

Banks Peninsula conservation walks

CANTERBURY



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Fun at Packhorse Hut. Photo: Sarah Mankelov

Banks Peninsula was once a rich mosaic of plant and bird species, which human interference all but destroyed. The few pockets which survive as public reserves give some idea of the diversity that once typified Banks Peninsula. Many of these reserves are easily accessible, being close to the Summit Road. All are worth visiting as most have short walks and great picnic spots.

Peninsula people

Waitaha, Ngāti Mamoe and Ngāi Tahu all lived in or moved through the area. By 1820 Ngāi Tahu had many settlements and pā around the peninsula. In the 1820s fighting between hapū (family groups) began. Known as the Kai Huanga feud, it continued until the threat of Te Rauparaha in the early 1830s brought the families back together. In 1840 French settlers arrived at Akaroa, which had just been claimed by the English under the Treaty of Waitangi. As the site of the only attempted settlement by the French in New Zealand, Akaroa is unique. Some of the first European settlements in Canterbury were whaling stations on the peninsula.

Plants & animals

Banks Peninsula was formed over six million years ago, following the violent eruptions of two volcanoes. Craters now form the harbours of Lyttelton and Akaroa with many smaller bays indenting the coastline. The original Banks Peninsula forest, 20,000 years ago, had similar plants to those we find today. Most of this forest was felled or burned during the first 50 years of European occupation. Forest remnants provide refuges for native forest birds, including bellbird/korimako, wood pigeon/kererū, silvereye, pūkeko, fantail/pīwakawaka, tomtit/miromiro, grey warbler/riroriro, rifleman/tititipounamu, and brown creeper/pīpipi. A marine mammal sanctuary protects the rare Hector's dolphin/upokohue, while nearby Pōhatu Bay is the site of a marine reserve, protecting marine life.



Getting there

Banks Peninsula reserves and walking tracks are widely scattered and best accessed by car. Akaroa, 83 km from Christchurch is situated on the edge of a deep harbour. Allow 1.5 hours driving as the Christchurch to Akaroa Highway climbs and turns steeply. The roads on Banks Peninsula are winding, steep, narrow and not all are sealed. Some are four-wheel drive only. Parking is limited for some reserves. Drive cautiously. There are two bus services to Akaroa; Akaroa Shuttle (0800 500 929) and French Connection (0800 800 575).

For your safety

Sturdy footwear is essential for most walks, as many of the tracks have uneven and rocky surfaces. Carry drinking water, adequate clothing, and be prepared for sudden changes in the weather. All walking times are approximate. Some tracks cross private farmland and may be closed from August to October for lambing. Tracks may also be closed for maintenance or during periods of high fire risk. Please check before setting out.





Track classifications

-  **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 sign posted. 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

Key to symbols



Christchurch – Little River Railtrail

Time: 5 hours walking one way    

Distance 20 km




Note: Shared cycleway

Following the route of a 19th-century railway which ran from Hornby in Christchurch to Little River, this cycle track and walkway currently begins at Motukarara and ends at Little River. The track itself is nearly flat and has a gravel surface. Public toilets are available at Motukarara, Ataahua, Birdlings Flat, Catons Bay, and Little River. Drinking water should be carried as there is none available on the route.

The Motukarara to Ataahua leg of the trail borders Te Waihora/Lake Ellesmere offering spectacular views across this 20,000-hectare lake. Formerly an estuary of the Waimakariri River, the lake provides habitat for numerous species of birds and fish.

The Christchurch-Little River Railtrail Trust produces a pamphlet on the railtrail and maintains a website at www.littleriverrailtrail.co.nz

Kaituna Valley Scenic Reserve



Time: 10 minutes   

From Christchurch travel along the Akaroa Highway about 40 km, turn left at Kaituna Valley Road and travel about 5 km.

The walk, starting and finishing at the picnic area, winds through the bush of the reserve and surrounding rank exotic grass.

The scenic reserve is about six hectares of bush remnant with a few large mataī and kaikahikatea. The outstanding feature is the healthy even-aged stand of New Zealand ash/tītoki. One of the largest stands left in Canterbury, it is known for the showy display of brilliant scarlet and black fruits. Māori steamed these and squeezed oil from them for medicine and perfume.

Sign of the Packhorse Scenic Reserve

Time: 3–4 hours return to hut  

Hut sleeps 9. This is a serviced hut. Hut tickets available from DOC offices.



Note: Closed for lambing Aug – Oct.

Start from a short side road off Kaituna Valley Road.

The track is well sign-posted and passes the farm, following vehicle tracks up a bush-filled valley before climbing onto a big spur. It then follows the spur for some distance before reaching a farm track past Parkinsons Bush Reserve. This leads to the saddle and historic stone hut, well situated for the views. The hut can also be accessed by tracks from Gebbies Pass and Mt Herbert.

