

Rees and Dart tracks

| Mount Aspiring National Park



Know before you go

Weather

The upper Rees valley and Snowy Creek area are exposed, with no shelter in adverse weather. Cold temperatures, snow, high winds and heavy rain are possible at any time of the year, and the weather and track conditions can change at any time. Check with the visitor centre for information on current conditions.

River crossings

River and streams will become difficult or impossible to cross in heavy rain or snowmelt, particularly in the Cattle Flat and lower Dart valley areas. If a river is swollen, do not cross it – have alternative plans and extra supplies.

Avalanches

There are multiple avalanche paths in this area, typically active in winter (May to November). The highest risk areas are the:

- Dart Track from the Whitbourn River confluence to Dart Hut
- final 5 km before Shelter Rock Hut on the Rees Track
- Rees Track between Shelter Rock Hut and Dart Hut.

Avalanches can occur outside these areas but are less frequent.

The upper Snowy Creek bridge is removed during winter due to the area being avalanche prone. It is removed from mid-May to mid-November, but the exact timing can depend on the weather and avalanche conditions.

Snow

Snowstorms can occur at any time of the year and the tracks can become impassable due to heavy snow in winter (May–November), especially in the upper Rees valley and Snowy Creek area.

Water

Water at the huts is not treated or filtered – ensure you take sufficient water treatment supplies if you wish to treat the water.

Private land

The section of track from the Muddy Creek car park to the national park boundary (12 km) crosses the Rees Valley Station, which is private farmland. Please respect this by staying on the track. Do not camp, hunt or disturb stock on this land.

Remember

Dogs and other pets

Dogs and other pets are not allowed in Mount Aspiring National Park. Our national parks have been preserved for their recreational values and to protect significant native plants and animals. It is vital that habitats of threatened species are properly protected.

Drones

No unauthorised drones are allowed within Mount Aspiring National Park. Drones can:

- interfere with helicopters for search and rescue, fire and operational needs
- cause noise, disturbing native birds and visitors to the park.

Fires

Fires should only be lit in designated fireplaces and must be kept small. Do not use live vegetation on fires and have containers of water close by for controlling any fires that get out of control. Always make sure the fire is out before leaving the area. Gas cookers should be used for cooking – care is required with these.



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Nau mai, haere mai

Welcome to the Rees River and Dart River/ Te Awa Whakatipu valleys.

Here, you can enjoy a moderately demanding 4-5 day tramp consisting of 6-8 hr of walking each day through farmland and the southern part of Mount Aspiring National Park. Spectacular mountain scenery, forest and alpine vegetation, glacier-fed rivers, and the Dart Glacier are significant features of the walk.

Huts

The three Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai (DOC) huts in this area have solid fuel fires for heating, toilets, mattresses and water. Trampers must bring their own cookers. Hut wardens are present from November until late April.

For updated hut pricing, contact the Queenstown DOC Visitor Centre or visit www.doc.govt.nz. Huts and campsites along the Rees-Dart circuit will become bookable for the summer season 2026-27.

Please leave the huts clean and tidy. There are no rubbish disposal facilities on the track or in the huts – carry out what you carry in.

Camping

Campers are encouraged to camp outside the huts. Camping is also allowed in all areas except in the fragile alpine and subalpine areas between Shelter Rock Hut and Dart Hut, and on the Rees Valley Station. Camping on the Cascade Saddle Route is only permitted near Cascade Creek where there is a toilet to limit the impact on this fragile alpine area. Be aware that Kea chew tents and steal people's gear at the Cascade Creek campsite on the Cascade Saddle Route.

Do not disturb kea – they are a protected species and are in their natural habitat.

Hunting and fishing

There are limited opportunities for trout fishing in the mid-section of the Rees River, and in some tributaries and parts of the Dart River/Te Awa Whakatipu. Fishing licences can be obtained from Fish & Game New Zealand (www.fishandgame.org.nz/licences/fishing-licence-info).

