

NELSON/TASMAN

# Travers–Sabine Circuit

| Nelson Lakes National Park



Department of  
Conservation  
*Te Papa Atawhai*

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



Nelson Lakes. Photo: Shellie Evans

## 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](http://www.doc.govt.nz) or call Rotoiti / Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre on 03 521 1806.

## Biosecurity

The invasive microscopic algae didymo and lake snow diatom *Lindavia* are significant threats to freshwater in the park.

Please Check Clean Dry all clothing, footwear and equipment before arriving. Unfortunately, Lakes Rotoiti and Rotoroa have been infected with lake snow. Any clothing or equipment that comes into contact with water in Rotoiti or Rotoroa can spread lake snow to other tarns or lakes. The best way to treat gear in the backcountry is to make sure it is thoroughly dry for 48 hours, or soak in 10% detergent solution for 10 minutes.



BETWEEN WATERWAYS

## 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 beech trees. Along the valley floors, red and silver beech prevail; on the higher slopes where the soil is thinner, the small-leaved mountain beech takes over. A wide diversity of small trees and shrubs make up the rest of the forest, including red-flowered southern rātā, and yellow-flowered kōwhai around the lake edges. Altitude is the main driver of forest type and diversity in the park.

Ferns, mosses, and lichens proliferate on the forest floor and on tree trunks, where the light is subdued. At the bushline, forest gives way to shrubland, where white-flowered hebe, wharariki / mountain flax, rust-red *Dracophyllum*, and the spiky flower heads of speargrass plants pepper the landscape. Beyond the shrubland, tussocks soften the harsh texture of broken rock.

Throughout the alpine tops in summer, yellow buttercups, white mountain daisies and many species of small, specialised plants flourish in the brief growing season. Most alpine herbs are very slow growing and sensitive to disturbance like trampling, so please keep to the marked routes.

## Animals

The park land encompassed by the Travers-Sabine Circuit is subject to landscape-scale predator control aimed at stoats, rats, possums and feral cats. A poison-based aerial control is usually timed around beech-seed masting events, which can occur every 3 to 7 years.

The Rotoiti Nature Recovery Project is a long-term, multi-species control programme that maintains reduced predator numbers along the eastern side of Lake Rotoiti and effectively protects kākā, roroa (great spotted kiwi) and kea during the time intervals between aerial predator control events. The Friends of Rotoiti also maintain a trapline for stoats in the Sabine and the Travers valleys.

Roroa can be heard at night at Rotoiti (but are hardly ever seen). The raucous call of kākā is often heard, and visitors enjoy the friendly toutouwai / South Island robin and ngirungiru / tomtit that will venture close. Korimako / bellbirds, tūi and pīwakawaka are common and noisy in the forest, and the tiny tītipounamu / rifleman can often be heard before it is seen. Pekapeka / long-tailed bats live in the lower altitude forests, especially near Lake Rotoroa, but as they are nocturnal it is very hard to spot them.



Kea were reduced to extremely low numbers from 1990 to 2010 and the population is now rising in response to careful predator management.

They can often be seen and heard in the alpine areas and will sometimes be keen to investigate huts and areas where people congregate. Please, never feed the kea, and keep your belongings contained! Human food is bad for them.

Whio / blue duck are sometimes seen in the upper Sabine, and extremely rare geckos are present in some alpine areas of the park. If you spot a gecko in an alpine environment, DOC staff would love to hear about it.



Male tītipounamu / 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.

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

## Public transport

There are limited transport options to and from the area. Water taxis operate all year round on both lakes.

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. Seasonal pricing may apply – refer to the DOC website.

Angelus Hut and Bushline Hut operate on a booking system all year round. Please book online at [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz).

