

Greenstone and Caples tracks

Whakatipu-wai-Māori/Lake Whakatipu
Greenstone and Caples
Conservation Areas



Nau mai, haere mai

Welcome to the Caples and Greenstone valleys, where you can enjoy a 4-day round trip over the subalpine McKellar Saddle in superb surroundings. The Greenstone valley is wide and open with tussock flats and beech forest, while the Caples valley is narrower and more heavily forested with some grassy clearings.

The Caples and Greenstone tracks start from the car park at the end of Greenstone Road, 86 km from Queenstown. Driving from Glenorchy to the Greenstone Shelter takes 1 hr on mostly gravel road. Note that there are a number of fords between Kinloch and the Greenstone Road end that can be flooded in heavy rain and become impassable.

Both tracks can also be started at Lake Howden on the Routeburn Track, which is an hour's walk from The Divide (Milford Road, 80 km from Te Anau).

UNESCO 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 hectares and incorporates Aoraki/Mount Cook, Westland Tai Poutini, Fiordland and Mount Aspiring national parks. Some of the best examples of animals and plants that were once found on the ancient supercontinent Gondwana live here, and the superb diversity of natural features in this area is recognised internationally.



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

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 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.



Keep New Zealand clean

Take all rubbish with you and use toilets where provided.



Show respect

Respect others, respect culture.



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai



Huts and camping

There are three Department of Conservation (DOC)-managed huts along the Greenstone and Caples tracks – the Greenstone, McKellar and Mid Caples huts. Untreated water is available in all three huts (indoor running water in summer, outside tank water in winter) and flush toilets are provided in summer, with pit toilets in winter. The huts also have wood fires for heating only – wood is supplied in summer and can be collected from the forest floor in winter. Trampers need their own cookers as gas stoves are not provided all year round, but mattresses are provided. Trampers should leave the huts clean and tidy and pack out what they pack in as there are no rubbish disposal facilities. Hut wardens are present from November until late April.

Camping is available beside each of these huts and campers are welcome to use the hut facilities.

Online bookings are required for huts and campsites.

The Upper Caples and Mid Greenstone huts are managed by the Southern Lakes branch of the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association. Bookings can be made at www.southernlakesnzda.org.nz.

Camping elsewhere in the Greenstone–Caples area is permitted under the following conditions.

- Camping must only take place along the bush edge (on public conservation land) and more than 50 m from the track.
- Camping is not permitted on McKellar Saddle because of the fragile subalpine environment.
- Camping is not permitted on the privately owned Caples and Greenstone valley floors.
- Always follow the Tiaki principles – this includes burying toilet waste well away from any water sources or carrying it out.
- Avoid camping under trees that may fall or in flood zones.

History

The Greenstone and Hollyford valleys were once the easiest access routes between the West Coast and Central Otago. They were discovered and widely used by the Waitaha, one of the earliest groups of settlers in the region, who were followed by Kāti Māmoe and then Ngāi Tahu while travelling from Lake Whakatipu to the West Coast in search of pounamu / greenstone. Early West Coast Ngāti Wairangi also used the route as they sought this highly valued stone from the Dart valley. The Otago pounamu was the especially valued pearly grey-green variety and was made into tools and weapons of great mana / status.

No Māori archaeological sites have been found within the Greenstone and Caples valleys, but about 20 sites have been identified beside the Dart River / Te Awa Whakatipu and Rees River (Puahere) and on Pigeon Island / Wāwāhi Waka, opposite the Greenstone valley.

The first Europeans here included Southland runholders David McKellar and George Gunn in 1862, who were looking for grazing land, and prospector Patrick Caples a year later, who was thought to be the first European to cross from Lake Whakatipu to the West Coast. For a long time, the pack track up the Greenstone valley was the only

route to Martins Bay on the West Coast. Farming began in the Caples valley in 1880 – the original Birchdale homestead still stands – and the Greenstone valley and Pass Burn were used as stock routes by early runholders.