Hunting is permitted in parts of both valleys with an open hunting permit. Apply online at www.doc.govt.nz/hunting-permit. For information on the Rees hunting block, visit www.doc.govt.nz/rees-hunting.

Didymo is an invasive weed of rivers and streams that can form massive blooms, which can adversely affect fish, plants and invertebrates by reducing their habitats. Therefore, please Check, Clean and Dry all equipment, apparel and vehicles that have entered waterways.



BETWEEN WATERWAYS

History

The Rees and Dart river valleys were well known to the Ngāi Tahu people of Southland and the Otago Coast who travelled great distances to collect the highly valued, pearly grey-green inaka/koko-takiwai variety of pounamu (greenstone). Ngāi Tahu and their forebears used ara tawhito (traditional trails) that crossed the main divide of the Southern Alps/Kā Tiritiri o te Moana for mahinga kai (food gathering) and pounamu trading.

Along with Te Komama (Routeburn), the Dart River/Te Awa Whakatipu was part of the ara tawhito connecting Whakatipu-wai-Māori (Lake Whakatipu) with Whakatipu Waitai (Martins Bay), where one of the largest Ngāi Tahu kāinga (settlements) in South Westland was situated. Numerous pounamu artefacts and the remains of several kāinga nohoanga (seasonal settlements) have been discovered at the head of Whakatipu-wai-Māori. Today, ownership of all pounamu remaining within the takiwā (tribal boundary) of Ngāi Tahu and the adjacent seas are vested in Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu.

The first Europeans to explore the Rees-Dart area were surveyors, prospectors and run holders looking for grazing land. By the time surveyor James McKerrow finished his reconnaissance in 1863, a large number of gold prospectors and miners were based at the head of Whakatipu-wai-Māori.

In 1864, a mining party led by Patrick Caples crossed the Rees Saddle into the Dart River/Te Awa Whakatipu to search for reported gold, but little was found and after days of snow they retreated to the Rees valley. Caples was the first European to refer to the Dart Glacier, which he saw on this trip.

Sheep runs were established in the Rees and Dart valleys and at Mount Earnslaw during the 1860s, and a gold dredge operated on the Dart River/Te Awa Whakatipu from 1899 until 1902. More recently the valleys have been used as film locations, notably for *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* and *Mission Impossible*. There is still evidence today of extensive gold sluicing that occurred around the Whitbourn/Dart confluence circa 1870s.

The areas diversity and remarkable natural landscapes were recognised in 1964 with the creation of Mount Aspiring National Park, and again in 1991 with the establishment of Te Wāhipounamu – South West New Zealand World Heritage Area.

Tōpuni

In the mountains at the head of Whakatipu-wai-Māori lie Mount Earnslaw/Pikarakatahi and Te Koroka (Dart/Slip Stream), which are highly important to Ngāi Tahu for their cultural, spiritual, historic and traditional associations. As part of the Deed of Settlement between the Crown and Ngāi Tahu, these two areas have been given the status of Tōpuni. The concept of Tōpuni derives from the Ngāi Tahu custom of persons of rangatira (chiefly) status extending their mana (power and authority) and protection over areas or people by placing their cloak over them or it. Tōpuni provides a very public symbol of Ngāi Tahu customary mana and rangatiratanga (chieftainship) over some of the most prominent landscape features and conservation areas in Te Waipounamu. Tōpuni does not override or alter the existing status of the land but ensures Ngāi Tahu values are recognised, acknowledged and provided for. Access to Te Koroka (Dart/Slip Stream) requires a special permit.

Te Wāhipounamu – South West New Zealand World Heritage Area

Te Wāhipounamu – South West New Zealand is one of the great wilderness areas of the Southern Hemisphere. Known to Māori as Te Wāhipounamu (the place of greenstone), this World Heritage Area covers 2.6 million ha and incorporates Aoraki/Mount Cook, Westland Tai Poutini, Fiordland and Mount Aspiring national parks. The area is home to some of the best examples of animals and plants once found on the ancient supercontinent Gondwana, and the superb diversity of natural features are recognised internationally.



