mountains and the largest glaciers in the country. The area was formally established as a national park in 1953 and is a harsh land of ice and rock. Glaciers cover 40% of the park. There are 21 peaks over 3000 m high, including, of course, Aotearoa New Zealand’s highest mountain, Aoraki / Mount Cook.

The park is also recognised for its outstanding natural values and forms part of the internationally celebrated Te Wahipounamu – South West New Zealand World Heritage Area.

Enjoy one of the many walks or hikes around the village and environs; ranging from 10 minutes to 4 hours, there is something to suit everyone’s ability.

If you are doing an overnight walk, you will need to sign in at the Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai (DOC) Visitor Centre and pay your hut fees before you go.
Glacier country

The glaciers that have helped shape the park’s landscape include five major valley systems: Godley, Murchison, Tasman, Hooker and Mueller. There are also over 150 named smaller hanging glaciers on the mountainsides, which add to the dramatic landscape.

The Haupapa/Tasman Glacier is Aotearoa New Zealand’s largest and longest glacier and is clearly visible from the main highway at the entrance of the park. It is about 22 km long, up to 3 km wide and extends over 100 km². Although covered with rock material in its lower reaches, the ice of the glacier is about 600 m deep near the Hochstetter icefall.

The ancestor of Ngāi Tahu

Aoraki is an entity with his own mauri. His resting place within Te Manahuna/Mackenzie Basin is a place of awe, mana and cultural significance for many people. For Ngāi Tahu whānui, Aoraki and his surrounding peaks are ancestors frozen in stone by time. Like any other elders in Māori and Ngāi Tahu culture, they are afforded great respect.

There are different accounts as to how Aoraki and the surrounding landforms within Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park came to be. One such account is known as the Ārai Te Uru tradition and speaks of a great waka, the Ārai Te Uru, travelling to Aotearoa. As this waka travelled down the coast of Te Waipounamu/the South Island, it began to be troubled by the waves, eventually succumbing to the rough seas near Shag Point/Matakaea on the North Otago coastline where it capsized. Many of the passengers went to shore to explore the island. One of the passengers, Kirikirikatata, walked inland to explore with his grandson, Aoraki, sitting upon his shoulders. An instruction was given that all the passengers must return to where the waka lay by sunrise, lest they be turned to stone. However, many of the passengers, including Kirikirikatata and Aoraki, did not return to the waka in time, instead turning into many of the mountains and geographical features of central Te Waipounamu.

‘Aoraki Matatū’ is a phrase encouraging people to stand tall and strong like Aoraki. It reminds Ngāi Tahu to be inspired by their ancestral mountain and its leadership position within Te Waipounamu and Aotearoa as our highest peak.

Ngāi Tahu whānui see Aoraki not just as a mountain peak, but as an ancestor who stands among us all. As this whakatauki alludes to, this tipuna has strong leadership attributes that people aspire to instil in themselves and today’s youth – standing strong in your identity, remaining steadfast in your beliefs and being a leader of others.

The naming of a mountain

The mountain from which Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park takes its name was originally named Aoraki by Ngāi Tahu, the first settlers in the area. It received its European name, Mount Cook, in 1851 from Captain J.L. Stokes, who first sighted the impressive peak as he sailed down the West Coast. Stokes named the mountain in honour of the English navigator of Aotearoa New Zealand, Captain James Cook.

In 1998, both names were officially recognised and the mountain is now known as Aoraki/Mount Cook.
Walks from the village and campground

Governors Bush Walk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>1 hr return (loop track)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>Short walk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start place</td>
<td>Public shelter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height gain</td>
<td>100 m – steps plus well-gravelled track</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A delightful bush walk that joins with Bowen Bush Walk to form a nature trail and explores one of the few stands of tawa/tawhai/silver beech forest in the park.

A gradual climb leads to a lookout point of Wakefield Ridge and Aoraki/Mount Cook. This popular walk offers birdlife, a great view of the mountains and a sheltered place to experience the outdoors in poor weather.