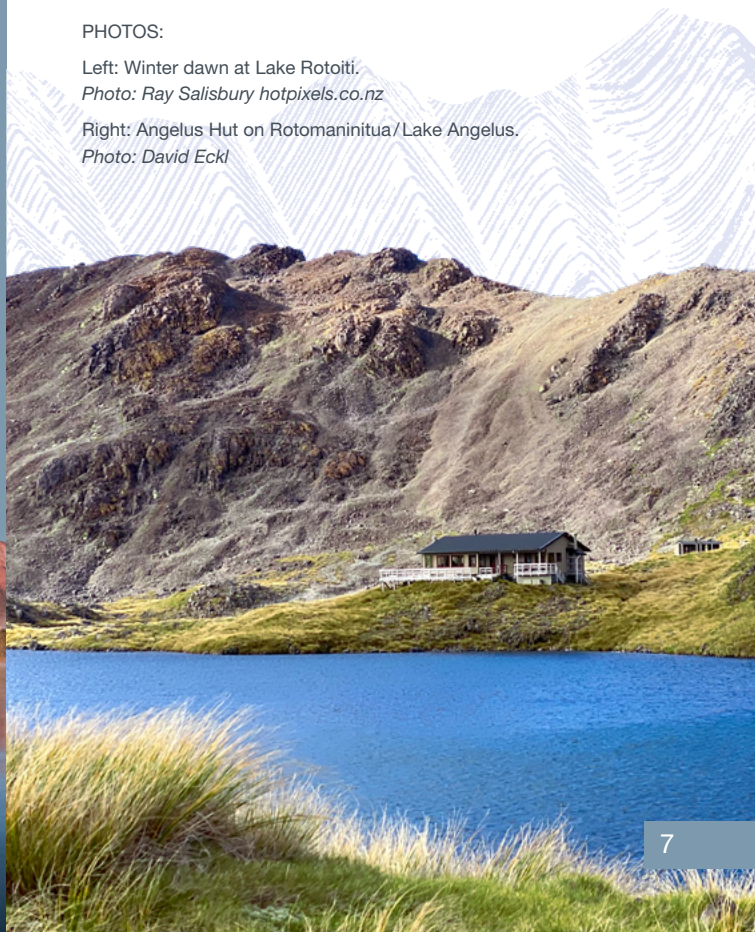
Lake Rotoiti has a serviced campsite open all year at Kerr Bay. A standard campsite is open during the peak summer months at West Bay. Both campsites require bookings at all times.

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.  
*Photo: David Eckl*



## Commercial transport operators

Please contact Rotoiti/Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre for information about commercial transport and water taxi operators.

**PHONE:** 03 521 1806


**EMAIL:** [nelsonlakesvc@doc.govt.nz](mailto:nelsonlakesvc@doc.govt.nz)

## Huts and campsites


### Hut and campsite fees


Seasonal pricing applies to hut tickets. The Backcountry Hut Pass may not be valid during the summer period. For more information, go to [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz) or contact Rotoiti/Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre, by phone 03 521 1806 or email [nelsonlakesvc@doc.govt.nz](mailto:nelsonlakesvc@doc.govt.nz).

