

Photographic Locations Worth Sweating For: Peak Hill, Lake Coleridge

by Peter Laurenson

The view northwest, to the Rakaia River and
Palmer Range, from 1,240m on Peak Hill
Nikon D750, Nikon AF-S Nikkor 24-120 F4 lens
Stitch of 2 landscape images
@ F11, 1/320s, ISO 100, 28mm





Near the summit of Peak Hill, looking northeast to Lake Catherine in the middle distance
Nikon D750, Nikkor AF-S 24-120mm lens @ F11, 1/250s, ISO 100, 75mm

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Lake Coleridge, from above the power station inlet. Peak Hill (1,240m) centre
Nikon D750, Nikon AF-S Nikkor 24-120 F4 lens
Stitch of 2 landscape images @ F11, 1/320s, ISO 100, 48mm

Lying in the foothills of the Canterbury mountains, Lake Coleridge is 11 km long and, at its widest, 4.8 km. Its deepest point is 200 metres, and this, combined with the mountain waters feeding it, explains its vibrant turquoise colour when the light is right.

Sometime before 1400, when fires cleared the landscape, the area was once densely forested. Today it lies in open country, mostly farmland, when the gradient permits.

Known to them as Whakamatau, the lake was a mahinga kai site for Māori, who gathered food during their challenging journeys from east to west in search of pounamu. Its colonial name, given about 1850, commemorates two early members of the Canterbury Association.

At just over 500 metres above sea level and 150 metres higher than the nearby Rakaia River, the lake's location is well suited to hydroelectricity generation. An underground channel linking the lake to the river was completed in 1914. The downward rushing water, driving turbines at the lower end, is the basis of one of New Zealand's earliest hydroelectricity facilities, which still feeds power to Christchurch today.

It takes about 1.5 hours to drive to the lake from Christchurch. Head west from Darfield on State Highway 77 as far as Windwhistle, then turn right onto Coleridge Road. Even the lake-side views are worth the drive, but if you're prepared to do some walking, there's a much better viewpoint – Peak Hill.

To get there, turn off Coleridge Road before the township onto Homestead Road, then left onto Algidus Road, which takes you to a roadside car park at the southeastern end of Peak Hill. The trail crosses farmland to reach the base of the hill and then climbs about 650 metres through tussock to the summit at 1,240 metres. Soon after the climb begins, you're rewarded with lovely views that just keep expanding with each step.

From the summit, Lake Coleridge fills the northern view with a mountainous backdrop. Lower down to the southwest are the many braids of the Rakaia River. With no forest, there is no shelter if weather conditions are bad, but in fine conditions, the trail is easy to follow and will only take one or two hours to reach the top. This means that, with a torch, being there for dawn or dusk is quite feasible. And even outside the magic hours, the panoramic vistas are definitely worth sweating for.



Peter Laurenson is an occasional climber, traveller, photographer, and writer. His adventures, which span 30+ years, come together on his website 'OccasionalClimber'. Peter is also Editor of FMC's Backcountry Magazine and writes for Wilderness Magazine and, occasionally, other publications, alongside his bi-monthly articles here in NZPhotographer.

 www.occasionalclimber.co.nz



Looking north, up Lake Coleridge (550m), from the power station inlet
Nikon D750, Nikon AF-S Nikkor 24-120 F4 lens
Stitch of 2 landscape images @ F11, 1/250s, ISO 100, 95mm



The view north (left) to east, from 1,240m on Peak Hill, Lake Coleridge
Nikon D750, Nikon D750, Nikon AF-S Nikkor 24-120 F4 lens
Stitch of 2 landscape images @ F11, 1/320s, ISO 100, 32mm