Bowen Bush Walk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>10 min return (loop track)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>Short walk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start place</td>
<td>Opposite petrol pumps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height gain</td>
<td>Predominantly flat with some steps</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An easy forest walk that can be joined with Governors Bush Walk to form a nature trail. This track wanders through tōtara and mountain toatoa/celery pine forest, and has an alternative exit/entry towards the Mount Cook Lodge.

For more information, visit: [www.mountainsafety.org.nz](http://www.mountainsafety.org.nz).

Note that the maps in this brochure are a guide only and should not be used for navigation. The appropriate NZTopo50 series map for this area is BX15.
Glencoe Walk

**Time** 30 min return  
**Grade** Short walk  
**Start place** Behind The Hermitage hotel  
**Height gain** 40 m – steps and some zigzags

This walk zigzags through tōtara trees with a ferny understorey, emerging at a lookout near the prominent water tanks above The Hermitage. A short climb rewards with a bird’s-eye view of the village and beyond to the white ice of the Hooker Glacier and Aoraki/Mount Cook. Sunrise and sunset are good times to catch the light playing over the mountains.

Red Tarns Track

**Time** 2 hr return  
**Grade** Walking track (steep with steps)  
**Start place** Public shelter  
**Height gain** 300 m

Follow the track downhill from the public shelter to cross the bridge over Black Birch Stream and then climb steeply to the Red Tarns. The vegetation changes as you ascend from the valley floor to a superb panoramic viewpoint of the valleys below, the village and Aoraki/Mount Cook. The tarns are named for the red pond weed that grows in them. An aptly placed seat allows you to recover your breath and enjoy the views. This is a magnificent spot to view the sunset in summer.

Kea Point Track

**Time** 2 hr return from the village  
1 hr return from the White Horse Hill Campground and car park  
**Grade** Walking track  
**Start place** Across the road from Aoraki/Mount Cook Visitor Centre towards Hooker valley  
**Height gain** 180 m over 3 km

This walk gently winds its way through subalpine grasslands and scrub to the Mueller Glacier moraine wall. The track passes through a landscape that was formed in 1913 when a stream cut through from the glacier to the original Hermitage site, damaging the building. The walk ends at a viewing deck that gives stunning views of Mount Sefton, The Footstool, the Hooker Valley, the Mueller Glacier lake and Aoraki/Mount Cook.

Sealy Tarns Track

**Time** 3–4 hr return  
**Grade** Walking track (steep with steps)  
**Start place** As for Kea Point Track, then branch off at the signpost  
**Height gain** 600 m

Dubbed the ‘stairway to heaven’, 2200 steps take you straight up to the freshwater lakes of Sealy Tarns. This energetic walk provides spectacular views of the Hooker valley and peaks of the area, including Aoraki/Mount Cook. An abundance of alpine flowers in summer and the views from the tarns make the effort worthwhile. The tarns are the halfway point to Mueller Hut.
**Hooker Valley Track**

**Time:** 3 hr return (add 1 hr if starting from the village)

**Grade:** Walking track

**Start place:** As for Kea Point Track, or start at the White Horse Hill Campground and car park

**Height gain:** 80 m over 5 km

The best time to walk this stunning track is at dawn when the first rays of sun creep over the Southern Alps/Kā Tiritiri o te Moana, including over Aotearoa New Zealand’s highest peak, Aoraki/Mount Cook, and there are fewer walkers.

The track leads up the Hooker valley towards Aoraki/Mount Cook. It passes close to the Alpine Memorial (a great viewpoint) and Freda’s Rock before coming to the viewing point of the Mueller Glacier and the first swing bridge.

Cross the Hooker River here and carry on to the second swing bridge. Look out for many different wildflowers along the way, including celmisia and the kōpukupuku/Mount Cook buttercup.

