

OFF the  
BEATEN  
TRACK

Aren't we lucky to have  
public shelters like Arete Hut  
in such amazing locations

Visiting the most remote hut in the Tararua Range in mid-winter requires great effort but offers sublime tramping – if the weather holds.



# TARARUA HEARTLAND

by PETER LAURENSEN





“

Come over the lip, Pete! It's sheltered here," Andy called.

Andy Caruthers, my companion on this trip into the Tararua Range, was struggling to control his shivering fingers and lock 'find' mode on his Garmin for Arete Hut. Meanwhile, horizontal sleet whipped around us, caught fleetingly in the beams of our headlamps.

The tussock-covered tops were coated in micro rime ice. It could have been incredibly beautiful, but our only thoughts were to find the hut somewhere 150m below.

"It's that way," Andy confirmed, determinedly setting off downhill.

Relief came when Andy whooped confirmation that he'd reached the hut. We battled with the ice-sealed door, and once inside we laughed, both coated from head to foot in verglas. It was easy to see how death could visit here in winter if you became lost.

So why were we here in August, in bad weather, on some of the highest terrain in the Tararua Range? Ambition, determination, perhaps blissful ignorance.

That morning we had a clear plan to reach Carkeek Hut, the most remote hut in Tararua Forest Park. Good weather was forecast for the next two days, but to ensure we could enjoy tramping the tops, we had to reach Arete Hut on the first day.

At the junction on the Gable End Ridge Track, a DOC sign showed the way ahead to be closed because of slips. It was drizzling as we set off up the longer but surprisingly good Waiopahu Track towards Waiopahu Hut, where there are expansive views over Levin. We carried on towards the main range, tackling two quite arduous up-down-ups first to Richards Knob and then over Butchers Saddle to Te Matawai Hut.

At Te Matawai conditions were deteriorating, darkness was approaching and my resolve was faltering. It was important to push on, though, so we steelled ourselves for more hours of climbing. A spectacular blood-red sunset at our backs slid into darkness three kilometres later at Pukematawai. We crossed the saddle to Arete and briefly sought shelter to consult the GPS. Arete Hut was reached a little after 7pm after we'd travelled 19km over 10.5hr.

ABOVE: The view west from below Pukematawai;  
RIGHT: The freshly painted Carkeek Hut is in the Tararua heartland – it's the most remote hut in the park



## The terrain leading to Lancaster and then along Carkeek Ridge is spectacular even in dull weather.

Anyone who's been at Arete Hut in a clear dawn knows that it's one of the best vantage points in the entire Tararua Range. In August the sun breaches the skyline directly behind Bannister which, with its companions Wain-gawa, the Twins and Arete, forms a striking picture. In the other direction, the dawn light will bathe Table Ridge, Mitre, Brocket, Girdle-stone, Pinnacle, Lancaster and Thompson. Adding sparkle for us was the rime-encrusted landscape right from the hut door.

Even in the warm sunshine we were in no hurry to set off in sodden, semi-frozen boots. A glance along our impending route did excite though. We had the good weather we wanted for the upcoming tops section of the trip, and with no maintained tracks to Carkeek Hut we had another big day ahead.

The terrain leading to Lancaster (1504m) and then along Carkeek Ridge is spectacular even in dull weather. The deeply cut Waiohine Valley plunges to the east, Park Valley to the west, and peaks and ridgelines stretch in every direction.

In places, rapid travel was impeded by sections of steep terrain, mostly on the southern sides of the ridge leading to Lancaster. Andy introduced me to micro spikes – stretchy rubber outers housing small metal spikes, which fit around boots. They don't have front points like crampons, but give excellent grip on ice-encrusted surfaces while allowing comfortable movement on rocky terrain. They are light, and fortunately he carried two pairs.

It was steady over Lancaster, Thompson and then Carkeek to join Carkeek Ridge. After passing two unnamed high points, a hint of orange appeared beyond the bushline ahead. Carkeek Hut lay bathed in sunshine in a small clearing at 1070m, surrounded by magnificent goblin forest.