The hut was one of a series of rest houses along the proposed Summit Road, along with the Sign of the Takahē, Kiwi and Bellbird. Built in 1917 of local stone, it sits on a saddle between the sea and the summit of Mt Bradley.

Mt Herbert/Te Ahu Pātiki

Time: 5–6 hours return  




Note: Closed for lambing Aug – Oct.

Can be accessed from Whero Ave, Diamond Harbour, or Orton Bradley Park. Can also be accessed from Packhorse Hut or Port Levy Saddle (via Summit Road Walkway) or from the Purau/Port Levy saddle.

This is a strenuous walk from the sea to the summit of Mt Herbert/Te Ahu Pātiki, the high point of Banks Peninsula. The walkway mostly follows a farm vehicle track up a volcanic spur.

There is a shelter on the saddle between Mt Herbert and Mt Bradley.


Okuti Valley Scenic Reserve

Time: 20 minutes return   

From Christchurch turn right just before Little River, then left following Okuti Valley Road 4 km to the reserve.

A short walk from the picnic area leads to the start of Reserve Road, a shingle no-exit road. From here the track zigzags gently up through the heart of the reserve. The track meets back up with Reserve Road, which walkers can follow down to make a round trip back to the picnic area. Birds are plentiful in this reserve, which features lowland forest such as kaikahikatea, tōtara, māhoe and kānuka. The kaikahikatea is growing with *Carex secta* (large swamp sedge) and is thought to be the last place left on Banks Peninsula for this once very common association. Stone picnic tables provide seating for visitors.

Montgomery Park Scenic Reserve

Time: 10 minutes return to tōtara tree,  2 hours return to Rocky Peak.

Drive to Hilltop on the Akaroa Highway then turn along the Summit Road for 500 m to a small area at the side of the road where you can park.

An outstanding feature of this reserve is a huge forked lowland tōtara which may be 2,000 years old and measures 8.5 metres around its trunk.


The tōtara can be reached after a few minutes walk into the bush which also features tōtara, mataī and fuchsia/kōtukutuku.

The track winds up steadily through forest and then north through open grasslands and regenerating bush. Good views are possible from this section of track.

The track then turns and climbs steeply up a gap in the bluffs, over boulders. It reaches open tussock tops before eventually climbing onto 'Rocky Peak', with views of the peninsula and Akaroa Harbour.

Montgomery Track links up with the longer Summit Road Walkway Track.

Hay Scenic Reserve





Time: 20 minutes return 

Follow the Akaroa Highway to Hilltop, then along the Summit Road to the Pigeon Bay turnoff. The reserve is adjacent to the road, 5 km from the turnoff.

Head clockwise around this scenic loop track through one of the best remaining stands of lowland podocarp forest on the peninsula. Large mataī, kaikahikatea, tōtara, and miro mix with exotics in this small reserve.

The easy grade makes this walk suitable for small children and family groups.

Pigeon Bay Walkway

Time: 4–5 hours return    

Note: The walkway crosses private land and is closed for lambing July – September.




Follow Akaroa Highway to Hilltop, then turn left along Summit Road to the Pigeon Bay Road turnoff. Follow this road to the coast, turn right on to Wharf Road. The walking track starts at the end of Wharf Road, by the yacht club building. It is about 14 km long, well sign-posted and follows a grassy vehicle track of easy grade.

Note: This is a walking track only.

Contact Andrew Humm 03 304 6881

Features include spectacular coastal views, tītoki trees, akeake, and native passion vine/kōhia at their southern limits.

Ōtepātotu Scenic Reserve

Time: 1 hour return   


From Christchurch follow the Akaroa Highway to Hilltop, then turn left on to Summit Road. Ōtepātotu is located along the Summit Road midway between Okains and Le Bons Bays. A loop track starts and finishes at the picnic area.

Walk along the track to a lookout point on the bluffs, with panoramic views across the harbour and surrounding landscape.

From the lookout the track climbs through a remnant of mountain tōtara forest to reach the summit of Lavericks Peak (755 m). Nearing the summit, trees are hung with weeping moss, creating a ‘goblin forest’ atmosphere, appropriate to the loose translation of the name Ōtepātotu, ‘place of the fairies’.

The return track travels down through a native fuchsia/kōtututuku gully forest on the southern side.

Ellangowan Scenic Reserve

Time: 30–40 minutes return 




From Akaroa, travel 7 km up Long Bay Road to the Summit Road junction known as the ‘Cabstand’.

Turn onto Hickory Bay Road and travel 1 km to the sign-posted car park.

From here walk down the road for 5 minutes to pick up the start of the track, marked with a DOC green and gold post. The track climbs to the ridge and then along to a rocky outlook on a 12-metre bluff near the centre of the reserve. It then drops down to meet with Hickory Bay Road, with a short walk back to the beginning.

This reserve is the northeastern limit of beech trees on Banks Peninsula. There is an excellent contrast between wetter and drier faces, and many of the rocky bluffs are home for a variety of interesting herbs.

