

# Mueller Hut Route



AORAKI/MT COOK NATIONAL PARK



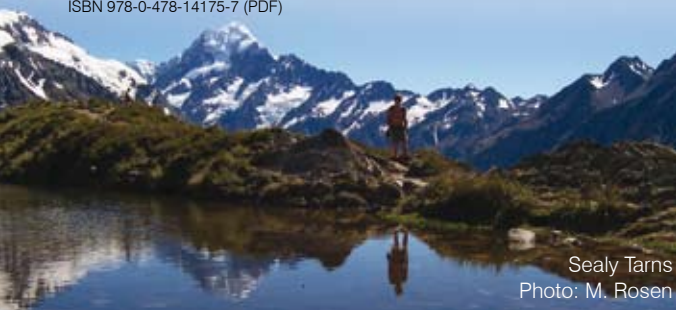
Department of Conservation  
*Te Papa Atawhai*

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Sealy Tarns  
Photo: M. Rosen

## Introduction

The route to Mueller Hut offers a mountain experience possible for anyone with moderate tramping ability, as long as care is taken.

At 1800 metres on the Sealy Range (nearly half as high as Aoraki/Mt Cook's summit), the view from the hut is a 360-degree panorama of glaciers, ice cliffs, vertical rock faces and New Zealand's highest peaks. It's a great site for hearing and viewing ice falls, alpine sunrises and equally unforgettable sunsets. The climb to the hut through alpine scrub, herb fields and scree slopes is an achievement in itself, or the start of further opportunities for the more experienced. Whatever the aim, following the instructions in this guide will help make your trip safe and memorable.

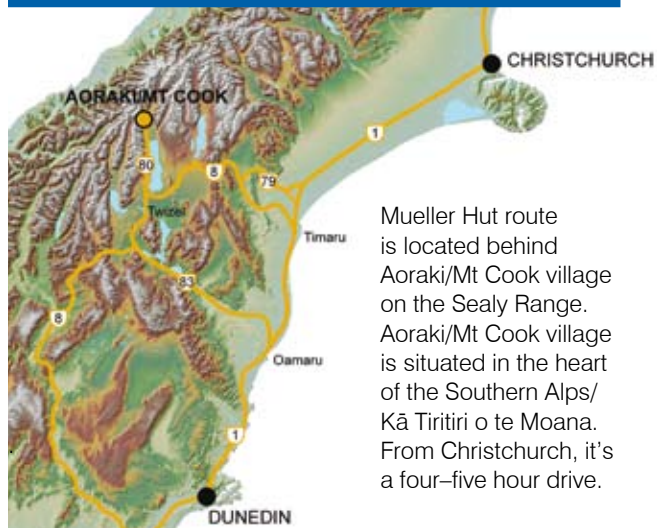
Aoraki/Mt Cook  
viewed from hut  
kitchen



Hogsback clouds  
over Aoraki/Mt Cook  
Photo: M. Rosen



## Location



Mueller Hut route is located behind Aoraki/Mt Cook village on the Sealy Range. Aoraki/Mt Cook village is situated in the heart of the Southern Alps/ Kā Tiritiri o te Moana. From Christchurch, it's a four-five hour drive.

## Getting there

The simplest route to Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park is to take State Highway (SH) 1 from Christchurch to Rangitata. Here, turn right onto SH 79. Follow it through to Fairlie and then continue on SH 8 until just before the township of Twizel. The turn-off is well signposted and it takes about 45 minutes to get to the village. The road is sealed all the way.

The village has an airport, used by charter companies and Aoraki/Mt Cook-based ski planes.

Regular bus services connect Aoraki/Mt Cook village from Christchurch and Queenstown and a shuttle service from Twizel operates in summer.

Hooker Valley from Sealy Range Photo: C. Smith



## Walking seasons

The normal season for climbing to Mueller Hut is from mid-November to late March. However, that can vary according to snow conditions. There is considerable avalanche danger on the route during winter and spring (April to mid-November).



Mueller Hut in summer . . . Photo: C. Smith

and in winter Photo: M. Langford



## Can I do it?

Mueller Hut route is about 5.2 km long, which includes a steep 1000 m climb. It usually takes 3–4 hours one way depending on fitness, weather and conditions. The weather can change dramatically from when you leave. To ensure you enjoy your trip in all weathers, you will need to be fit and have good equipment and clothing. You should have done some training, carrying a moderate pack up and down stairs or hills. Many people find a trekking pole is useful in reducing stress on knees and assisting balance.

