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*Raoulia eximia* (vegetable sheep).  
*Photo: Markus Baumann*
Introduction

The 80 km Travers–Sabine Circuit reaches deep into the heart of the mountains of Nelson Lakes National Park. Tranquil beech forests, fields of waving tussocks, 2000 m high mountains and clear rushing streams are highlights of the journey. The circuit requires 4–7 days to complete and involves a crossing of Poukirikiri/Travers Saddle, an alpine pass subject to freezing conditions at any time of the year. Most of the track is classified as a tramping track. It is well marked and although most rivers and streams are bridged, after heavy rain there are a number of streams that may not be safe to cross. Sturdy boots and a good standard of fitness are recommended, and warm, waterproof clothing is essential. Pricing varies according to the season. Refer to www.doc.govt.nz or call Rotoiti/Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre on 03 521 1806.

Landform

The mountains have been thrust up by continental collision along the Alpine Fault, which crosses the track in places between Sabine Hut and Lake Rotoiti. Extensive glaciation, erosion and weathering have left a characteristic landscape of steep valley sides, scree slopes, sharp ‘arête’ ridges and many tarn-filled basins. The forested valleys once cradled glaciers, which excavated the hollows now filled by the waters of lakes Rotoiti and Rotoroa.
Vegetation

The park’s forests are dominated by the beech tree. Along the valley floors, red and silver beech prevail; on higher slopes, where the soil is thinner, the small-leaved mountain beech takes over. Sprinkled throughout the forest are occasional tōtara and a range of shrubs, many of which display an unusual wiry form that is thought to have evolved as a defence against browsing by moa.

Ferns and mosses proliferate on the forest floor, where the light is subdued and dampness clings. At the bushline, forest gives way to shrub and herb fields, where white-flowered hebe, New Zealand flax, rust-red dracophyllum and the spiky flower heads of Spaniard plants pepper the landscape.

Beyond the shrublands lie the alpine grasses and carpet plants. Tall tussocks soften the harsh texture of broken rock. In damper places in early summer, yellow buttercups, white daisies and a host of tiny specialised plants flourish in the brief growing season.

Birds

The Rotoiti Nature Recovery Project is a long-term multi-pest control programme that has reduced predator numbers on the eastern side of Lake Rotoiti. In this area, birds, including reintroduced great spotted kiwi, thrive, but beyond the project’s boundaries you can still enjoy the friendly toutouwai/robin that ventures close, alert to any insects stirred by your passing. Korimako/bellbirds and pīwakawaka/fantail are common in the forest, and the tiny titipounamu/rifleman can often be heard before it is seen, flitting up beech trunks in search of food. Raucous kākā, a native forest parrot, are often heard but rarely seen.

Pīwauwau/rock wren and cheeky kea visit the higher areas. On the river flats, paradise pūtangitangi/shelducks flee from disturbance with noisy fuss, while in forest-fringed streams, the rarer whio/blue duck may be seen deftly riding the rapids to take insects from the stony riverbed.
Male titipounamu/rifleman. Photo: Leon Berard
History

Legend tells the story of Rākaihautū, chief and explorer, who came to Aotearoa and travelled with his people to the great mountains. With his kō (digging stick), Rākaihautū dug enormous holes that filled with water. He then placed kai (food) in the lakes that had formed for those who followed him. The kai – eel, freshwater mussels and waterfowl – was important for Māori travelling the pounamu (greenstone) trails to and from the West Coast. The lakes, Rotoiti (little lake) and Rotoroa (long lake), remain today.

From their arrival in the 1840s, Europeans rapidly occupied open land close to Rotoiti for grazing sheep. By 1900, people were holidaying on the shores of the lake, and in the 1920s a fishing lodge was built at Rotoroa.

Soon cottages were being built at Rotoiti and people began to explore the mountains. In 1956, the scenic values of the mountains and lakes were recognised nationally with the creation of the national park.

How to get there

St Arnaud is easily accessible from Nelson and Blenheim. From each location it is a 1 hr 30 min drive on good roads.