The NZ Forest Service hut was built in 1962 to shelter deer cullers and is one of just a handful of six-bunk S70-type Forest Service huts. Until recently, Victoria University of Wellington Tramping Club members intermittently maintained the hut in between traditional 'Carkeek Picnics' over demanding weekends.

In February 2022 several ex-NZFS members, supported by Backcountry Trust funding, replaced the hut's roof, made other repairs and repainted it the original orange. That's why we could see it from so far away.

We stopped for lunch but, regrettably, had to keep moving. At least two days of hard tramping lay ahead, and the weather was due to deteriorate late the next day.

Initially our journey further south, back into the goblin forest, was a pleasure. Frequently spaced white permolat strips marked the route along the broad ridge. →

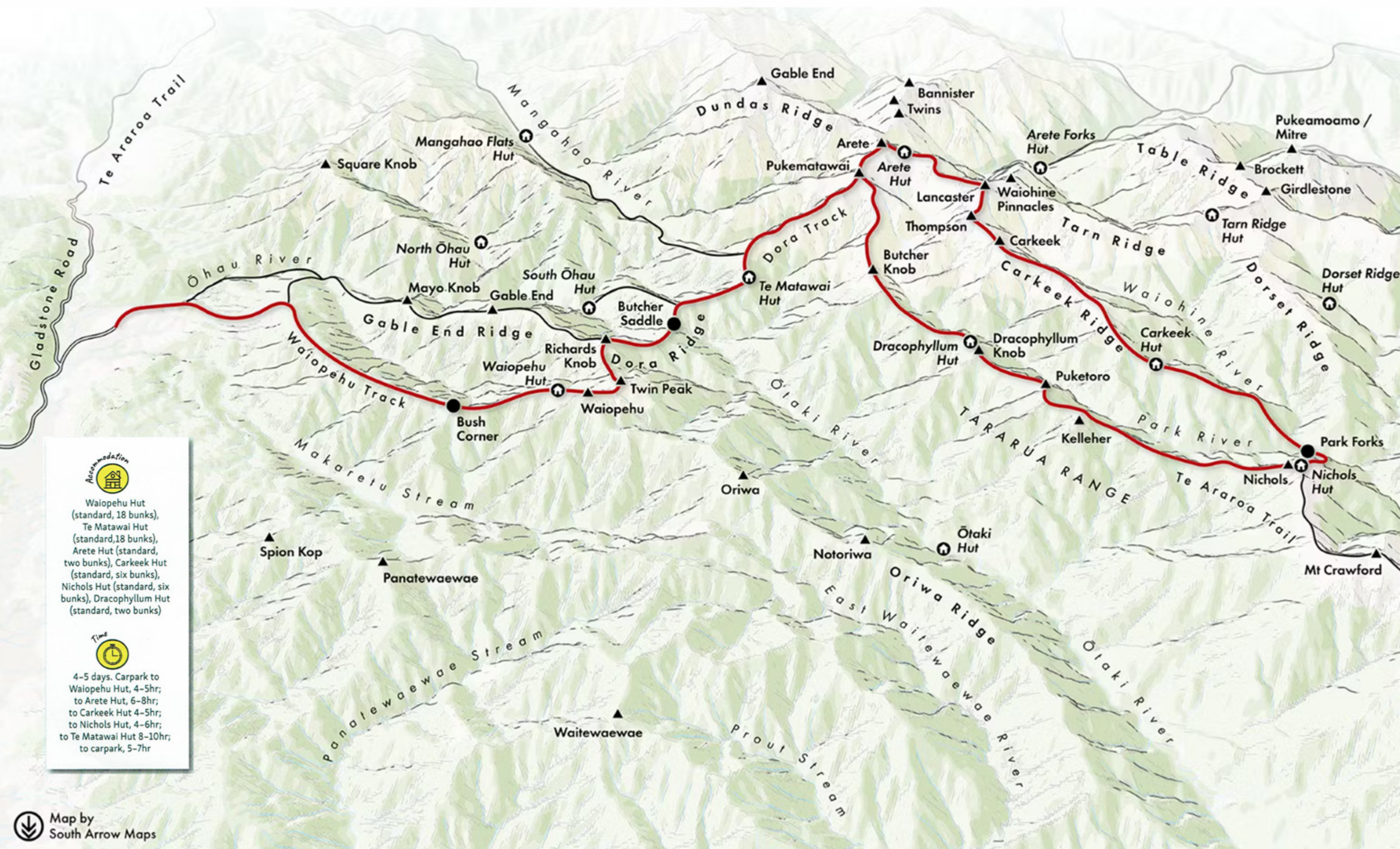




Access: Poads Road end, off Gladstone Road  
 Grade: Difficult  
 Distance: 57.7km  
 Total ascent: 4445m  
 Topo50 map: BN33, BN34

**Accommodation**  
 Waiopahu Hut (standard, 18 bunks),  
 Te Matawai Hut (standard, 18 bunks),  
 Arete Hut (standard, two bunks),  
 Carkeek Hut (standard, six bunks),  
 Nichols Hut (standard, six bunks),  
 Dracophyllum Hut (standard, two bunks)

**Time**  
 4-5 days. Carpark to Waiopahu Hut, 4-5hr;  
 to Arete Hut, 6-8hr;  
 to Carkeek Hut 4-5hr;  
 to Nichols Hut, 4-6hr;  
 to Te Matawai Hut 8-10hr;  
 to carpark, 5-7hr







The view south  
along Carkeek  
Ridge; Approaching  
Thompson with the  
ridge leading to  
Lancaster beyond

"This is too good to be true," I said. "We are in the heart of the Tararua after all!"

As I spoke, the steep, slippery 600m plunge to Park Forks began. Park River was an easy shin-deep wade and, on the far bank, a large orange triangle left no doubt as to where the route to Nichols started.