### 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](http://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.

 **Standard 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



West Sabine Hut. Photo: DOC



Lakehead Hut. Photo: DOC



Sabine Hut. Photo: Gabriella Czoma



John Tait Hut. Photo: Gabriella Czoma



Speargrass Hut. Photo: Gabriella Czoma



Upper Travers Hut. Photo: DOC

# 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

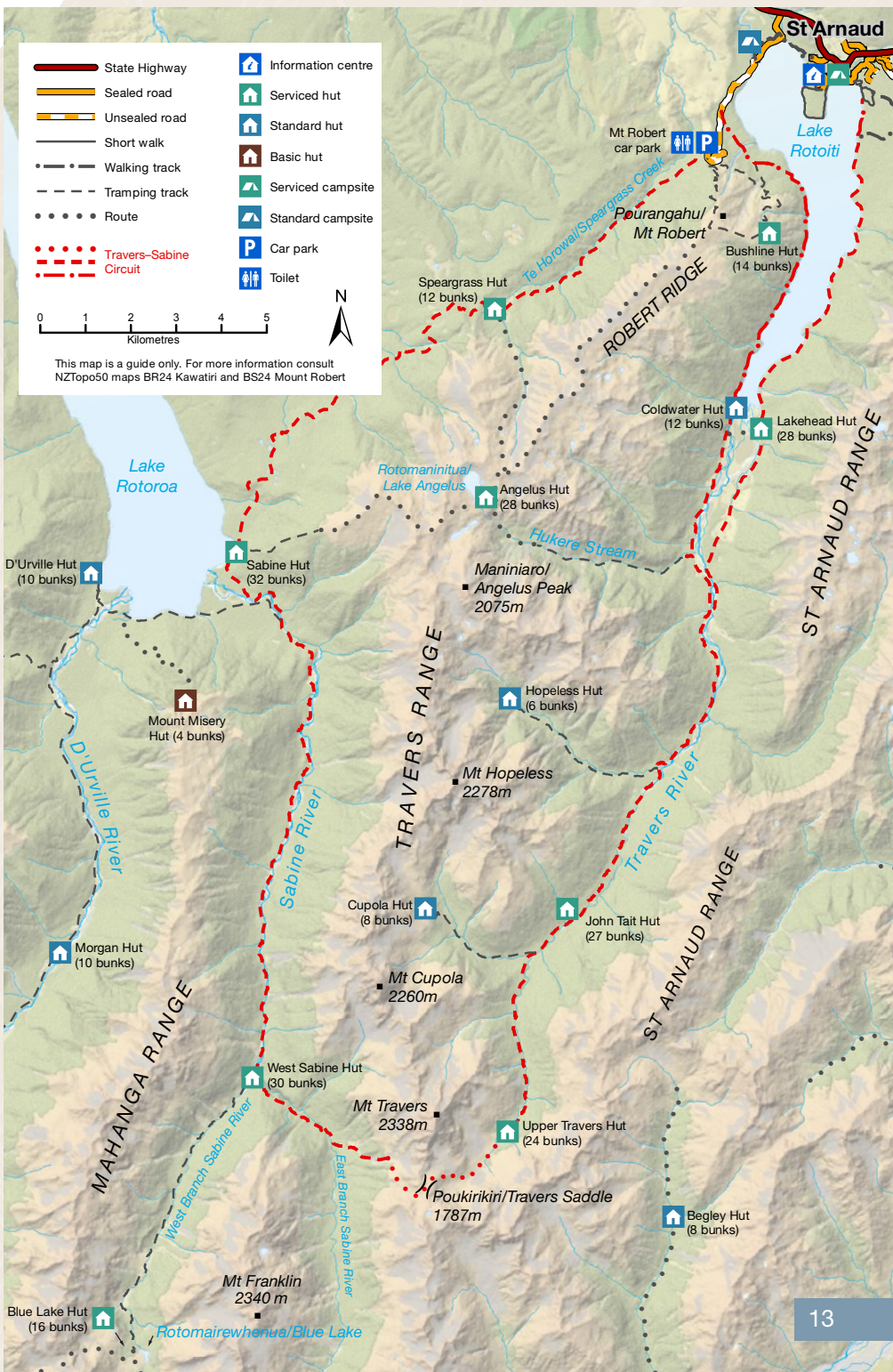
- ▶ Easy to moderate walking from a few minutes to a day.
- ▶ Track is mostly well formed, some sections may be steep, rough or muddy.
- ▶ Suitable for people with low to moderate fitness and abilities.
- ▶ Clearly signposted. Stream and river crossings are bridged.
- ▶ Walking shoes or light tramping/hiking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

