



Travers – Sabine Circuit

NELSON LAKES NATIONAL PARK



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai



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

ABOVE RIGHT: View of Lake Rotoroa from the porch of Sabine Hut.

Photo: Gabriella Czoma



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.

A Backcountry Hut Pass or Backcountry Hut Tickets are required to stay in any of the huts on the circuit.

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 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 robin/toutouwai that ventures close, alert to any insects stirred by your passing. Bellbirds/korimako and fantail/pīwakawaka are common in the forest, and the tiny



rifleman/tītipounamu 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.

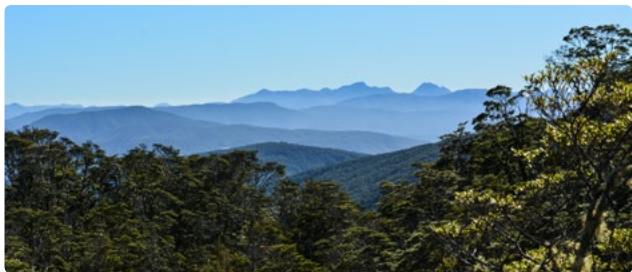
Rock wren/pīwauwau and cheeky kea visit the higher areas. On the river flats, paradise shelducks/pūtangitangi flee from disturbance with noisy fuss, while in forest-fringed streams, the rarer blue duck/whio may be seen deftly riding the rapids to take insects from the stony riverbed.

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 1 hr 30 min by road from Nelson or Blenheim. Lake Rotoroa is a 30-min drive west of St Arnaud.



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 operates on a booking system for certain parts of the year. For dates and booking options refer to www.doc.govt.nz or the *Angelus Hut Tracks & Routes* brochure.

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. There are also standard campsites in the area and a self-registration camping area at Rotoroa.

Hotel and backpacker accommodation is available at St Arnaud and Rotoroa.

This page: Cold Water jetty. *Photo: Crystal Brindle*

Left: View from the track between Sabine Hut and Speargrass Hut. *Photo: Gabriella Czoma*

Commercial transport operators

Nelson Lakes Shuttles

Transport to and from St Arnaud. Bookings essential.

PHONE: 03 547 6896 or 027 547 6896

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


Huts and campsites

Hut categories

 **Serviced huts** have mattresses, a water supply, toilets, hand-washing facilities and heating, with fuel available. They may have cooking facilities with fuel, and a warden may be present. Backcountry Hut Passes or Backcountry Hut Tickets are required.


You must book to stay at Angelus Hut from late November to 30 April.

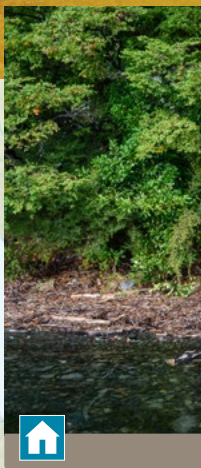
 **Standard huts** have mattresses, a water supply and toilets. Wood heaters are provided at huts below the bushline. Backcountry Hut Passes or Backcountry Hut Tickets are required.

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

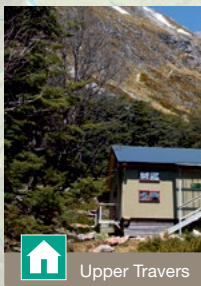
Campsite categories

 **Serviced campsites** have a wide range of facilities and services. Flush toilets, tap water, kitchen/cooking bench, hot showers, rubbish collection and road access for all types of vehicles are available. Laundry facilities, BBQs, fireplaces, cookers and picnic tables may be available.

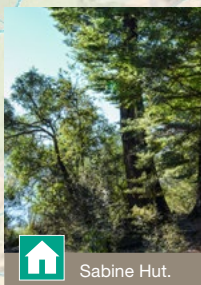
 **Scenic campsites** have a more limited range of facilities and services than serviced campsites. These campsites have toilets, water supply (tap, stream or lake) and vehicle or boat access. Wood BBQs and fireplaces, cold showers, picnic tables, a cooking shelter and rubbish bins may be provided; this will vary from site to site. The higher fee for scenic campsites is based on the scenic location and high popularity of these campsites.



Lakehead Hut.



Upper Travers



Sabine Hut.