Public transport

There are limited transport options to and from the area. Water taxis operate all year round on both lakes – see the ‘Commercial operators’ section of this booklet.

More information is available at the Rotoiti/Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre.
Accommodation

On the Travers–Sabine Circuit, Hopeless, Cupola and Coldwater huts are standard huts. All other huts on the circuit are serviced huts. Backcountry Hut Passes or Backcountry Hut Tickets are required to stay in all huts.

Angelus Hut and Bushline Hut operate on a booking system all year round. For dates and booking options for other bookable huts, refer to www.doc.govt.nz

Lake Rotoiti has a serviced/scenic campsite open all year at Kerr Bay, and a scenic campsite open during the peak summer months at West Bay. Both require bookings all year round. There are also standard self-registration campsites in the area at Rotoroa, Kawatiri and Teetotal.

There is a range of accommodation options in St Arnaud and Rotoroa.

PHOTOS:
Left: Winter dawn at Lake Rotoiti.
Photo: Ray Salisbury hotpixels.co.nz

Right: Angelus Hut on Rotomaninitua/Lake Angelus Lake.
Photo: David Eckl
Commercial transport operators

Nelson Lakes Shuttles
Transport to and from St Arnaud. Bookings essential.
PHONE: 03 540 2402
EMAIL: info@nelsonlakesshuttles.co.nz
WEBSITE: www.nelsonlakesshuttles.co.nz

Lake Rotoiti Water Taxis
Year-round on-demand transport for hikers.
PHONE: 021 702 278
EMAIL: watertaxi@clear.net.nz
WEBSITE: www.rotoitiwatertaxis.co.nz

Lake Rotoroa Water Taxi
Water taxi service to and from Sabine and D’Urville on demand. Contact Kerry Simpson.
PHONE: 03 523 9199
EMAIL: Simpson.Rotoroa@xtra.co.nz

Other transport operators may be available. Contact Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre on 03 5211806 or nelsonlakesvc@doc.govt.nz
Huts and campsites

Hut categories

Serviced huts have mattresses, a water supply, toilets, hand-washing facilities and wood fireplaces. Firewood is supplied during the higher use period (October–April). A warden may be present. During the low season, Backcountry Hut Passes or Backcountry Hut Tickets are required. During high season the Backcountry Hut Pass is not valid.

You must book to stay at Angelus Hut and Bushline Hut. Please refer to www.doc.govt.nz

Standard huts have mattresses, a water supply and toilets. Wood heaters are provided at huts below the bushline. Backcountry Hut Passes or Backcountry Hut Tickets are required.

Basic huts provide very basic shelter with limited facilities; no charge.

Campsite categories

Serviced campsites have a wide range of facilities and services. Flush toilets, tap water, kitchen/cooking bench, hot showers and road access for all types of vehicles are available. A cooker and picnic tables may be available.

Scenic campsites have a more limited range of facilities and services than serviced campsites. These campsites have toilets, water supply (tap, stream or lake) and vehicle or boat access. Cold showers and a cooking shelter are available.

Basic campsites have toilet facilities and may have a water supply.
Coldwater Hut from boat deck. Photo: Shellie Evans

Lakehead Hut. Photo: DOC

Upper Travers Hut. Photo: DOC

John Tait Hut. Photo: Gabrielle Czoma
West Sabine Hut. Photo: DOC

Sabine Hut. Photo: Gabrielle Czoma

Speargrass Hut. Photo: Gabrielle Czoma
Travers–Sabine
Circuit map

Track categories

Tracks are developed to different standards to cater for a variety of experiences. Choose the type of track that matches your skills, fitness and the experience you want – be realistic.

Your safety is your responsibility.

Walking track

- Easy to moderate walking from a few minutes to a day.
- Track is mostly well formed, some sections may be steep, rough or muddy.
- Suitable for people with low to moderate fitness and abilities.
- Clearly signposted. Stream and river crossings are bridged.
- Walking shoes or light tramping/hiking boots required.