### Tramping track

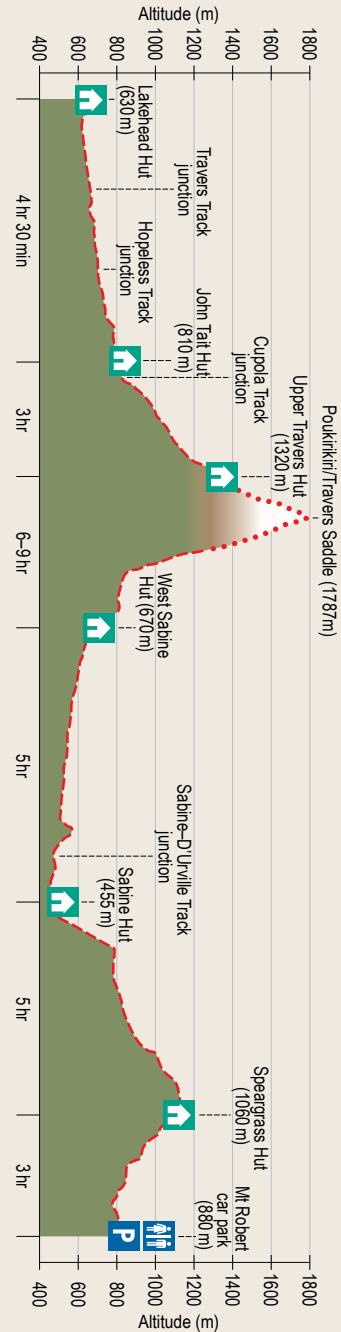
- ▶ Challenging day or multi-day tramping/hiking.
- ▶ Track is mostly unformed with steep, rough or muddy sections.
- ▶ Suitable for people with good fitness. Moderate to high-level backcountry skills and experience, including navigation and survival skills, required.
- ▶ Track has markers, poles or 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.




Travers–Sabine Circuit profile from Lakehead Hut to Mt Robert car park




## 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), 3 hr

 **From Kerr Bay:** Beginning at the eastern end of the bay, the Lakehead Track wanders through forest, crossing several shallow streams and shingle screens. 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.






The track between John Tait Hut and Upper Travers Hut. Photo: Gabriella Czoma



The descent from Poukirikiri/ Travers Saddle into Sabine valley. Photo: Kathrin and Stefan Marks