You should be experienced in walking on an unformed track, ranging from a rough dirt route surface to unstable scree and rocky terrain.

The first section of the track to Sealy Tarns is steep and stepped, and takes around 1–2 hours. Snow can fall at any time of the year.



Photo: M. Rosen

## Other activities

### Snowboarding and ski touring

Over the autumn to spring season, Mueller Hut is used as a base for parties wanting to do backcountry ski touring or snow boarding. The face in front of Mt Ollivier, the Annette Plateau and the descent from Mueller Hut to Sealy Tarns, provide challenging routes for backcountry skiers and boarders. Experience in avalanche terrain and alpine conditions is essential. Refer to the book *New Zealand Backcountry Skiing* by James Broadbent, NZAC, 2004, for further information on ski touring in this area.

### Hunting

Thar and chamois can be found in the Sealy Range, and the Mueller Hut route provides access to this area. A hunting permit can be obtained from the Aoraki Area Office.

### Climbing

Mueller Hut is often used as a base for those starting their climbing career. Mt Ollivier situated behind the hut is an easy scramble up a rocky ridge. This was the first mountain that Sir Edmund Hillary climbed, the start of a long career that included being the first person to climb Mt Everest. There are several options from Mueller Hut—refer to the book *Aoraki Mount Cook a guide for mountaineers* by Alex Palman, NZAC, 2001, for detailed information on these routes.

### Mountain biking

Mountain biking is not permitted on the Mueller Hut route or any of the tracks in the park.

### Dogs and other pets

It is an offence under the National Parks Act 1980 to bring dogs and other introduced animals into Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park. Please leave your animals at home.

### Commercial activities

A concession (an official authorisation) is required to operate any commercial activity in an area managed by the Department of Conservation. Concessions are required for: guiding (including fishing, hunting, tramping, walking, climbing/ski tours, kayaking/canoeing); transport services; commercial education or instruction activities. Guided walking groups with a concession can stay at Mueller Hut. For more information regarding concessions, visit [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz)

Rocky terrain  
on the ridge line  
Photo: M. Rosen



## Planning, preparation and equipment

Plan, prepare and equip yourself well. Have the right gear and skills for the trip and always check the latest information about weather and avalanche conditions. Even in the best conditions a climb to Mueller Hut demands a fair degree of fitness and experience, plus good equipment.

Much of the 1000-metre climb is not via track, but is made up of a route marked by rock cairns and orange markers. These can be hard to find if the weather deteriorates, as it can, rapidly, at any time of year. Both track and route sections are steep, demanding 3–4 hours of almost continuous climbing from Aoraki/Mt Cook village to the hut.



Cairns and poles mark the route Photo: M. Rosen

## Trip intentions

Although it is not necessary to sign in at The Department of Conservation Visitor Centre for a day trip to the hut, it is important to let somebody know your intentions and estimated returning time. For an overnight trip you must sign in at the Visitor Centre before departure and out again on return, to avoid an unnecessary search. Hut fees must be paid before the trip starts.

## Radio

Every evening at 7 pm there is a radio call to all huts in the park. The Duty Officer will give the latest weather and avalanche

forecast, and ask what parties and individuals are in the hut or camping outside. Inform the warden (if there is one) when you arrive of your party name. If there is no warden, someone in the hut needs to collate party names and give these to the Duty Officer when asked. The radio is available for emergency calls, just push the red button and someone will respond. When you talk into the radio, push the green button, hold it and talk slowly and clearly, a few centimetres from the tiny speaker hole (ringed in red on photo above).



## Cell phones

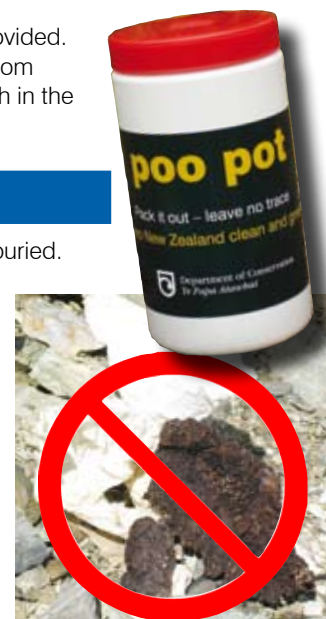
Generally cell phones work sporadically up to the ridge line, and then tend to be more reliable as you approach the hut. There may not be coverage at the hut itself, but walking over to the ridge line tends to work.

