

Photographic Locations Worth Sweating For: Mole Tops

by Peter Laurenson

The view south from P11770, Ella Range.
Lumix TZ220, Leica AF 24-360mm, F3.3 - 6.4 lens
Stitch of 5 portrait images @ F8, 1/320s, ISO125, 24mm





Tarns on Mole Tops, with Mts Hopeless and Cupola in the distance, Ella Range.
Lumix TZ220, Leica AF 24-360mm, F3.3 - 6.4 lens @ F8, 1/400s, ISO125, 85mm

Probably the most famous walk in Nelson Lakes National Park is the one to Lake Angelus. It's popular for a reason – you can get there in one solid day's walk, mainly along an alpine ridge affording magnificent views out over Lake Rotoroa to the west and Lake Rotoiti to the east. At the end of the day, beautiful lakeside Angelus Hut is waiting for you if you've booked far enough in advance.

But there is so much more to the Nelson Lakes. If you're prepared to venture away from the best-known routes, others are readily accessed and do not require technical skills or gear during the summer months. A great example is Mole Tops at the northern end of the Ella Range, which sits to the southwest of Lake Rotoroa.

Why Mole Tops? Access is up the mostly quite gradual Jameson Ridge Track, firstly through native forest, then on to tussock tops, which is the terrain that gets me excited – the open rolling country with views that compel you to get your camera out. The track starts at 500 metres. It takes about two hours to climb to Mole Saddle at 1,269 metres, and there are a couple of spots where you need to take care to stay on route.

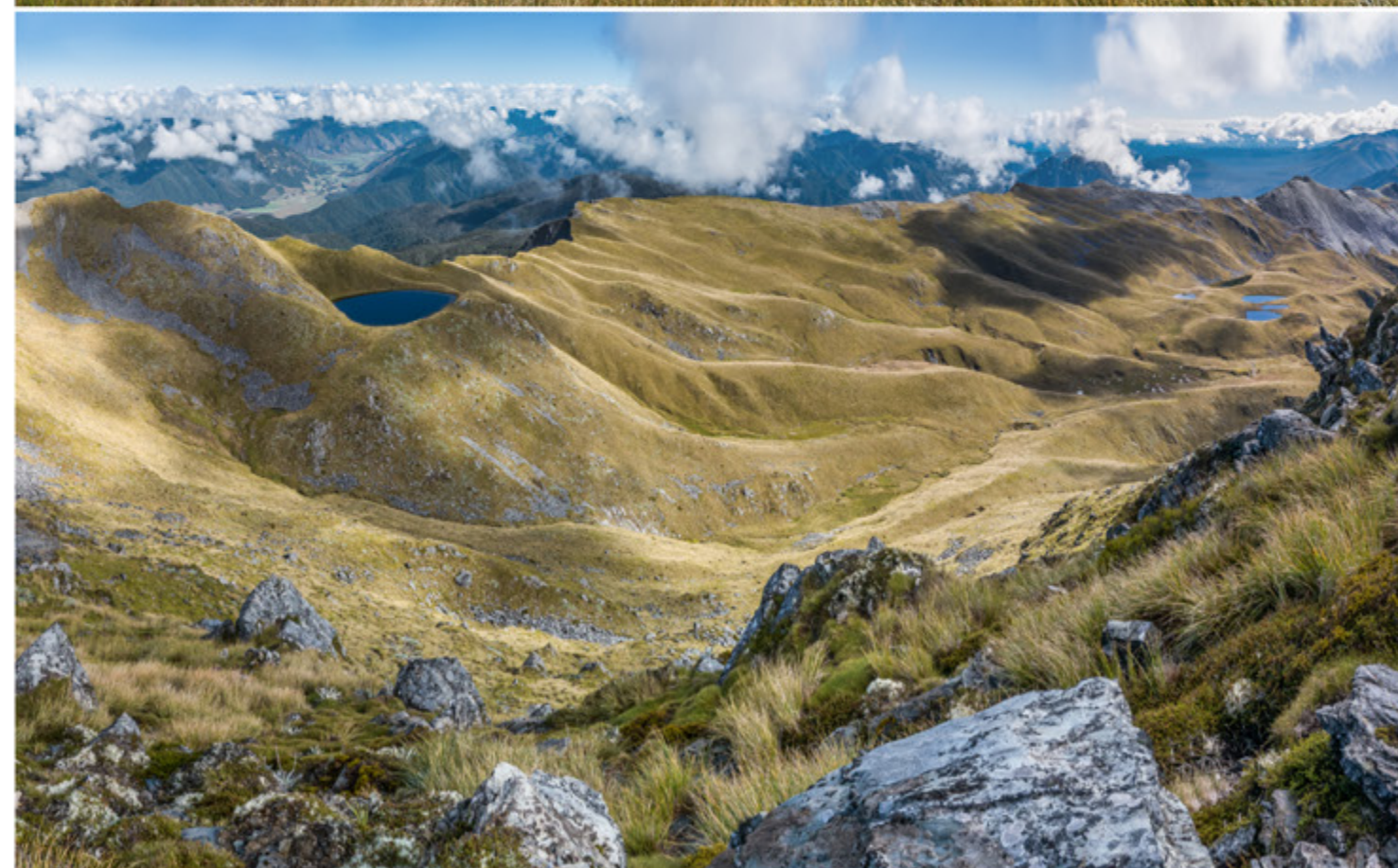
From Mole Saddle, you leave the marked track, so it's important to bring a map. Head south, up an open ridge to 1,600 metres. You'll know when you reach the top because, as you crest the ridge, a wide open

tussock-scape dotted with gleaming tarns (alpine lakes) greets you – Mole Tops. Beyond this, the terrain drops away to the D'Urville River, which feeds Lake Rotoroa. The Travers Range rears up to the east, part of which the Lake Angelus route traverses. Some of Nelson Lakes' highest peaks, including Mounts Hopeless, Cupola and Franklin, pierce the skyline.

The openness of Mole Tops allows easy exploring. If you have calm weather, enjoy capturing all manner of mirror images on the surfaces of the tarns. To get a superb overview, carry on further south to Pt1770. This is an easy scramble that rewards the extra sweating required to reach the top by providing a view north across the entirety of Mole Tops and south across another tarn-dotted landscape down the steep jagged ramparts of the Ella Range.

It's possible to visit Mole Tops as a long day trip, but its lofty open location is ideal for enjoying sunset and sunrise. I advise bringing a tent so you can revel in both magic hours. Remember, though, there are no hut or toilet facilities on Mole Tops. However, Mole Hut (1,170m) is not far below Mole Saddle, offering another option.

To get there, from Murchison, take Mangles Valley Road to the end of the tar seal, where you turn right down Tutaki Road South. Follow this gravel road until you reach the trailhead of the Jameson Ridge Track.



Top: The tarn at 1,660m, just north of Pt1770, Ella Range.
Lumix TZ220, Leica AF 24-360mm, F3.3 - 6.4 lens, stitch of 3 landscape images @ F8, 1/400s, ISO125, 24mm

Bottom: The view back to Mole Tops from Pt1770, Ella Range.
Lumix TZ220, Leica AF 24-360mm, F3.3 - 6.4 lens, stitch of 4 portrait images @ F8, 1/320s, ISO125, 24mm