### 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 slopes, 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.



Speargrass Hut. Photo: Kathrin and Stefan Marks

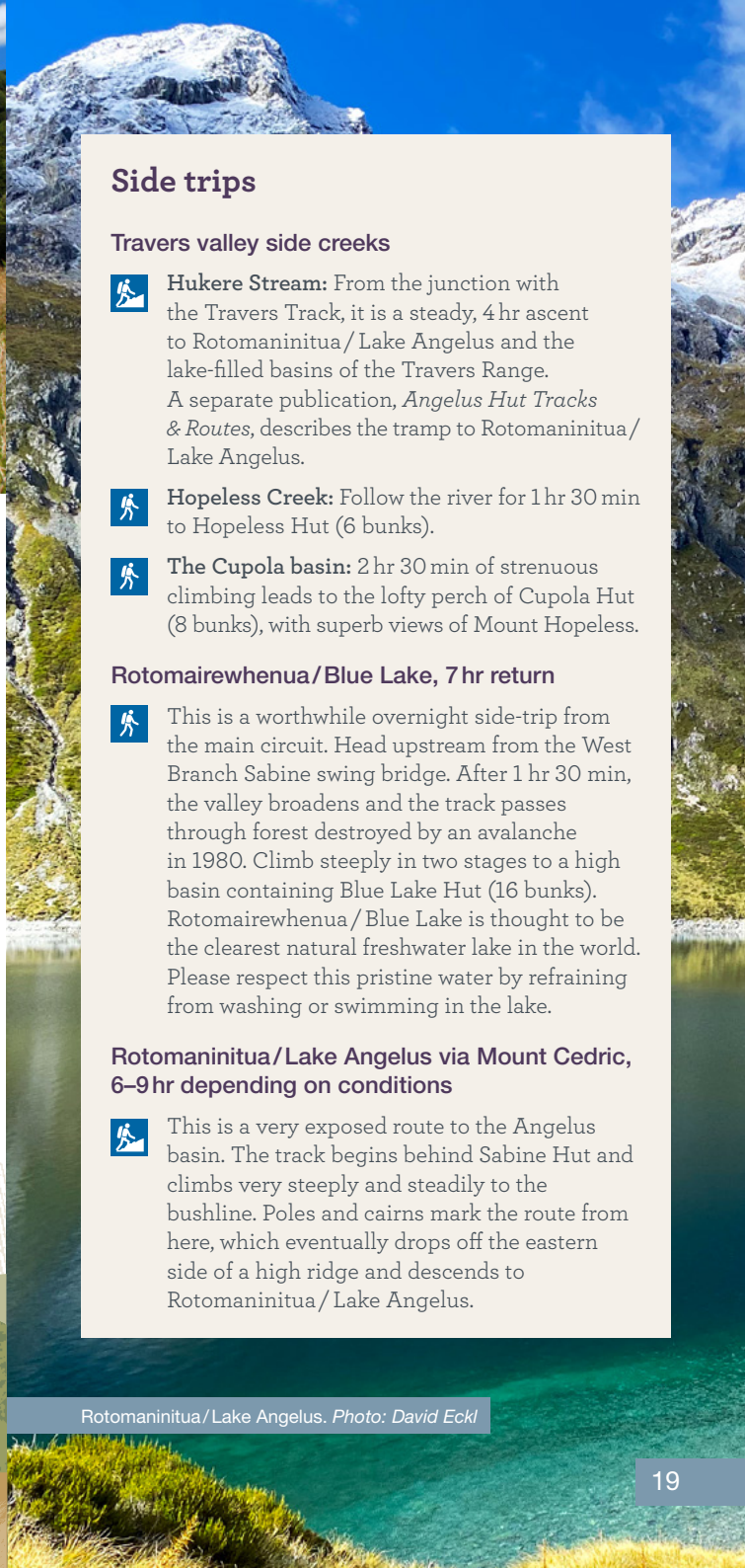
## Completing the circuit – Sabine Hut to St Arnaud

### 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 Pourangahau / 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.

Rotomaninitua / Lake Angelus. Photo: David Eckl

## 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](http://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: an ice axe, crampons, snow shovel, avalanche transceiver and probe.

You will need to provide your own sleeping bag, fuel, toilet paper, 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](http://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, Poukirikiri/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 risk information, including track and hut closures, is available from the Rotoiti/Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre. Alternatively, check the New Zealand Avalanche Advisory at [www.avalanche.net.nz/region/13](http://www.avalanche.net.nz/region/13) or the NIWA weather website for Nelson Lakes National Park at [weather.niwa.co.nz/parks](http://weather.niwa.co.nz/parks).

## 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 and fuel.

## 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.

## 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.

## No pets



To protect wildlife, domestic animals are prohibited in the Nelson Lakes National Park. Dog owners convicted of bringing a dog into the park face a fine of up to \$800 under the National Parks Act 1980.

## Drones



Drones are prohibited in the Nelson Lakes National Park.

Tirairaka pango/black fantail. Photo: Shellie Evans



## 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 NZ clean

Take all rubbish with you and use toilets where provided.



### Show respect

Respect others, respect culture.



Department of  
Conservation  
*Te Papa Atawhai*



tiaki  
KEEP THE NEW ZEALAND

## Further information

### Department of Conservation Rotorua / Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre

View Road  
St Arnaud 7053

**PHONE: (03) 521 1806**

**EMAIL: [nelsonlakesvc@doc.govt.nz](mailto:nelsonlakesvc@doc.govt.nz)**

### Department of Conservation Nelson Visitor Centre

Taha o te Āwa / Millers Acre Centre  
79 Trafalgar Street, Nelson 7010  
PO Box 375, Nelson 7040

**PHONE: (03) 546 9339**

**EMAIL: [nelsonvc@doc.govt.nz](mailto:nelsonvc@doc.govt.nz)**

**[www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz)**

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*Photo: Gabriella Czoma*

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