## Rubbish

No rubbish facilities are provided. Carry out all your rubbish from the park. Do not put rubbish in the toilets.

## Poo pots

In winter the toilet may be buried. Please carry a personal poo pot (available from the visitor centre), and carry all your faecal waste out. Faeces do not break down in the alpine environment, and if buried in snow will melt out for all to see in summer. Do not burn toilet paper, but carry it out in your poo pot.



## What to take

Whether you intend tramping in summer or winter always go equipped for the worst conditions. Weather can change abruptly, and snow can fall at any time of the year. Cotton clothing, such as jeans, are not suitable. Wool and modern synthetics are better as they dry quickly and give more warmth. Mueller Hut is not heated, so if it is likely you will get wet, you may need a spare set of clothing for in the hut. There is gas supplied in summer for cooking. Food is not available for purchase at the hut. For more safety information visit [www.mountainsafety.org.nz](http://www.mountainsafety.org.nz)

### Suggested gear list for Mueller Hut:

Pack (including pack liner)  
Sleeping bag  
Waterproof raincoat & overtrousers  
Tramping boots and socks  
Polar fleece jacket/warm jersey,  
thermal top & pants  
Map or track guide  
Cooking utensils: pot/pan/billy  
Eating utensils: cutlery, plate, cup  
Matches/lighter & torch with batteries  
Sunscreen, sunhat & sunglasses  
Warm hat & gloves  
Water bottle & water for walking  
Sufficient food  
Personal first aid kit  
Toilet paper  
Poo pot

#### *Also useful:*

Trekking poles  
Ear plugs (you may be sharing the hut with over 20 other people in communal bunkrooms)  
Camera  
In winter you must carry your own cooker, and alpine equipment and appropriate gear is required.

Campers at Mueller Photo: M. Rosen



### Alpine Care Code

- Plan ahead
- Pack it in, pack it out— take all your rubbish with you
- Dispose of your toilet waste appropriately
- Respect our Māori heritage
- Look after our native species
- Be considerate of others



Appropriate clothing for walking Mueller Route  
Photo: D. Shirtliff and Mountain Safety Council

## Mueller Hut

Hut fees are \$35 per person in summer and \$30 in the winter. A warden may be present over the summer season. The hut has gas cookers available in summer, but the gas is turned off over winter. Check at the visitor centre if you are visiting early or late summer. There is no heating or shower, but there are solar lights. Water is available at the hut, but you need to carry water for the journey up and down.