The track from the first swing bridge to the second travels between old moraine ridges and humps. Past the second bridge, the vegetation changes to more open tussock and a wider valley floor. A third swing bridge leads to the east Hooker and the source of the Hooker River. The track ends at the glacier lake, where there are amazing views of Aoraki/Mount Cook, the Hooker Glacier and the Southern Alps/Kā Tiritiri o te Moana. Return the same way, enjoying more views down the valley and across to the Sealy Range.

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**Hooker Hut**

**Time:** 4 hr return

**Grade:** Tramping track

**Start place:** White Horse Hill Campground

**Height gain:** 120 m

Hooker Hut is the oldest hut in Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park. It was moved to a new location and fully restored between 2020 and 2021, with care taken to preserve its distinctive heritage features while providing a comfortable stay.

The route starts on the Hooker Valley Track, turning off shortly after the toilets at Stocking Stream. After trekking an unformed route through tussock and alpine scrub, the route enters the bed of Stocking Stream before following marker poles to the hut.

With Mount Sefton and the Tewaewae Glacier towering overhead, the hut also offers breathtaking views northwards to Aoraki/Mount Cook.

A fireplace, gas cooker and toilet facilities are available at the hut.

Bookings can be made online at [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz).

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*Hooker Valley, Photo: Shellie Evans*

*Hooker Hut, Photo: David Sagar*


**Mueller Hut Route**

**Time** 3–5 hr one way  
**Grade** Tramping track (steep)  
Route in winter  
**Start place** As for Sealy Tarns Track  
**Height gain** 1000 m

We recommend the **NZTopo50 BX15 map for this route.**

Spectacular panoramic views, a large hut and amazing landscapes are the drawcards for this strenuous walk. During the summer months (December–February), this route offers a mountain experience for anyone with moderate tramping experience – if you take good care. During the winter months (June–August), the route requires a good level of mountaineering experience, including walking on ice and snow with ice axe and crampons, route finding, and using an avalanche transceiver, probe and shovel. Check with the DOC staff at the Aoraki / Mount Cook Visitor Centre for current mountain conditions.

During the summer months, you can book this hut online at [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz).

In winter, you need to call in to the Aoraki / Mount Cook Visitor Centre to sign into the park’s intention system and pay hut fees before heading to the hut.

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**Key to symbols**

- Car park  
- Toilets  
- Shelter  
- Campsite  
- Hut  
- Information centre  
- Road  
- State highway  
- National Park boundary  
- Short walk  
- Walking track  
- Tramping track  
- Route  
- Four-wheel drive
Freda du Faur was the first woman to climb Aoraki/Mount Cook. She accomplished this amazing feat in 1910 with the help of two guides, brothers Alex and Peter Graham. In 1913, Freda completed the first Grand Traverse (all three peaks) of Aoraki/Mount Cook with guides Peter Graham and Darby Thompson. Freda’s Rock is the site where her now-famous photograph was taken just after her first successful ascent of the mountain. For further information, visit the Aoraki/Mount Cook Visitor Centre.

Walks in the Tasman valley

Blue Lakes and Tasman Glacial View Track

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>40 min return</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>Walking track (with steps)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start place</td>
<td>Blue Lakes car park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height gain</td>
<td>100 m</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the car park, walk past the Blue Lakes shelter and meander up past the Blue Lakes to a viewpoint on the moraine wall. There are good views of the lower Haupapa/Tasman Glacier and lake, icebergs, and the mountains at the head of the valley. A side trip to the Blue Lakes offers good swimming in summer.

At about 22 km long, the Haupapa/Tasman Glacier is the longest glacier in Aotearoa New Zealand. Unfortunately, glaciers the world over are shrinking, with the Tasman receding over 100 m per year.

