

Photographic Locations Worth Sweating For: Mount Somers, Canterbury Mountains

by Peter Laurenson

2am at 1,300m, Manuka Range and Clent Hills, Mount Somers
Nikon D750, Nikon VR Fixed 4F 24-120mm lens, stitch of 2 landscape images
@ F6.3, 120s, ISO800, 24mm



Winterslow Range at dawn, Mount Somers

Nikon D750, Nikon VR Fixed 4F 24 -120mm lens, stitch of 2 landscape images @ F11, 1/8s, ISO100, 38mm

To Cantabrians, Mount Somers is part of their backyard. To trampers more generally, it's a nice excursion in summer and a great training climb for novices in winter. The main routes on Mount Somers are certainly not technical, but its landscape offers more than you might expect. For one, it's big. From the Sharplin Falls carpark to the summit involves a 1,200 metre height gain. The standard route can be done in a day, but there are good reasons to take less direct routes, or just linger, so you can enjoy photographing some fine Canterbury high country scenery at dawn and dusk.

The 19km Mount Somers Track circumnavigates the entire mountain. From Sharplin Falls carpark (500m) you can choose which direction to go. If you're heading for a day trip to the top, then the most direct way up is via the Summit Track, accessed after an hour or so walking in an anticlockwise direction along the south face to Staveley Hill. At Staveley hill (1,085m) the Summit Track branches right, offering another 700 metre relentless slog, up through rocky terrain, leading to the summit (1,688m).

If you continue on around the south face track, you skirt beneath steep craggy pinnacles that ring the southern and eastern edges of what is actually a large flat summit area above. When out of the beech forest you can enjoy expansive views of the Canterbury Plains. After Acland Shelter, the trail dips through beech forest to around 800 metres, before steadily ascending again to 1,100 metres.

The trail will eventually lead you to Woolshed Creek Hut (26 bunks), situated at about 850 metres. This can become busy though, so making a booking or bringing a tent on weekends and during the summer months is advised. But a much better option is to avoid the crowds altogether.

As the track starts to veer north on the clockwise route, there is an old 4WD track that climbs north and then east, leading to a large tussock and wetland shelf at around 1,200 metres. Up there the landscape mellows, with a softly curving eastern skyline and many thirst-quenching tarns – the perfect place to camp, which I did. The tarns also offer plenty of photographic scope.

The hike from carpark to campsite took me around six hours. I camped on the western edge of the shelf, on a small highpoint at 1,300 metres, affording expansive, unimpeded views out to the Manuka Range and Clent Hills to the west, the Winterslow Range to the north and the summit skyline to the east. From this point, the dawn is a particular treat.

From the camp spot, it's another couple of hours of gradual climbing, up through tussock slopes and rocky outcrops, to the summit, which offers panoramic views in all directions. The descent of the Summit Track is quite steep in places, but it's nice to be facing out rather than in, so you can enjoy looking at the Canterbury Plains each time you pause. Keep your eyes on the trail when moving though, otherwise, you might lose more than a bit of sweat on the way down. The campsite to carpark leg took me about five hours.



A section of the Winterslow Range at dawn, Mount Somers

Nikon D750, Nikon VR Fixed 4F 24 -120mm lens @ F11, 1/10s, ISO100, 112mm



Dawn view of the summit area of Mount Somers

Nikon D750, Nikon VR Fixed 4F 24 -120mm lens, stitch of 2 landscape images @F8, 1/30s, ISO100, 24mm