By the late 1800s, Lake Rere was a popular destination, with tourists arriving at the Elfin Bay wharf on steamers and walking to the lake.

Ngāi Tahu Land Settlement – Kā Whenua Roimata

As part of the Crown's settlement of Ngāi Tahu's historic land claims, three high-country stations at the head of Lake Whakatipu have been transferred to Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu. In turn, Ngāi Tahu has transferred 4100 ha of mountain land in the southern Ailsa and Humboldt mountains back to the Crown, as a gift to the people of Aotearoa New Zealand. This land is now known as Kā Whenua Roimata, which translates as 'the land of tears'.

Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu is also to lease back to the Crown in perpetuity other significant portions of the stations as conservation areas, which are mainly in the Mararoa catchment. In addition, there are rights of way for public foot access across Ngāi Tahu lands in the Lake Rere and Scott Basin areas and along the Greenstone and Caples valleys.

View of the mid-Greenstone valley before Steele Creek. Mt Christina can be seen in the distance. Photo: Sadao Tsuchiya



Natural history

The dominant rock of both river valleys and the surrounding mountains is the erosion-resistant Caples sandstone, which virtually stands on end, while a band of blackish serpentine known as the Greenstone Melange occurs in the lower reaches of the valleys.

The Greenstone valley was carved into its 'U' shape by glacial action. At its peak, the once enormous Hollyford Glacier reached Martins Bay on the coast, flowed over Key Summit on the Southern Alps/ Kā Tiritiri o te Moana and branched into the Eglinton and Greenstone valleys. It then split at the Sly Burn, reaching Mavora Lakes in the south and Lake Whakatipu in the east.

The forests in both valleys comprise New Zealand beech species. Tawhai/ silver beech is found throughout the valleys, while the larger leaved tawhairaunui/ red beech prefers lower altitudes and alluvial fans, and the small- and smooth-leaved tawhairauriki/ mountain beech prefers higher altitudes. The forest understorey includes ferns and small shrubs and trees, such as horopito with its peppery tasting leaves.

The open, grassy river flats have always been clear of forest due to the frequent frosts that occur here. Native grasses and tussocks have mostly been replaced by introduced grasses through farming, although extensive tussock fields remain in the mid and upper Greenstone valley. Prominent patches of tānekaha/ celery pine and bog pine, as well as īnaka/ dracophyllum, tussocks and stunted mountain beech occur on the river flats and McKellar Saddle.

The beech forests are rich in invertebrate life and insect-eating birds such as ngirungiru/ South Island tomitts, pīwakawaka/ fantails, tititipounamu/ riflemen, pīpipi/ brown creepers and kakaruwai/ South Island robins. Kākāriki/ parakeets, mohua/ yellowheads and kākā can also be seen in the Greenstone and Caples forests, while kea are sometimes seen at the upper end of the Caples Track and kārearea/ New Zealand falcons soar above the valley flats and forest edges. Mohua and pekapeka/ long-tailed bats are also found in the upper Caples valley. Whio/ blue ducks inhabit fast-flowing streams and the noisy pūtakitaki/ paradise ducks and kōau/ black shags are conspicuous on the river flats.

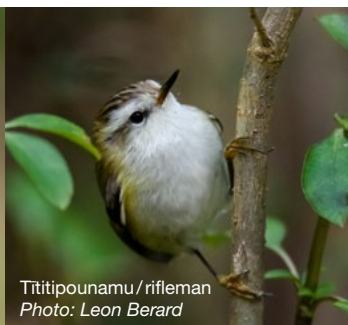
Hunting and fishing

The Greenstone/ Caples Recreational Hunting Area (RHA) covers both the Greenstone and Caples catchments. Black fallow deer are most common, although white fallow deer are also present. Chamois are frequently seen on the tops in Fiordland National Park and in the RHA, and red deer may also be seen. There is a balloted restricted shooting season from 1 April to 30 September only, and no hunting is permitted on or within 100 m of the river flats. Ballot applications are accepted online in November for April/ May (the roar) and in February for June through September at www.doc.govt.nz. No hunting is allowed from 1 October to 31 March in the Greenstone/ Caples RHA.