Tramping track

- Challenging day or multi-day tramping/hiking.
- Track is mostly unformed with steep, rough or muddy sections.
- Suitable for people with good fitness. Moderate to high-level backcountry skills and experience, including navigation and survival skills, required.
- Track has markers, poles or rock cairns. Expect unbridged stream and river crossings.
- Tramping/hiking boots required.

Route

- Challenging day or multi-day tramping/hiking.
- Track unformed and natural, rough, muddy or very steep.
- Suitable for people with above-average fitness. High-level backcountry skills and experience, including navigation and survival skills, required.
- Complete self-sufficiency required.
- Track has markers, poles or rock cairns. Expect unbridged stream and river crossings.
- Sturdy tramping/hiking boots required.
This map is a guide only. For more information consult NZ Topo 50 maps BR24 Kawatiri and BS24 Mount Robert.
Walking the track

The circuit is best walked as described below because crossing the Poukirikiri/Travers Saddle is easier from the Travers side. Walking times are a guide only and will vary with fitness and weather conditions. Weather and snow conditions are most favourable between October and May, although in some years winter snow persists into late November on alpine passes.

St Arnaud to Lakehead Hut (28 bunks)/Coldwater Hut (12 bunks), 3hr

From Kerr Bay: Beginning at the eastern end of the bay, the Lakehead Track wanders through forest, crossing several shallow streams and shingle screes. Small beaches along the way offer picnicking opportunities and mountain views. At the head of Lake Rotoiti, the grassy flats of the lower Travers valley greet you. Lakehead Hut is 15 min on from the jetty.

From West Bay: Walk up Mount Robert Road to where the Lakeside Track descends to the lake edge through dense mānuka and kānuka forest. Follow the lake shore to Coldwater Hut, which is perched right on the water’s edge. The short diversion to Whisky Falls is worthwhile. Many trampers take a water taxi to the head of Lake Rotoiti to start their trip.

Lakehead Hut/Coldwater Hut to John Tait Hut (27 bunks), 4 hr 30 min

From Lakehead or Coldwater huts, walk up the Travers River flats through forest and clearings (remnants from the valley’s farming days). The track from Coldwater Hut passes the turn-off to Rotomaninitua/Lake Angelus. After 1 hr 30 min of easy walking you’ll reach a swing bridge, beyond which the track continues on the west bank of the Travers River.

Soon the valley narrows and walking becomes more varied, alternating between forested terraces and grassy river flats. Mount Travers can be glimpsed as the track nears Hopeless Creek.

Cross the creek on a swing bridge. Soon you’ll leave the river and notice the gradient becoming steeper. As it eases, you’ll hear the river again. Cross a few small creeks and suddenly emerge to the welcome sight of John Tait Hut at the head of a small clearing.
John Tait Hut to Upper Travers Hut (24 bunks), 3 hr

Continue beyond John Tait Hut to Cupola Creek chasm, from where the track climbs steeply, leaving the river in its gorge below. A sign marks a short side-track to Travers Falls, a 20 m cascade plunging into a deep bowl.

Back on the main track, the gradient soon eases. Cross several scree, and eventually the Travers River via a short bridge. From here, the forest is noticeably stunted and the track, although steep again, offers occasional views of the looming mountains.

Finally the track levels and emerges from the trees onto an extensive tussock-covered flat, where Upper Travers Hut nestles at the base of the east face of Mount Travers.

Upper Travers Hut to West Sabine Hut (30 bunks), 6–9 hr depending on conditions

Poukirikiri/Travers Saddle is an alpine pass requiring ice axes and crampons in winter and well into spring. Be prepared for sudden weather changes. The Sabine side of the saddle in particular is exposed to avalanches. At Upper Travers Hut, the track becomes a route marked with snow poles as far as the bushline on the Sabine side.

Cross the Travers River near the hut and follow the poles through dense alpine shrubs. Leaving the boulder-strewn valley, the track steepens and zigzags...
up a scree slope before continuing more gently to the saddle with its panoramic views. The saddle is 450 m above the hut, about 1 hr 30 min walking.