Further information

Whakatipu-wai-Māori / Queenstown Visitor Centre

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Queenstown 9300

PHONE: 03 442 7935

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www.doc.govt.nz

COVER: Heading down Rees Saddle. *Photo: Amy Clarke*
BACK: Lancewood and dead forest. *Photo: Sam Kuperus*

This information was accurate at the time of printing. For the latest information on DOC's policies and facilities, visit www.doc.govt.nz.

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Ngāi Tahu and Pikirakatahi

Sitting between the Rees and Dart rivers is Mount Earnslaw/Pikirakatahi. The creation of Pikirakatahi relates in time to Te Waka o Aoraki, and the efforts of Tū Te Rakiwhānoa. It is said that during the formation of Pikirakatahi, a wedge of pounamu was inserted into this mountain, which is the highest and most prominent peak in this range.

The mountain is also linked to the travels of Rākaihautū, who dug out the great lakes of the interior with his kō (a tool similar to a spade), known as Tū Whakaroria and later renamed Tuhiraki at the conclusion of the expedition. Pikirakatahi was of crucial significance to the many generations that journeyed to that end of Whakatipu-wai-māori and beyond. Staging camps for the retrieval of pounamu were located at the base of the mountain, while semi-permanent settlements related to the pounamu trade were located closer to the lake.

Pikirakatahi stands as kaitiaki (guardian) over the pounamu resource and marks the end of a trail. The tūpuna (ancestors) had considerable knowledge of whakapapa, traditional trails, places for gathering kai (food) and other taonga, as well as ways in which to use the resources of the land, the relationship of people with the land and their dependence on it, and tikanga for the proper and sustainable utilisation of resources. All of these values remain important to Ngāi Tahu today.



Natural history

The Rees and Dart valleys are surrounded by towering mountains made of green and grey schist and have been shaped by glaciation. The Dart Glacier is now a small valley glacier, but at its peak was part of an enormous system that ended at Kingston, 135 km away at the southern end of Whakatipu-wai-māori (Lake Whakatipu). Huge moraine walls beyond Dart Hut show the previous extent of the glacier and how much it has receded in the past few hundred years.

The forest is dominated by southern beech species, with tawhairaunui/ red beech growing along the warm valley floor of the Dart River/Te Awa Whakatipu, and tawhairauriki/ mountain beech and tawhai/ silver beech dominating the rest of the Rees and Dart valleys. Cold air from the Dart Glacier has lowered the treeline in the Dart valley to 900 m (200 m lower than elsewhere in the region). Above the tree-line, tussock grasslands dominate, interspersed with flowering spikes of the aptly named speargrass or Spaniard, and spring and summer flowering herbs like mountain buttercups and daisies.

The Dart valley is notable for its populations of the endangered mohua/yellowhead, kākā and pekapeka/ long-tailed bat. Other forest birds such as kākārīki/ New Zealand parakeet, kakaruai/ South Island robin, miromiro/tomtit, pīwakawaka/fantail and pīpipi/ brown creeper thrive in both valleys. The cheeky alpine kea is also a significant valley inhabitant, along with the pūtakitaki/ paradise shelduck, which is found on the river flats. Mātuhituhi/ rock wren can be heard, if not seen, on the Rees Saddle and kōwhiowhio/ blue duck may be seen in the turbulent upper reaches of the rivers. Invertebrates are abundant, especially the ubiquitous sandfly in the beech forest and grassy flats, and energetic grasshoppers in the alpine areas. Alpine wētā are found at the Rees Saddle and in the upper Dart valley.



Care for Aotearoa



Protect nature

Keep your distance and don't feed wildlife. Follow any rules restricting dogs, fires, drones or vehicles.