The Caples and Greenstone valleys are recognised as rainbow and brown trout fisheries of national importance. Both Whole Season and Backcountry fishing licences are required, and only fly fishing is allowed, with a daily bag limit of one trout. A controlled fishery is established from the source of the Greenstone River to the Sly Burn confluence from 1 February to 31 March each year. To apply for licences, visit the Fish & Game New Zealand website: www.fishandgame.org.nz.



Kārearea/ New Zealand falcon
Photo: Sabine Bernert



Tititipounamu/ rifleman
Photo: Leon Berard



Kākāriki/ red-crowned parakeet
Photo: Leon Berard



Whio/ blue duck
Photo: Sabine Bernert



Mohua/ yellowhead
Photo: Leon Berard



Kākā
Photo: DOC



Kakaruwai/ South Island robin
Photo: Baptiste Maryns

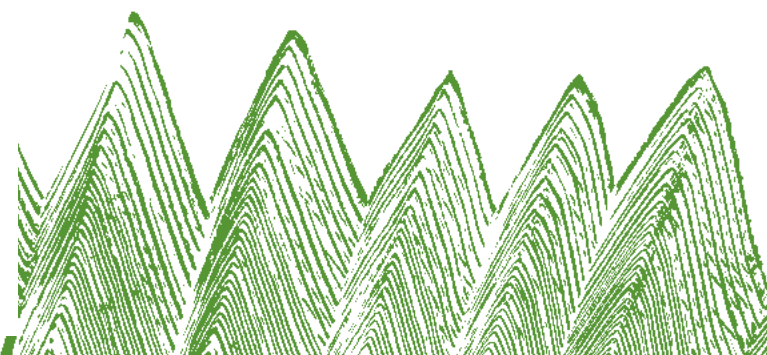


Pekapeka/ long-tailed bat
Photo: DOC

Anglers must agree to didymo cleaning procedures before obtaining a Backcountry Licence. 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.

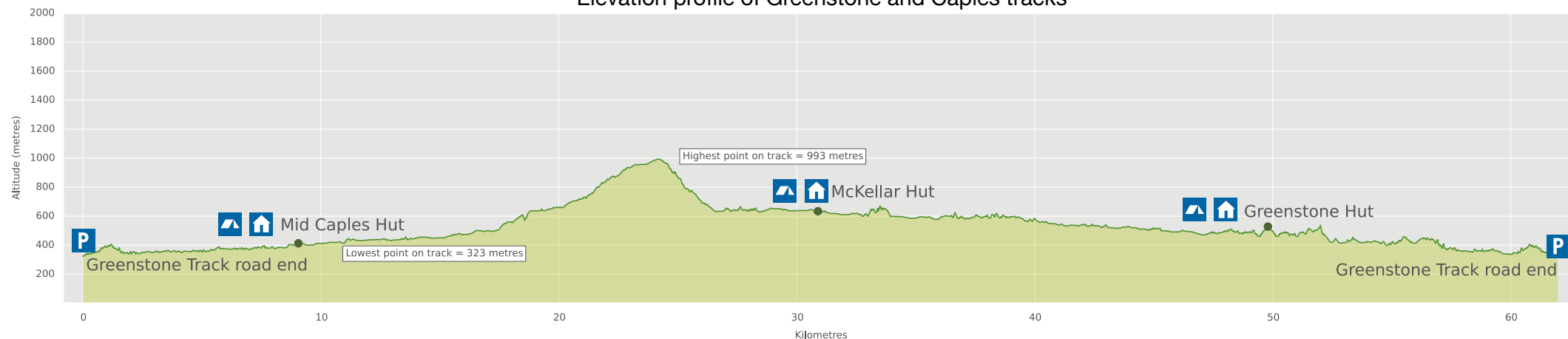


BETWEEN WATERWAYS





Elevation profile of Greenstone and Caples tracks



Track grades



Easy tramping track – Generally well-formed track for comfortable overnight tramping/hiking trips. Suitable for people with limited backcountry (remote area) experience. Light tramping/hiking boots required.