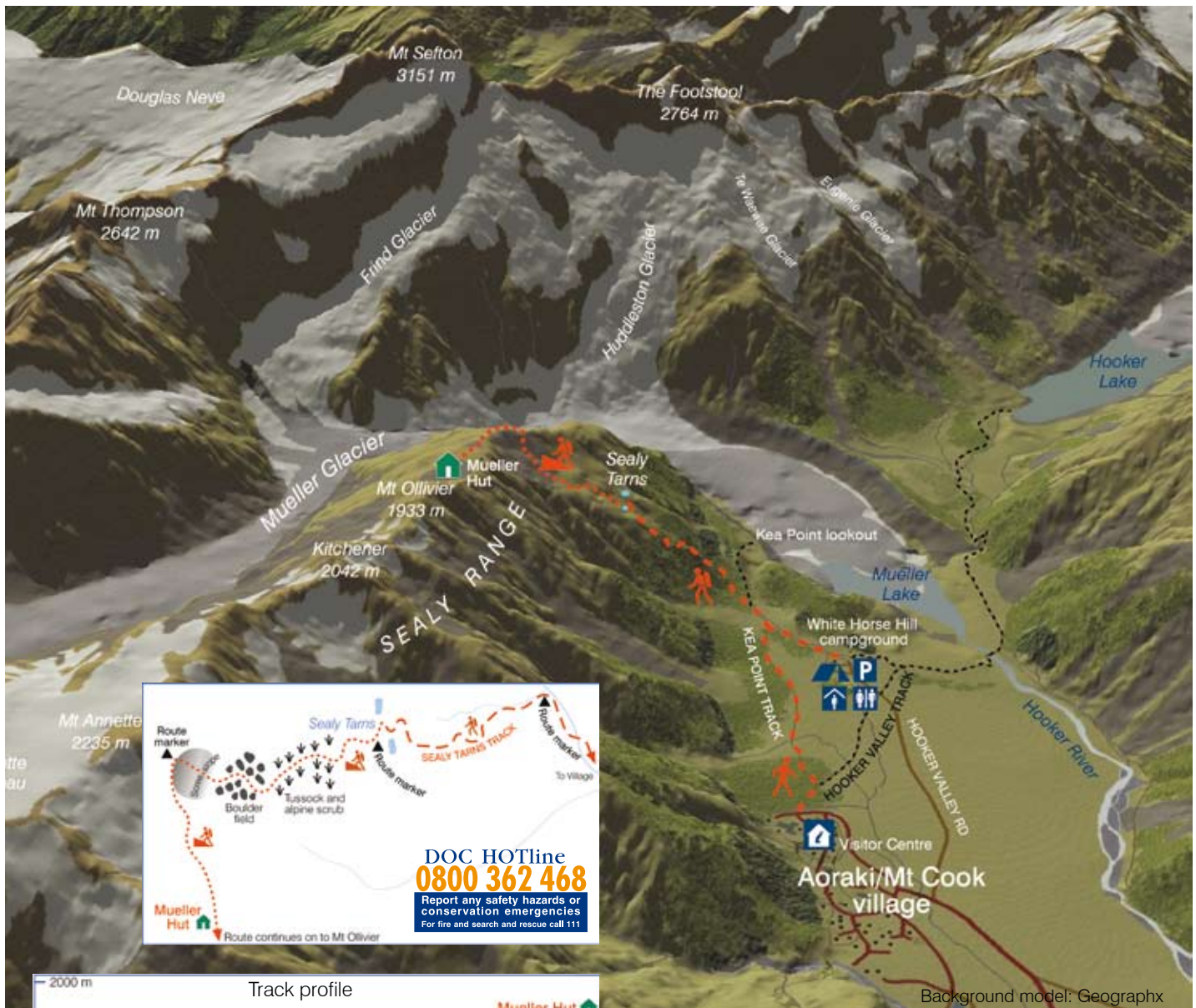
## Camping

Camping is permitted beside the hut. The cost is \$15. The ground around the hut is rocky, and tents need to be tied down, especially in high winds. Remember the weather can change at any time and winds up to 150 km/hour are possible. Camping before and after the trip is available at the White Horse Hill campground, at the start of the track. The cost is \$6/person/night. Cars can be left there while people do the trip.

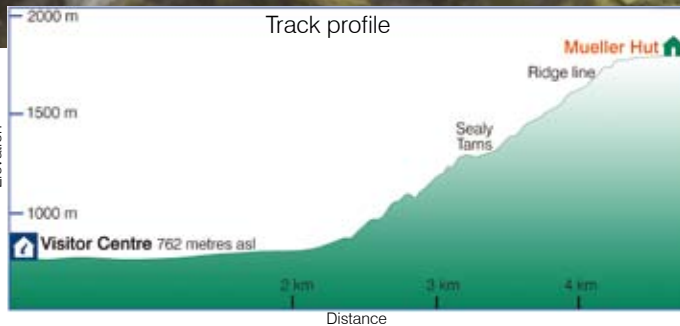
**Warning**—vehicles left at road-ends have sometimes been broken into.

## Booking

There is no booking system for Mueller Hut. Trampers need to sign into the intentions system at the visitor centre and pay hut fees before starting the trip. Backcountry hut passes are not valid for Mueller Hut.



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



- Walking track
- Tramping track
- Route
- Toilets
- Shelter

Heights of interest (metres)	
Village	762
Kea Point lookout	840
Sealy Tarns	1250
Mueller Hut	1800
Mt Ollivier	1933
Mt Sefton	3151
Aoraki/Mt Cook	3754

## The route to Mueller Hut

### Village to Sealy Tarns: 2 hours

Start on the Kea Point Track either outside the Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park Visitor Centre or at White Horse Hill car park, at the end of Hooker Valley Road. Follow Kea Point Track to the Sealy Tarns turnoff.

Sealy Tarns Track begins gently until you reach the foot of Sealy Range. The start of the steep section of this track is marked by an orange triangle. Make sure you are on the obvious track—not in the old streambed just adjacent. The track zig-zags steeply up to Sealy Tarns. A climb to this spot will reward the walker with spectacular views of Hooker Valley and the peaks in the area, including Aoraki/Mt Cook on a good day.