Be prepared

Stay safe in the outdoors by planning and preparing for your trip.



Keep New Zealand clean

Use toilets where provided. Take all rubbish with you.



Show respect

Respect others, respect culture.



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai



tiaki
THE OFFICE OF THE
TANGATA

Access



The Rees Track begins 68 km from Queenstown. There is a car park at Muddy Creek, but it is not advisable to take four-wheel drive vehicles over the creek as it is prone to sudden washouts.


The Dart Track begins 76 km from Queenstown. The road between Paradise and Chinamans Bluff (6 km) is subject to washouts and flooding.

The access roads to both the Rees and Dart valleys require vehicles to cross several fords that can become difficult to navigate in wet weather. Parts of these roads are gravel and should be traversed with care. During the summer, transport providers service both tracks. Car relocation companies can move your car between track heads.

Note: All times and distances are one way unless otherwise stated.

Track grades

- **Advanced tramping track:** Mostly unformed track with steep, rough or muddy sections; has directional markers, poles or cairns.
- **Route:** Unformed track suitable only for people with high-level backcountry skills and experience.



Throughout this circuit, there are river and stream crossings that become hazardous in heavy rain or snowmelt. Make sensible decisions about river crossings and have alternative plans.

Day 1



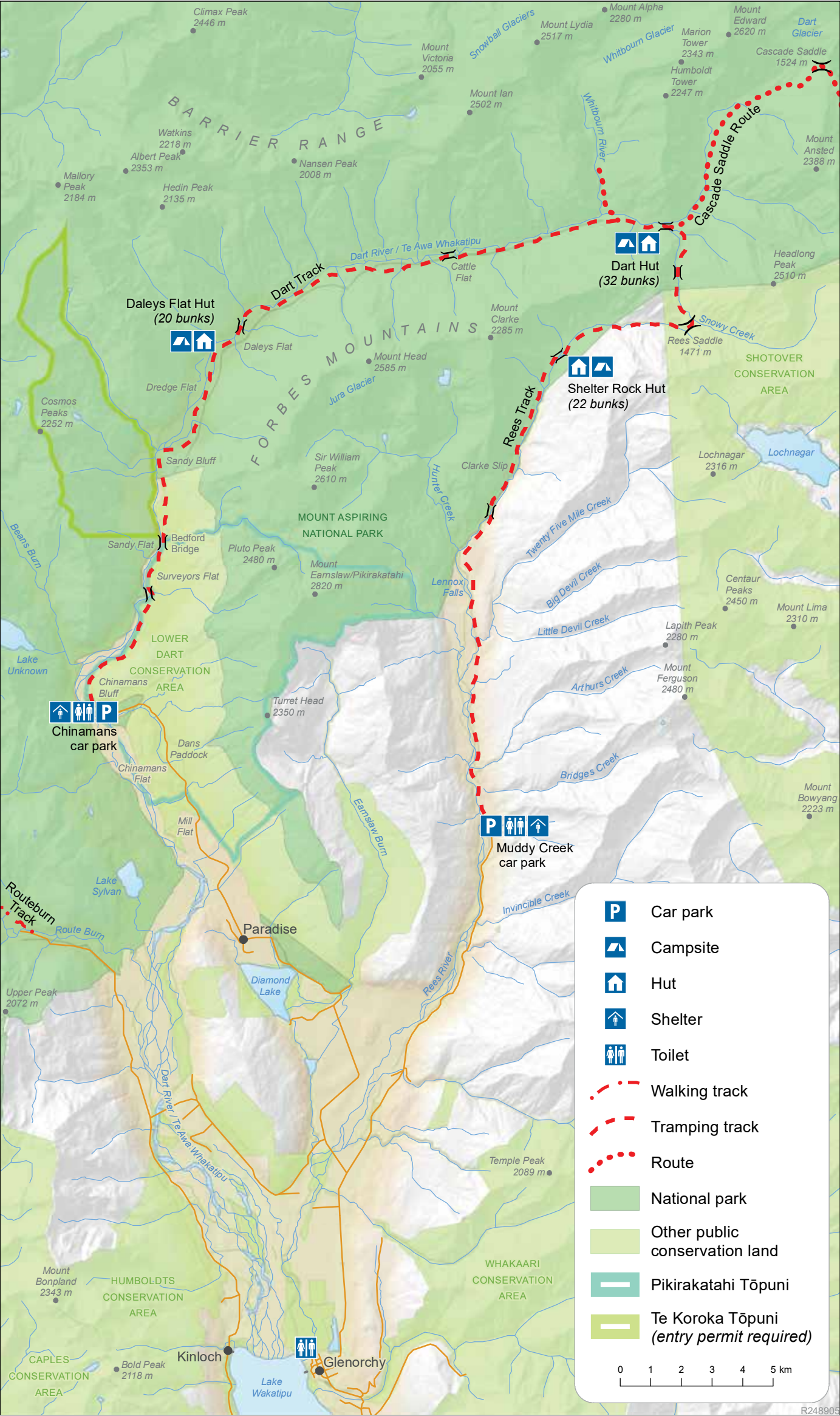
Day 2



Day 3

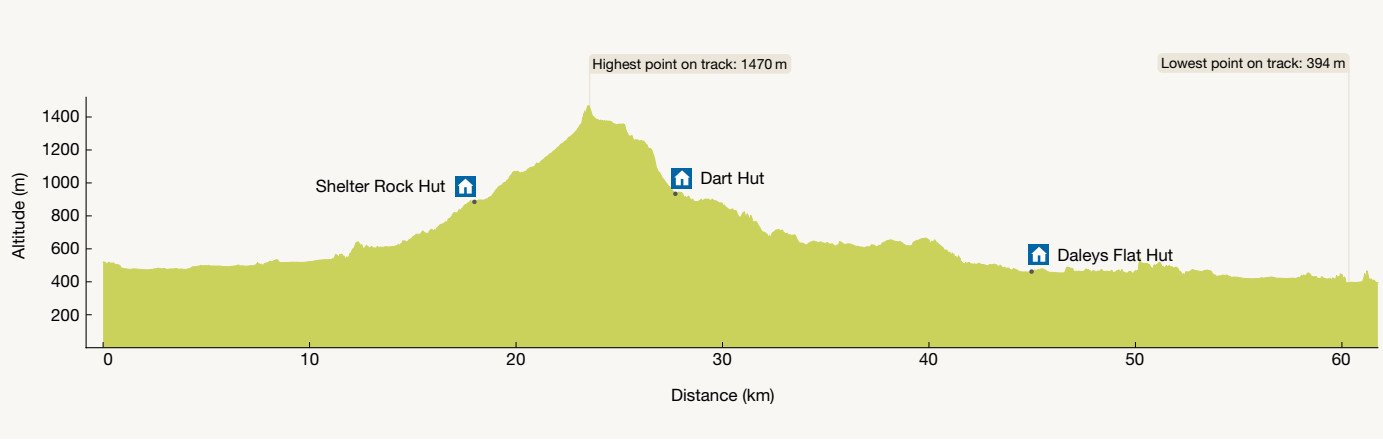


Day 4



Note that the maps in this brochure are a guide only and should not be used for navigation. The appropriate NZTopo50 series maps for these tracks are CA10 and CB10, which are available from the Whakatipu-wai-Māori/ Queenstown Visitor Centre.

Elevation Profile



Day 1

Muddy Creek to Shelter Rock Hut

6–8 hr, 19 km

Muddy Creek to park boundary

4–5 hr, 12 km

Take the vehicle track from Muddy Creek and follow the marker poles across the boggy section beyond Arthurs Creek. A side trip to the Kea Basin begins on the other side of the Rees River, north of the picturesque Lennox Falls. Continue up the valley to the swing bridge on the national park boundary.