Tramping track – Challenging day or multi-day tramping/hiking. Mostly unformed track but has directional markers, poles or cairns. Suitable for fit, experienced and adequately equipped people. Tramping boots required.



Route – Challenging overnight tramping/hiking. Unformed track suitable only for people with high-level backcountry skills and experience and above-average fitness.



Warning: Unbridged side streams on these track systems may flood due to heavy or prolonged rain. Care is required. Make sensible decisions about river crossings and have alternative plans.



Upper Greenstone valley. Photo: Sadao Tsuchiya

Greenstone–Caples circuit

The Greenstone and Caples tracks combined are a moderately demanding tramp, with some days averaging 6–7 hr of walking. A reasonable degree of fitness is required.

These tracks can be walked in either direction. This description details walking the Caples Track and then the Greenstone Track.



Greenstone Road end to Mid Caples Hut

2–3 hr, 9 km

Follow the joint start of the Greenstone and Caples tracks from the car park. After 2–3 min, a stock bridge gives access to the Lake Rere Track. Do not cross the bridge but keep to the true left of the river – the left bank, looking downstream. The track continues past the confluence of the Caples and Greenstone rivers, and another swing bridge provides access to the Greenstone Track. The Caples Track continues on the true left of the Caples River and passes over a few slips, which can be difficult to traverse in bad weather. The track mainly follows the bush edge along the valley floor but does cross the occasional grassy clearing, as well as a spectacular gorge just before the 24-bunk Mid Caples Hut.



The Caples River. Photo: Celeste Bisson-Rowe



Mid Caples Hut to McKellar Hut

6–7 hr, 22 km



Beware of side streams on this section after heavy rain.

Travel up the valley through bush and grassy clearings. About 2 hr from Mid Caples Hut, the track passes junctions with Steele Creek and the Fraser Creek and Kay Creek tracks before sidling steadily up towards the bush edge. The track across McKellar Saddle (945 m) gives great views and has been boardwalked to protect the fragile subalpine vegetation.



McKellar Saddle and Mt Christina. Photo: Sadao Tsuchiya

West of the saddle, the track again enters the bush and zigzags downwards for 1 hr to the open valley floor, where a track junction is reached upstream from Lake McKellar. The 24-bunk McKellar Hut lies to the left and Lake Howden and the Routeburn Track to the right. Both are about 1 hr from the junction.

Note: Upper Caples Hut is now locked and managed by the Southern Lakes Deerstalkers Association.



McKellar Hut to Greenstone Hut

4 hr 30 min – 6 hr 30 min, 18 km



Take care crossing side streams, which may become hazardous during heavy rain – particularly Jean Batten Creek south of McKellar Hut.

Cross the bridge in front of the hut and walk downriver on the true left. Travel is easy, alternating between tussock flats and bush, until the track passes through an old landslide to reach a gorge. Once there, cross Steele Creek over a swing bridge. The track veers right, passing close to a private hut (Steele Creek Lodge) and the local Deerstalkers Association Mid Greenstone Hut (locked). The 20-bunk Greenstone Hut is 1–2 hr from here.



Greenstone Hut
Photo: Celeste Bisson-Rowe

The track stays on the true left of the river and meanders down past a large, white, terraced bank. It then continues down the open valley before entering the bush. A junction in the track is reached soon after; turning right leads to a bridge over a gorge to the Greenstone Hut and Mavora–Greenstone Walkway.



Greenstone Hut to Greenstone Road end

3–5 hr, 12 km



The areas above and below Slip Flat may be avalanche prone in winter.

To continue down the valley to the Greenstone car park, return to the junction via the gorge bridge and continue along the Greenstone Track. The valley narrows sharply as the river enters a long section of gorge, but about halfway down the gorge is a large, open area known as Slip Flat. If the creek across the flat is in flood, there is an emergency bridge upstream.