Coldwater Hut. Photo: Gabriella Czoma



Photo: DOC



John Tait Hut. Photo: Gabriella Czoma



Hut. Photo: DOC



West Sabine Hut. Photo: DOC



Photo: Gabriella Czoma



Speargrass Hut. Photo: Gabriella 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

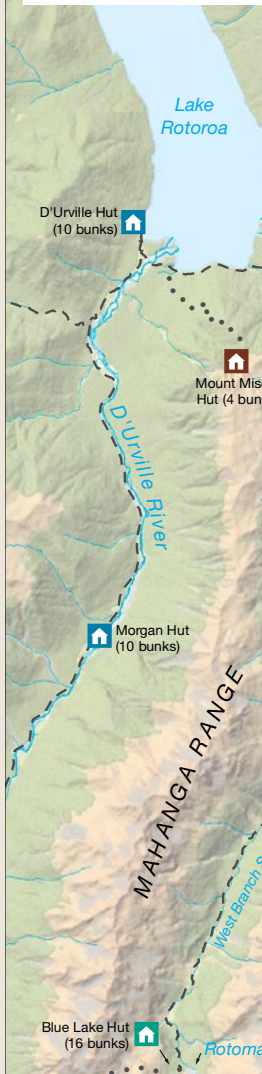
- ▶ Challenging day or multi-day tramping/hiking.
- ▶ Track unformed and natural, rough, muddy or very steep.
- ▶ Suitable for people with above-average fitness. High-level backcountry skills and experience, including navigation and survival skills, required.
- ▶ Complete self-sufficiency required.
- ▶ Track has markers, poles or rock cairns. Expect unbridged stream and river crossings.
- ▶ Sturdy tramping/hiking boots required.









-  State Highway
-  Sealed road
-  Unsealed road
-  Short walk
-  Walking track
-  Tramping track
-  Route

 Travers – Sabine Circuit



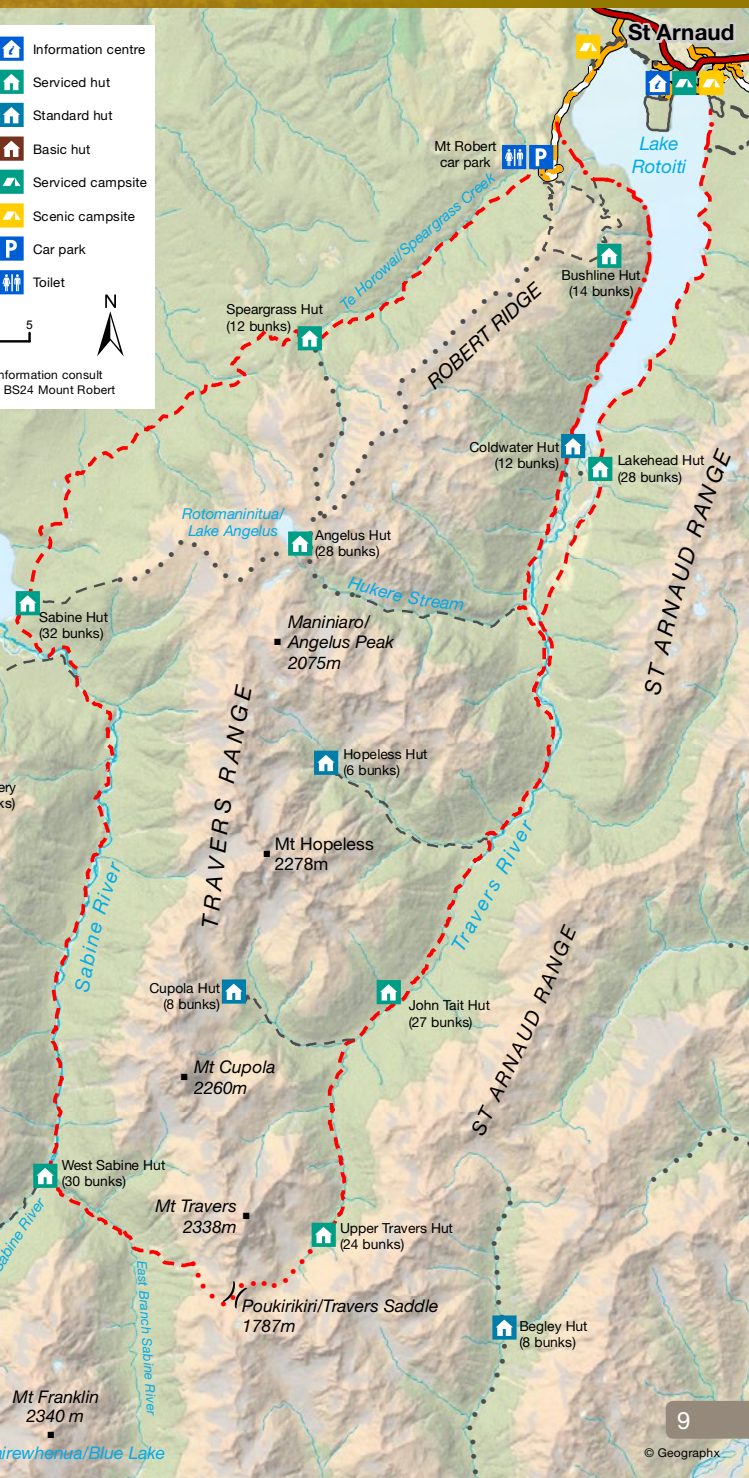
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Kilometres