Note: This track can be boggy with surface water in sections.

This track crosses private land. Please respect this by keeping your distance from stock and leaving all gates as you find them.

Park boundary to Shelter Rock Hut

2–3 hr, 7 km



Avalanche paths between the upper bush-line and Shelter Rock Hut can make travel hazardous from winter to early summer.

There is a marked track through the bush and a swing bridge crossing to the west bank of the Rees River. The track continues through beech forest past Clarke Slip to the bush edge. Above the bush, the track crosses several gullies with creeks that are classified avalanche paths. Take care crossing these gullies in spring and early summer when late snow may still pose a risk. About 30 min up from the bush edge, cross a bridge to the river's east bank to reach the 22-bunk Shelter Rock Hut.



Park Boundary bridge over the Rees River. Photo: Amy Clarke

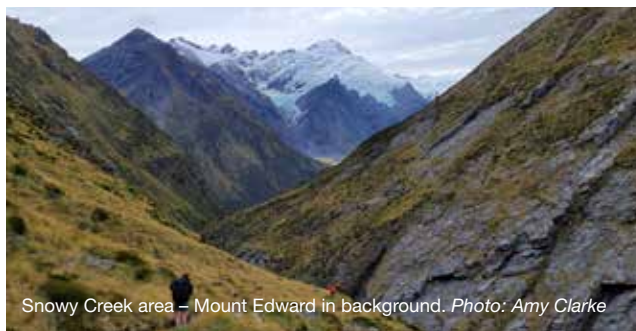
Day 2

Shelter Rock Hut to Dart Hut

4–6 hr, 10 km



The upper Snowy Creek bridge is removed each winter and is returned when the snow clears, which can be as late as December. This creek can be hazardous so extreme care must be taken if crossing it. Avalanche paths between the bush-line and Dart Hut can make travel hazardous from winter to early summer.



Snowy Creek area – Mount Edward in background. Photo: Amy Clarke

The track between Shelter Rock Hut and Dart Hut is narrow, with a number of steep drop-offs, particularly in the upper Snowy Creek. Follow the track along the true left of the Rees River, passing through scrub and then climbing to approximately 100 m above the river. The track sidles into the tussock-filled upper basin and follows the riverbed. On the final steep climb to the Rees Saddle (1471 m), there is a marked track close to the bluff on the left. From the saddle, follow the orange markers as the track drops and passes tarns to a tussock bench well above Snowy Creek. From here, the track traverses steep slopes that can be dangerous when wet or covered in snow. A bridge crosses upper Snowy Creek, and the track sidles across broken slopes before descending sharply. The 32-bunk Dart Hut is to the true left of Snowy Creek and can be reached via a swing bridge.



Shelter Rock Hut. Photo: Amy Clarke

Day 3

Dart Hut to Daleys Flat Hut

5–7 hr, 18 km

From Dart Hut, it is an easy 2–3 hr sidle and descent through beech forest to Cattle Flat. A faint track marked by metal poles leads across the 4 km of Cattle Flat, undulates through terraces and gullies, and then becomes a well-marked track through beech forest to 20-bunk Daleys Flat Hut.



Cattle Flat – Dart valley. Photo: Amy Clarke



Dart to Daleys before Cattle Flat. Photo: Amy Clarke

Day 4

Daleys Flat Hut to Chinamans car park

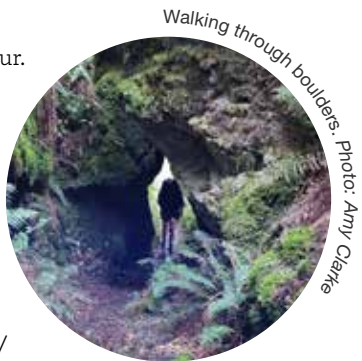
5–7 hr, 16 km



Keep to the track between Sandy Bluff and Daleys Flat Hut. Keep out of the lake and riverbed as quicksand is present.