Where the track re-enters the bush, it follows the Greenstone River to its junction with the Caples River. Parts of the track cross private land and stock may be present. At the confluence of the two rivers, take the swing bridge that leads to the true left bank of the Caples River and join the Caples Track. From here, it is a 40-min walk downstream to the car park.



Bridge over the Caples River near the confluence. Photo: Kamila Hesketh

Other options



McKellar Hut to Lake Howden outlet (Routeburn Track)

1 hr 30 min – 2 hr 30 min, 6 km

From McKellar Hut, the track skirts to the left of Lake McKellar and passes through forest, over the Greenstone Saddle, and then along Lake Howden to a junction with the Routeburn Track.

From the Lake Howden outlet, it takes about 1 hr to reach the road end at The Divide or 3 hr to walk up to Lake Mackenzie Hut (bookings required during the Great Walks Season from November to April).



Caples Track / Steele Creek junction to Greenstone Hut via Steele Creek Track

10–12 hr



Steep and sparsely marked, this tramping track is suitable for experienced trampers only.



Mid Caples Hut to The Divide (Routeburn Track – Milford Road end)

7–8 hr, 24 km



The area at the base of the McKellar Saddle in the Greenstone valley is prone to flooding in heavy rain.

From Mid Caples Hut, the track meanders through bush and grassy clearings and then climbs through beech forest to subalpine McKellar Saddle. From the 945-m saddle, the track descends along well-formed zigzags to the junction with the Greenstone Track. The track then goes to the right, over the Greenstone Saddle and alongside Lake Howden to the lake outlet and the Routeburn Track.

From the Lake Howden outlet, it takes about 1 hr to get to the road end at The Divide.



Swimming hole. Photo: Sadao Tsuchiya



Mid Caples Hut. Photo: Celeste Bisson-Rowe



Walking in beech forest. Photo: Sadao Tsuchiya



Greenstone valley. Photo: Sadao Tsuchiya



Mid Caples Hut to Greenstone Hut 5 hr, 16 km

This track passes the confluence of the Greenstone and Caples rivers.



Mid Caples Hut to Caples Track junction with Steele Creek Track 2 hr, 7 km



Mavora–Greenstone Walkway

This 2–3-day walk from Greenstone Hut to Mavora Lakes forms part of Te Araroa – New Zealand's Trail.

A separate Mavora Lakes brochure is available for this walkway.



Rocky slip. Photo: Sadao Tsuchiya

Know before you go

Side stream flooding

Side streams on these track systems may flood due to heavy or prolonged rain – particularly the Caples River and side streams in the upper Caples valley, and Jean Batten Creek south of McKellar Hut. Care is required. Make sensible decisions about river crossings and have alternative plans and extra supplies.

Avalanche risk

Although the tracks remain open in winter, avalanche danger may be present both above and below Slip Flat in the lower Greenstone valley, and snow and ice may make travel difficult, even on the valley floors.

Lake Howden Hut

This hut, which was situated at the junction of the Greenstone and Routeburn tracks, was destroyed in the February 2020 flooding event and has been removed.

Weather

Always check the weather forecast, hazards and facilities before entering the area, as weather and track conditions can change at any time. McKellar Saddle is exposed, with no shelter in adverse weather. Check with Whakatipu-wai-Māori/Queenstown Visitor Centre for information on current conditions.

Water

Water provided at the huts is not treated or filtered, so ensure you take sufficient water treatment provisions. Cattle and sheep are present on the grassy lower flats, so it is advised that water taken from the rivers and streams is boiled or sterilised.

Land status

The grassy river flats of the Caples and Greenstone valleys are private farmland. Respect this by staying on the tracks that follow the forest edge and not disturbing stock.

The forest is a Stewardship Area managed by DOC. Fiordland National Park begins at the southern end of Lake McKellar.

Your safety is your responsibility.

Further information

**Whakatipu-wai-Māori /
Queenstown Visitor Centre**

50 Stanley Street
Queenstown 9300

PHONE: 03 442 7935

EMAIL: queenstownvc@doc.govt.nz

www.doc.govt.nz