A tarn is the name given to a small mountain pond.



Sealy Tarns track Photo: M. Rosen

### Sealy Tarns to Mueller Hut: 2 hours

From Sealy Tarns follow the orange markers (every 200 metres) through the tussock. This is not a maintained track but an alpine route. The route is also marked by cairns. Parts of the route are quite rocky. It zig-zags through alpine scrub, herb fields and tussocks to a large rock field. From here the route ascends a loose gravel slope (scree) of about 500 metres, to the skyline ridge. At certain times of the year this becomes a steep snow slope.

Once on the ridge relax and enjoy the magnificent view of Mueller Glacier sweeping down the valley past smaller hanging glaciers and the stunning ice shelf on Mt Sefton. The route from here turns southwards to the hut. Follow the cairns through large boulders along the ridge until you sight Mueller Hut—about 20–30 minutes along the ridge.



Trekking poles are useful on steep terrain Photo: M. Rosen

### Mueller Hut to village: 3 hours

Descend back to the village the same way as you came up. Do not be tempted to go straight down or veer off the route at any stage. Make sure you turn off the ridge down the scree slope at the orange marker. In bad weather it can be quite difficult finding your way.

### Mueller Hut to Mt Ollivier: 30 minutes

This is a rock scramble along the obvious ridge from Mueller Hut to the top of the rocky outcrop immediately to the south of the hut. A big cairn marks the top. Don't be tempted to go further along unless you have experience, as it can get dangerous. It is very steep and exposed beyond the top of Mt Ollivier.

On Mt Ollivier looking to Annette Plateau Photo: M. Rosen





## Safety information

Your safety and the decisions you make are your responsibility. Some people carry Personal Locator Beacons (PLBs), available for hire at the visitor centre. If you or a party member are injured, get someone to seek help—either by descending to the village or going to the hut where there is an emergency radio. The Department of Conservation has an alpine rescue team available year round, who will assist you if required. If you have a cell phone, you may be able to call 111 and ask for police. Keep the injured person warm and sheltered until help arrives.

### Be avalanche aware

There is considerable avalanche danger on the Mueller Hut route during winter and spring (April to mid-November). However, avalanches can occur at any time of the year, as snow falls year round in the park.

If you are going out during these times make sure you can;

- Recognise avalanche conditions and avalanche-prone areas.
- Know the safest areas to travel in.
- Assess your skills and knowledge of avalanche awareness—your life depends on it!
- Take with each of you an avalanche transceiver, a snow shovel and a probe. Know how to use them.

*Before you go:*

Check the avalanche and weather forecasts.

Take advice from professionals.

Sign in your intentions.

Never travel alone.

Navigation can be difficult in mist  
Photo: M. Rosen



Photo: M. Rosen

### High winds

Strong winds, which can blow walkers off their feet, can occur on the route—particularly on the section above the ridge line.

### Fires

Fire is a major threat within Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park. Alpine vegetation is very slow-growing and extremely susceptible to fire. Open fires are not permitted, and care is required with portable gas stoves.

### Lost?

The Mueller Hut route is well marked, but if you become lost, stop, find or create shelter and stay calm. Put on extra clothing if cold and assist searchers should you hear them searching for you.

Ridge line rocks to be negotiated Photo: M. Rosen



## Mueller Hut history

Mueller Glacier was named by Julius Haast in 1862, after Ferdinand von Mueller. Mueller was a Danish-born scientist and explorer, who came to Australia in 1848. Mueller became a great botanical collector and writer.

The present Mueller Hut is the fifth hut to be built with that name. The first hut was built in 1914 just 500 feet above the glacier and by 1947 was deteriorating. A second hut started in 1949 lasted just four months until it was swept away by a wet-snow avalanche. Hut debris was hauled back up from the glacier and used to build temporary quarters erected at the same spot.

The fourth Mueller Hut was built not far below the present site in 1953, and lasted until it was pulled down in 2003.

This latest hut was opened in July 2003 by Sir Edmund Hillary, and is situated just below Mt Ollivier—the first mountain Sir Edmund climbed.

The hut can sleep 28 people on platform bunks complete with mattresses. There is a separate kitchen and living area and self-contained warden quarters. There are also solar-powered lights and gas-operated stoves (summer only). A toilet is sited a short distance away from the hut, but can be inaccessible in winter.