The climb was quintessential Tararua – relentlessly steep, slippery, three-points-of-contact stuff, and demanding constant attention to stay in touch with the permat 'bread crumbs'. We emerged from the bushline dripping sweat and 550m higher, and reached the ridge top, just shy of Nichols, beneath a clear sky. To the north the ridge linking Nichols with Pukematawai – the route for next day – glowed in warm orange light. Carkeek Ridge stretched towards Lancaster and was also glowing orange, as were Dorset Ridge and the main Tararua Range further east.

We were in good spirits at Nichols Hut that evening. We were now ice-free and the water tap wasn't frozen, so preparing a hot meal was no problem. Nichols Hut, another six-bunker, is nestled into a south-facing cirque. There's a nice view down Waiohine River and out to Mt Holdsworth.

The next section was new for me, but it was part of Te Araroa Trail and didn't hold any of the

menace of our previous day.

We began in clag, climbing Nichols (1242m) with all hope dashed of viewing the route ahead. On a clear day we would have been able to see the string of high points we were soon to cross, but not today. However, just before the bushline north of Nichols, shafts of sunlight penetrated the fast-swirling clouds to reveal ever-widening and longer glimpses of what lay ahead.

The goblin forest is a standout here and goes on for long stretches. There are more short stretches of tops than suggested on the map, and also impressive views in both directions, especially east to the main range. Mt Crawford dominates to the south, and eastward are the jagged fins of the Broken Axe Pinnacles. Some sections are rugged with a few steep and exposed patches. And it was long.

About halfway along the ridge we paused at Dracophyllum Hut before pushing on to Pukematawai (1432m). By then the weather was clearly changing. The wind gusts intensified as we climbed into dense clag, but the rain held off until after we'd arrived at Te Matawai Hut.

The next morning we walked steadily down for over 200m to Butcher Saddle. The climb to Richards Knob felt endless. What a relief to see the DOC sign appear from the gloom at the knob.

From there it was mostly downhill to the car. Circuit closed, mission accomplished. 