Akaroa Head Scenic Reserve

Time: 40 minutes return   

From Akaroa, take Akaroa Lighthouse Road – 11 km of steep, narrow rough road, suitable for 4-wheel-drive vehicles only to the car park.

Note: From the car park it is foot access only.

The road descends past the foundations of the lighthouse keeper’s house and other buildings, to the site of the old lighthouse.

From here, follow the old supply road, constructed 1878–79, which ends at an iron ladder descending to a rock shelf in Little Haylocks Bay.


The original Akaroa lighthouse was replaced in 1977 by an automated light and in 1980 the lighthouse was relocated at Akaroa.

Botanical significance of this reserve is low because of a long history of grazing, but there is plenty of wildlife.

Fur seals/kekeno are seen in the bay, with local colonies of white-fronted terns/tara, black-backed gulls/karoro and white-flipped penguins/kororā.

There are excellent coastal views of towering cliffs.

Nikau Palm Gully Scenic Reserve

Time: 4–6 hours return 



Note: Closed at owner’s discretion over winter.

Crosses private land to reach Nikau Palm Gully, so obtain permission to cross. Ring beforehand. Contact Jeff Hamilton, Onuku Farm Hostel, phone 03 304 7066.

From Akaroa follow Kaik Road 4 km to the road end at the front gate of a private farm hostel and park by the DOC sign. Follow a farm track from the hostel for about 1 hour 30 minutes, winding in and out of several headlands.

The scenic reserve is sign-posted with a cut track and staircase leading into the gully in the creek bed. Travel down the boulder bed of the creek to the waterfall with fine views along the sea-cliff faces. The size and number of nīkau palms make this one of the best coastal forest remnants in Canterbury.

Tutakakahikura Scenic Reserve

Time: One hour  

Note: These roads are steep, narrow, gravel roads suitable for 4-wheel-drive vehicles only.



From Akaroa, take Akaroa Lighthouse Road for about 7 km. Turn left onto Flea Bay Road – the reserve is first signposted about 1 km from the turn-off, but continue down the road to Flea Bay where there is a lower reserve sign. Park there.

From the car park follow the track up through the reserve and then down the road back to your car.

Tutakakahikura Scenic Reserve is a narrow stand of remnant red beech/tawhairaunui forest, in a steep gully. Red beech has a very limited distribution on Banks Peninsula, making this small reserve a significant regional feature.

A section of the Banks Peninsula Track passes through the reserve, at a reasonably easy grade. For use of the track outside the reserve, phone 03 304 7612, email: bankstrack@xtra.co.nz www.bankstrack.co.nz

Summit Road Walkway

Time: 4 hours 30 min–5 hours one way  

This track goes from Montgomery Park Scenic Reserve to Port Levy Saddle. Drive to Hilltop on the Akaroa Highway

Port Levy Saddle. Drive to Hilltop on the Akaroa Highway then turn along Summit Road for 500 m to a small parking area at Montgomery Park Scenic Reserve. The walkway can also be accessed from Pettigrews Road 2 km along Summit Road from the Montgomery Scenic Reserve car park. Alternatively drive to Little River, turn NE onto Western Valley Road towards Port Levy until you reach the Port Levy Saddle car park.

As the track-ends are some distance apart, the easiest way to do this walk is to split into two groups walking in opposite directions, swapping car keys halfway. The track follows the crater rim, with magnificent views of Banks Peninsula. It passes through Whatarangi Tōtara,

Mt Sinclair and Mt Fitzgerald scenic reserves; forest remnants featuring tōtara, kaikahikatea and mataī. Most of the track is in open country and is very exposed, so be prepared for all weather conditions. There is little water along the way, so take plenty with you.

The Port Levy Saddle start of the track connects with a track that heads west along the ridges to Mt Herbert Walkway and Packhorse Hut. This section of track takes about 2 hours to where it connects with Mt Herbert Walkway.

Note: Open land at the Hilltop end of the walkway is private property. Walkway users must exit via Montgomery Park Scenic Reserve. An alternative exit is via Pettigrews Rd, about 3 km from Hilltop

Further information

It is recommended that you purchase a map of the area. The following topographical maps cover Banks Peninsula; NZTopo50 series BX24, BX25, BY24, BY25.

If you need any additional information or wish to report any incidents, issues or sightings of conservation interest, contact DOC Mahaanui Area Office
31 Nga Mahi Road
Sockburn, Christchurch 8042
phone 03 341 9100

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0800 362 468
Report any safety hazards or
conservation emergencies
For fire and search and rescue call 111



Map background: Geographx



Protect plants
and animals
Remove rubbish

Keep streams
and lakes clean
Take care with fires

Respect our
cultural heritage
Enjoy your visit

Toitu te whenua
(leave the land
undisturbed)



Packhorse Hut Photo: S Webb