From the saddle, the descent is steep – the Sabine forks lie 1000 m below. The track crosses tussock and scree, then briefly enters stunted beech forest before emerging into a steep gully. Descend by zigzagging to the valley floor, where the track begins again and the walking becomes easier.

Ten minutes further on, a bridge crosses the deep chasm of the East Branch Sabine River. The track sidles around the edge of this chasm before descending into the West Branch Sabine River valley and heading upstream a short distance to West Sabine Hut.

**West Sabine Hut to Sabine Hut (32 bunks), 5 hr**

Use the swing bridge upstream of the hut to cross the west branch of the Sabine River. The track down the valley sidles above the river and crosses three long, open flats.

Leave the river where it enters a gorge in the lower valley. Climb steeply, then descend again, rejoining the deep river at a bridge across a narrow cleft. Easy walking leads to Sabine Hut, with its expansive views over Lake Rotoroa. From Sabine Hut there are two ways to finish the tramp: either by tramping via Speargrass Hut and the Speargrass valley, or taking the Rotoroa Water Taxi to Rotoroa village.
Completing the circuit – Sabine Hut to St Arnaud

To St Arnaud via Speargrass Hut (12 bunks), 8 hr

Follow the track along the lake shore before climbing to Howard Saddle, then begin a long sidle in and out of several small valleys and through delicate wetlands. Here you will notice the distinctively conical kaikawaka, or New Zealand cedar, with its dark foliage, stringy bark and often twisted trunk.

After about 5 hr, the track reaches a saddle, from where it descends to a clearing above Speargrass Hut.

Leaving Speargrass Hut, cross the bridge over Te Horowai/Speargrass Creek and enter the forest. A well-graded track descends to the valley floor and follows the river before climbing gradually for some distance to Pourangahu/Mount Robert car park, overlooking Lake Rotoiti. From here, it is 1 hr 30 min down Mount Robert Road to St Arnaud village.
Side trips

Travers valley side creeks

**Hukere Stream:** From the junction with the Travers Track, it is a steady, 4 hr ascent to Rotomaninitua/Lake Angelus and the lake-filled basins of the Travers Range. A separate publication, *Angelus Hut Tracks & Routes*, describes the tramp to Rotomaninitua/Lake Angelus.

**Hopeless Creek:** Follow the river for 1 hr 30 min to Hopeless Hut (6 bunks).

**The Cupola basin:** 2 hr 30 min of strenuous climbing leads to the lofty perch of Cupola Hut (8 bunks), with superb views of Mount Hopeless.

Rotomairewhenua/Blue Lake, 7 hr return

This is a worthwhile overnight side-trip from the main circuit. Head upstream from the West Branch Sabine swing bridge. After 1 hr 30 min, the valley broadens and the track passes through forest destroyed by an avalanche in 1980. Climb steeply in two stages to a high basin containing Blue Lake Hut (16 bunks). Rotomairewhenua/Blue Lake is thought to be the clearest natural freshwater lake in the world. Please respect this pristine water by refraining from washing or swimming in the lake.

Rotomaninitua/Lake Angelus via Mount Cedric, 6–9 hr depending on conditions

This is a very exposed route to the Angelus basin. The track begins behind Sabine Hut and climbs very steeply and steadily to the bushline. Poles and cairns mark the route from here, which eventually drops off the eastern side of a high ridge and descends to Rotomaninitua/Lake Angelus.
Plan and prepare

Plan, prepare and equip yourself well. Have the right gear and skills for the trip. For up-to-date track alerts, weather and other safety information, go to www.doc.govt.nz/plan

This information is also displayed on the Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre noticeboards.

Weather

Hospitable and welcoming on a fine day, Nelson Lakes National Park and (especially) the alpine route over Poukirikiri/Travers Saddle are prone to sudden weather changes bringing freezing winds and snow at any time of the year. Even small streams are dangerous in flood. Winter conditions or bad weather could slow or stop your progress to or from the hut. A fall onto hard or icy snow could be lethal. Snow avalanches are possible.