First Mueller Hut



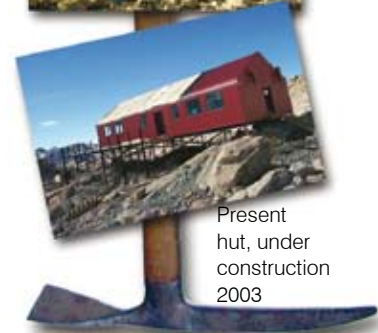
Second hut



Fourth hut



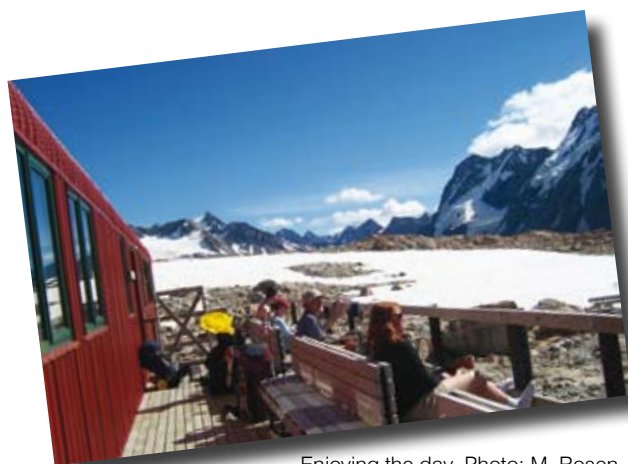
Present hut, under construction 2003



Sir Edmund and Lady June Hillary—Mueller Hut opening, 2003  
Photo: M. Langford



Mueller Hut kitchen Photo: M. Rosen



Enjoying the day Photo: M. Rosen

## Natural history

### Meet the locals

#### Common fauna

The nearest thing to a bandit likely to be encountered in the South Island mountains is the kea, New Zealand's alpine parrot. Relationships between humans and kea have not always been smooth, partly because of the bird's tendency to borrow things or analyse them to the point of destruction. People who stow vulnerable objects away and take the time to watch kea will be treated to some first-class clowning, then a flash of bright orange under-wing when the antics are over.

By contrast, piwauwau (rock wren, right) are content to hop among rocks and plants in their endless quest for spiders, insects and the minute fruit of alpine plants.

Despite being weak fliers they have made it to the 1300–2500-metre zone, where they stay for the exclusive delight of people who climb that high. Not even the harshest winter forces these little birds down, as they manage to shelter and find food between rocks, beneath alpine shrubs or even under a layer of snow.



Photo: R. Morris

Frequently seen flitting over rocky screes and ridges above the 1200-metre contour is the black mountain ringlet (*Percnodaimon pluto*) (right), New Zealand's hardiest native butterfly. Its colour is part of a sophisticated solar-energy system, vital for living at such an altitude. Survival techniques include laying eggs on the underside of relatively warm stones. Most of the ringlet's three-year lifecycle is spent as a caterpillar, which could explain the often joyful style exhibited when it finally and briefly, gets airborne.



Photo: A. Dennis

Beautifully camouflaged in grey, green or yellow, wingless alpine grasshoppers are so abundant on the route up that when disturbed they can sound like the patter of rain in the grass.

Species of large black spiders are common on the boulder and scree slopes, but they move so fast you have to be quick to see them.

### Flora

The route to Mueller Hut is a great place for viewing alpine flowers and herb fields. With a vertical gain of 1000 metres from valley floor to rocky ridge top, there is a diversity of flora to see. The tikapu, or Mt Cook lily (*Ranunculus lyalli*), makes an appearance in late November, followed by a variety of other alpine flowers. Clumps of gentian flowers appear from January onwards, and look out for the yellow Graham's buttercup (*Ranunculus grahamii*), which flowers even when snow is still about. The red berries of *Pratia macrodon*, a small creeping herb found in rocky and stony ground, can be seen on the climb to Sealy Tarns. Further up, the landscape changes to snow tussock and different grass species, including the curled snow tussock (*Chionochloa crassiucula*) and other *Chionochloa* species. The South Island edelweiss (*Leucogenes grandiceps*) can be glimpsed nestled amongst rocky outcrops.



South Island edelweiss Photo: B. Smith

Tikapu/ Mt Cook lily Photo: R. Morris



## Geology

Mountains tower above the village and Mueller Hut as memorials to a bygone age. These memorials however are very much alive, and in constant turmoil—the spectacular landscape of the Southern Alps/ Kā Tiritiri o te Moana is a front line in the never-ending clash between the forces of earth and weather. Geological processes build the mountains up, and erosion wears them down.