This map is a guide only. For more information see NZTopo50 maps BR24 Kawatiri and

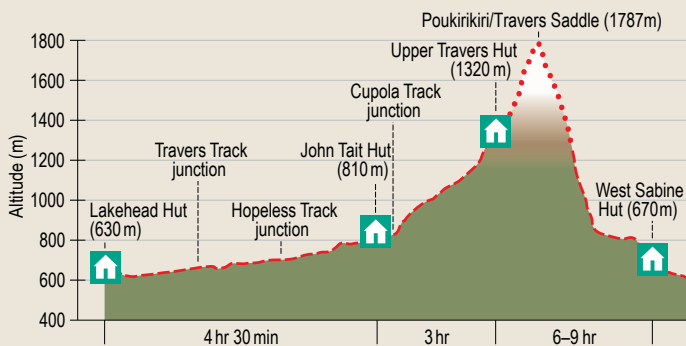


-  Information centre
-  Serviced hut
-  Standard hut
-  Basic hut
-  Serviced campsite
-  Scenic campsite
-  Car park
-  Toilet

Information consult
BS24 Mount Robert


Walking the track




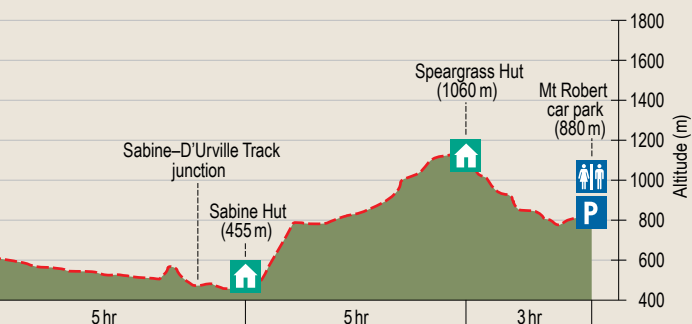
Travers - Sabine Circuit profile from Lakehead Hut to Mt Robert car park

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 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.



Travers Valley. Photo: Gabriella Czoma




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 screes, 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.

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

ABOVE RIGHT: Leaving the Upper Travers Hut for Poukirikiri/Travers Saddle. *Photo: Kerry Parker*




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

 Use the swing bridge upstream of the hut to cross the West Branch 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 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 hr



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.

Safety information

Your safety is your responsibility



Be prepared with plenty of food and warm and waterproof clothing as freezing conditions and/or heavy rain can occur at any time of year. If you doubt your abilities or the weather, particularly near Poukirikiri/Travers Saddle or at unbridged stream crossings after heavy rain, turn back.

Always leave your intentions with your family or a friend. You can use the AdventureSmart website: www.adventuresmart.org.nz.

DOC HOTline
0800 362 468

Report any safety hazards
or conservation emergencies
For Fire and Search and Rescue Call 111

Write your intentions in the hut books provided at each hut along the way.

To report any safety hazards in the outdoors, call **DOC Hotline: 0800 362 468**.

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 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.



leave no trace

NEW ZEALAND

- Plan ahead and prepare
- Travel and camp on durable ground
- Dispose of waste properly
- Leave what you find
- Minimise the effects of fire
- Respect wildlife and farm animals
- Be considerate of others



South Island robin/toutouwai. Photo: Markus Baumann

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.

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 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.

DOC contact details

For more information about Nelson
Lakes National Park:

**Department of Conservation
Rotoiti/Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre**
View Road, St Arnaud 7053

PHONE: (03) 521 1806
FAX: (03) 521 1896
EMAIL: nelsonlakesvc@doc.govt.nz

**Department of Conservation
Nelson Visitor Centre**
Millers Acre Centre/Taha o te Awa
79 Trafalgar Street, Nelson 7010
PO Box 375, Nelson 7040

PHONE: (03) 546 9339
FAX: (03) 546 9612
EMAIL: nelsonvc@doc.govt.nz

www.doc.govt.nz

COVER: Upper Travers Hut.
ABOVE: Going up to the Poukirikiri/
Travers Saddle. *Photos: Gabriella Czoma*

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New Zealand Government

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0800 362 468

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or conservation emergencies**
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