What to take

Personal locator beacons are available for hire from Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre. Pack a range of equipment for warm, cold, windy or wet conditions. You will need at least one set of clothes to walk in and another dry set to change into at night. Cotton clothing is not suitable; wool and modern synthetics are better as they dry quickly and give more warmth.

Winter visitors should carry; and know how to use, ice axe, crampons and snow shovel, and an avalanche transceiver and probe.

You will need to provide your own sleeping bag, gas, cooking equipment, food and utensils. Take a day’s spare food in case of delay due to weather conditions.

Trip intentions

Leave details of your trip (return date and time, planned route, party members names and vehicle licence plate numbers) with a trusted contact, and don’t forget to let them know when you return. You can also do this with the New Zealand Outdoor Intentions process on the AdventureSmart website www.adventuresmart.org.nz/outdoors-intentions

Remember to fill in hut books during your trip, even if you do not stay in the hut. They can assist in search and rescue operations, and may help save your life.
Safety information

Be prepared

Stay safe in the outdoors by following the Land Safety Code.

- Choose the right trip for you
- Understand the weather
- Pack warm clothes and extra food
- Share your plans and take ways to get help
- Take care of yourself and each other

Snow and avalanches

With snow on the ground, Poukirkiri/Travers Saddle and side trips into the alpine basins should only be attempted by experienced and well-equipped groups.

Be wary of avalanches. Avalanches occur in the park every year, normally between June and October but sometimes as late as December. Most occur during winter storms or in spring/early summer when warmer temperatures or rain make the snow unstable. The Travers–Sabine Circuit has more than 20 recognised avalanche paths.

To reduce the risk of being caught in an avalanche, do not stop between the avalanche signs. Even if you cannot see snow from the track, there may be enough snow out of sight on the upper slopes to form an avalanche that could reach the track. Avalanche paths are only marked on the Travers–Sabine Circuit and Blue Lake Track. Latest avalanche danger information, including track and hut closures, is available from Rotoiti/Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre.
Water quality

Water supplies in the Travers and Sabine valleys are generally of high quality but cannot be guaranteed. You may choose to boil, filter or treat drinking water. Please use toilet facilities and help keep water supplies clean.

Beware of catching or spreading norovirus (stomach bugs): good hygiene practices are essential. Always clean hut surfaces after use.

Cooking

No cooking facilities are provided in the huts. All visitors should carry portable cookers.

Wasps

There are high numbers of wasps, particularly between January and April. Consider carrying an antihistamine product and, if you are allergic to their stings, ensure you carry medication with you.
Be prepared
Stay safe in the outdoors by following the Land Safety Code.

- Choose the right trip for you.
- Understand the weather.
- Pack warm clothes and extra food.
- Share your plans and take ways to get help.
- Take care of yourself and each other.

Rubbish
No rubbish facilities are provided in the backcountry – pack out what you pack in.

No pets
To protect the wildlife, domestic animals are prohibited in the Nelson Lakes National Park. Dog owners convicted of bringing a dog into the park face a maximum fine of $10,000 or 12 months in prison under the National Parks Act 1980.

Drones
Drones are prohibited in the Nelson Lakes National Park.

Sandflies
The presence of biting sandflies can detract from your experience at the lakes, especially during the summer months. Cover up and apply a good quality insect repellent to any exposed skin.

Rubbish
No rubbish facilities are provided in the backcountry – pack out what you pack in.

Care for Aotearoa

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

Keep NZ clean
Take all rubbish with you and use toilets where provided.

Show respect
Respect others, respect culture.

Be prepared
Stay safe in the outdoors by following the Land Safety Code.

- Choose the right trip for you.
- Understand the weather.
- Pack warm clothes and extra food.
- Share your plans and take ways to get help.
- Take care of yourself and each other.

Department of Conservation
Te Pāpa Atawhai

New Zealand Government
Further information

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Rotoiti/Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre
View Road
St Arnaud 7053

PHONE: (03) 521 1806
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