The rocks around Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park are mainly sands, muds and silts, which have been welded by pressure and heat and uplifted, folded, faulted and fractured. The most greatly altered rocks have turned to schist, the rest remain as sandstone or greywacke and siltstone.

Glaciation has also greatly altered the landscape. Clearly visible on the climb to Mueller Hut are the valley glaciers of Mueller and Hooker, but also surrounding are the hanging glaciers perched on Mt Sefton and along the main divide. When you look down from the route, see if you can spot the old moraines at the end of Mueller Glacier, remaining as indicators of where the glacier went to, in more recent geological times. The down-wasting in the last 100 years is obvious, with the large vertical grey walls remaining. The u-shaped valleys of Hooker and Tasman are classic reminders of a glaciated landscape.

Mueller and Hooker glaciers Photo: C. Smith



## Conservation projects

Department of Conservation biodiversity staff are carrying out an intensive predator trapping programme in the Hooker and Tasman valleys. One of the main target species in the park has been stoats; others include weasels, ferrets, cats and hedgehogs, all of which threaten our native fauna.

Stoats were introduced to New Zealand in the 1880s to control the explosion of rabbits, another introduced animal. Prior to this time New Zealand's native birds had enjoyed an environment free of predatory mammals. The introduction of stoats has seen a steady decline of bird species in the New Zealand bush, open river valleys and alpine regions. Today the stoat is considered the greatest threat to many species. Stoats have been sighted around Mueller Hut. The main bird life that DOC is worried about up in these alpine zones is the rock wren, kea and New Zealand falcon/kārearea.

The predator control programme began in March 2005. Traps are placed up each side of the valleys and along the end of the lake. In the first two years 576 stoats were trapped, along with 230 cats, 211 ferrets, 51 weasels and 1293 hedgehogs. It is hoped the trapping programme will help halt the decline in population of many of the birds present in the park, and also help the insect and lizard populations.

### Rock wren and kea surveys

The Department is carrying out both rock wren and kea surveys, as it is suspected their populations are in decline. Fill out the survey forms and drop them back to the visitor centre when you sign out, if you see either of these birds.

New Zealand falcon/kārearea



Stoat



## Kea had a laugh on climbers

STAFF REPORTER

**TIMARU.** - The cheeky mountain kea has just pulled off one of his best practical jokes on two climbers in the Mt Cook National Park.

Camped in the Mueller Hut, the two men were about to make an attempt on Mt Sealy (8650ft) when they were thwarted by the wily bird.

Up early, they went to leave the hut at 4am, and found the door locked.

It appears that during the night the kea had slid the bolt shut.

"Apparently this kea has been sitting on a rock watching climbers open and shut the door and he learnt how to do it," the chief ranger (Mr Barrie Thomas) said today.

The two climbers finally managed to escape from the hut after an hour of jostling and shaking the door to budge the bolt - but it was too late to climb the mountain that day.



Kea are naturally inquisitive and highly intelligent alpine parrots. They live on berries, roots and insect larvae. Help protect these endangered birds by not feeding them. Please remember that they are fully protected by law.

Christchurch Star, 1973

### Useful contacts

Department of Conservation  
Aoraki/Mt Cook Visitor  
Centre 03 435 1186  
mtcookvc@doc.govt.nz  
www.doc.govt.nz

Weather forecast—  
twice-daily recordings  
03 435 1171

www.metvuw.com

Avalanche forecast  
www.avalanche.net.nz

Climbing Guides—NZ  
Mountain Guides Assoc.

www.nzmga.org.nz

Safety information

www.mountainsafety.org.nz



### Te Wāhipounamu—

*South West New Zealand*  
World Heritage Area

South West New Zealand is one of the great wilderness areas of the Southern Hemisphere. Known to Maori as Te Wāhipounamu (the place of greenstone), the South West New Zealand World Heritage Area incorporates Aoraki/Mt Cook, Westland/Tai Poutini, Fiordland and Mount Aspiring National Parks, covering 2.6 million hectares. World Heritage is a global concept that identifies natural and cultural sites of world significance—places so special that protecting them is of concern for all people. Some of the best examples of animals and plants once found on the ancient subcontinent Gondwana live in the World Heritage Area.