Tasman Lake Track

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>50 min – 1 hr return</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>Walking track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start place</td>
<td>Blue Lakes car park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height gain</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This walk branches to the right off the Blue Lakes Track just past the Blue Lakes shelter and leads to a viewpoint of the Haupapa/Tasman Glacier terminal lake. A further track branches to the right off this track leading to the source of the Tasman River. Icebergs can usually be seen floating in the lake in summer, and the lake freezes over in winter. The track leads through the old terminal moraines of the glacier, and you can see good examples of plant succession along the route.

The Tasman Lake is a relatively recent addition to the scene, starting its formation in 1974 and growing steadily since then. It is now large enough to take commercial boat and kayak tours. The large terminal moraines mark the foot of the Haupapa/Tasman Glacier at the time of the lake’s formation and are a sobering reminder of the glacier’s retreat.
Cycling

Track grades

**Easy / Grade 2**: Mostly flat with some gentle climbs on smooth track with easily avoidable obstacles, such as rocks and potholes.

**Hooker valley**

Distance 2 km
Grade Easy / Grade 2
Start place Aoraki / Mount Cook village – veer left at the Hooker Valley Road intersection
Height gain 50 m

This cycleway runs alongside Hooker Valley Road to the White Horse Hill Campground and car park. It provides stunning views of the Southern Alps / Kā Tiritiri o te Moana along its length.

**Tasman valley**

Distance 8.5 km
Grade Easy / Grade 2
Start place Aoraki / Mount Cook village – veer right at the Hooker Valley Road intersection and head towards the Tasman valley
Height gain 100 m

This cycle trail takes cyclists out to the Blue Lakes car park in the Tasman valley. Follow the Alps 2 Ocean Cycle Trail from either the White Horse Hill Campground or the Aoraki / Mount Cook village as far as the road bridge on Tasman Valley Road. Cycle along Tasman Valley Road to the Blue Lakes car park. Take care as the road can be busy with cars and buses. From here, leave your bike and walk to the Haupapa / Tasman Glacier viewpoint or lake, where you will be rewarded with expansive views of the glacier, moraines and the river winding its way along the valley floor.

**Alps 2 Ocean Cycle Trail**

*(National Park section)*

Distance 5 km
Grade Easy / Grade 2 – downhill to the airport
Start place Aoraki / Mount Cook village – as for the Tasman valley, then take the Alps 2 Ocean Cycle Trail at the Hooker River road bridge
Height loss 60 m

It is all downhill to the airport on this section of the Alps 2 Ocean Cycle Trail! Make sure you stop and take a look behind you from time to time to view the Southern Alps / Kā Tiritiri o te Moana as you spin down the Tasman valley.

This is the first section of the Alps 2 Ocean Cycle Trail, which leads all the way to Oamaru. From the airport, you need to take a short helicopter ride across the valley to continue on the cycleway through to Twizel and beyond.

**NOTE:**
Cycling is only allowed on the Alps 2 Ocean Cycle Trail and formed roads in the National Park. Cycling is NOT ALLOWED on the walking tracks in the park.

Photo: Rachel Gillespie
Nature walking and wildflower spotting

Pick up the *Nature-trail* guide (can be purchased from the Visitor Centre) and visit one of the short walks in the village for a true nature-trail experience. Use the guide and the plant labels through both Governors and Bowen bush walks to help you identify the plants and birds in the park.

Wildflowers abound from October to March, and the Hooker Valley Track is a great place to see these.

Riroriro / grey warbler
(more commonly heard than seen)
*Photo: M. Hamilton*

Pīwakawaka / fantail
*Photo: DOC*

Miromiro / tomtit
*Photo: Leon Berard*

Common skink
*Photo: DOC*

Common copper butterfly
*Photo: © Janice McKenna*

Black mountain ringlet butterfly
*Photo: DOC*
In summer, the native tutu shrub flourishes throughout the Hooker valley walks. All parts of this plant, including its berries, contain a poison called tutin.

Do not eat any tutu berries and wash your hands after touching any part of the plant.