From Daleys Flat Hut, follow the well-formed trail for about an hour.

The track then becomes rough and uneven as it deviates away from the recently formed lake over Dredge Flat, before climbing steeply to reach a picturesque, high viewpoint on Sandy bluff. From here, the track passes through the beech forest high above the Dart River/Te Awa Whakatipu. The initial parts of the track are narrow and sometimes steep and require a higher level of backcountry skill. However, much of the rest of the track has been realigned after landslides forced a long-term closure, making travel much easier. After descending to Surveyors Flat, the track stays close to the river, then gradually climbs over Chinamans Bluff and eases out towards Chinamans Flat car park.



Chinamans car park to Paradise 2 hr, 6 km

A 6-km fine-weather road leads to Paradise, crossing Chinamans Flat, forests and Dans Paddock before re-entering forests and descending to farmland at Mill Flat. During heavy rain, the road floods, preventing vehicle access beyond Paradise, so trampers may need to walk to Paradise to meet transport. In fine weather, trampers can catch the bus from Chinamans car park to Paradise.

Side trips from Dart Hut



Dart Glacier. Photo: Sam Kuperus



Dart Hut to Dart Glacier 2–3 hr, 7 km (one way)



Lunch view of The Dart glacier from Cascade saddle. Photo: Sarah Moreton

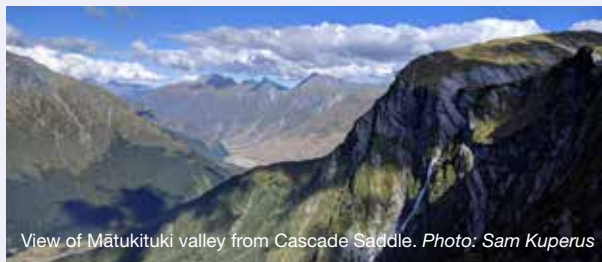


Dart Hut to Cascade Saddle 4–5 hr, 10 km (one way)



The side streams near Dart hut can rise quickly and become impassable due to rainfall and snow melt in hot summer weather.

The Dart Glacier and the Cascade Saddle make for challenging but rewarding day trips from Dart Hut. Cross the swing bridge near Dart Hut and follow the metal poles and rock cairns northward along the Dart River/Te Awa Whakatipu and the edge of the Dart Glacier.



View of Mātukituki valley from Cascade Saddle. Photo: Sam Kuperus



Dart Hut to Aspiring Hut via Cascade Saddle 8–10 hr, 17 km



Multiple fatalities have occurred on this route – make sure that you have the right skills and equipment and be prepared to turn back if conditions are unfavourable. Failure to make good decisions while attempting this traverse may result in serious injury or death.

If you want to reach the Mātukituki valley by this route, carry a copy of the Cascade Saddle Route brochure (available online at www.doc.govt.nz/cascade-saddle-route). Be aware it is recommended the route is walked in the reverse direction, starting from the Mātukituki valley. This alpine crossing only suits experienced trampers with alpine skills and should not be attempted in adverse weather. Steep snow-grass slopes on the Mātukituki valley side become treacherous when wet or covered in snow. Even in summer, snow may affect this area.



South Island Edelweiss. Photo: Sam Kuperus



Dart Hut to Whitbourn Glacier 2–4 hr, 7 km (one way)



The swing bridge across the Dart River/Te Awa Whakatipu has been removed due to flood damage. Trampers wishing to access the Whitbourn valley must now ford the river. This could be extremely hazardous in heavy rain or snowmelt, so we recommend you talk to a DOC ranger before attempting this crossing.

The track to the Whitbourn Glacier is not signposted or maintained. The Whitbourn River joins the Dart River/Te Awa Whakatipu about 30 min downstream from Dart Hut. Highly experienced parties can cross the Dart River/Te Awa Whakatipu (see warning above) and navigate along what is left of the old track to the glacier's snout.