

## History

Patearoa is the traditional Southern Māori name for the Rock and Pillar Range. Cultural artefacts typical of the Waitaha, and the later Kāti Mamoe and Kāi Tahu periods, indicate the length of human activity in the Strath Taieri. There have been some important archaeological finds in this area.

While hot dry summers and harsh winters would have made life difficult for the early inhabitants, the Strath Taieri was both a mahika kai/food gathering area, and the junction of trails leading into Central Otago through the Maniatoto, over the Silverpeaks to Waitati and south to the Taieri Plain. Nohoaka/camp sites were placed sixteen to twenty miles apart on these trails; in sheltered locations close to food sources and fresh water. Flax/harakeke and cabbage tree/tī kōuka were often planted at nohoaka for practical reasons. New sandals/pāraerae could be made from the leaves of both plants and the stem and root of the cabbage tree could be cooked and eaten.

Tussock was used for whare porotaka, thatched over a mānuka frame; a temporary dwelling, warm, waterproof and easily built. The rivers and wetlands provided water fowl and freshwater fish species such as eel/tuna and lamprey/kanakana. They were often preserved by drying or storing in pōhā – storage kits made from large blades of bull kelp/rimurapa. Speargrass/taramea was a source of oil for perfume.

The area was also a source of raw materials such as tikumu (*Celmisia semicordata*) and cottonwood, harvested from several sites on the range. Silcrete rock was another local resource, as large blocks were split into flake knives, a feature of Waitaha era, moa butchery sites throughout Otago.

European pastoralists began to move into the area in the mid-1800s, and the gold rush attracted more. Initially they were en route to Central Otago but later gold prospects were worked around the district.

The construction of the Central Otago railway began in 1879 and serviced this predominantly farming district until it closed in 1990. A decade later the rail corridor became the popular Otago Central Rail Trail.



Above: Leaning Hut - 1959 (D. Paulin)

Cover: The "Taieri Pet" and the Rock and Pillar Range beyond. (R Thomas)

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# Rambling in the Rock and Pillar Range



Otago

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## Introduction

Little more than an hour from Dunedin, the Rock and Pillar Range is one of Otago's most distinctive upland features; its summit ridge dominated by impressive schist tors or rocky pillars. The range lies south to north, some 1,000 metres above the plains on either side, and climbs to 1450 metres above sea level. From that height there are great views of inland Otago's many ranges – from the Lammerlaws to Rough Ridge, the Remarkables, Dunstons, and round to the Hawkdun, Kakanui and Silver Peak Ranges.

Both the Rock and Pillar Conservation Area and Scenic Reserve stretch along the broad summit of the range. Much of this land has come to full Crown ownership through the tenure review process. The summit access routes cross private land on the Strath Taieri plain and the lower slopes of the range. They climb through low-altitude tussock, sub alpine shrublands and snow tussock. Nearer the summit they pass through distinctively wrinkled snowbank, seepage herb fields, scattered low herbs and cushion plants. The upland is also home to a wide range of sub-alpine flora and invertebrates, many of them unique to this area.

## Geology and natural history

The Rock and Pillars are recent; formed over the last three million years. Like its neighbours, the Raggedy Range and Taieri Ridge, the Rock and Pillars are a series of folds, the result of deep local faulting. Looking west from the range the folding is obvious – steep-fronted, broad-backed ranges, rolling onwards like an ocean swell.

Some blocks of resistant schist remain, long after the surrounding rock has eroded away. These tors are a



significant feature on the bleak and windswept ridges. The fell fields on the crest have wave-like, ridge-patterned soils, typical of areas subject to freeze-thaw environments. Above it all is a semi regular visitor to the area, a lenticular cloud formation, known locally as the Taieri Pet; its appearance is associated with nor-west winds.

To the Rock and Pillar range the Taieri River is virtually a freshwater moat. From its headwaters in the Lammermoors, it flows north on the west side, to turn east at the north end, then run south through the Strath Taieri and on to the sea. The top of the range is a vast peneplain of tussock grasslands and high altitude bogs, dotted with moss and lichen encrusted schist tors, with low-growing alpine herb fields at the highest altitudes. The grasslands and bogs on the range's flanks are an important water resource, capturing and storing water from winter snow and year-round mists. This is slowly released over summer, maintaining flows in the Taieri River.

## Flora

Above 900 metres, blue tussock (*Poa colensoi*) and patches of the aromatic daisy *Celmisia viscosa* are dominant, along with low herbs, cushion plants and hebe shrublands. As the snowbanks recede in late spring the first flowers emerge; peak flowering time for high altitude plants is mid January to February. On the upper flanks look out for the daisy, *Celmisia haastii* var. *tomentosa* - endemic to this range - among native grasses, and speargrass (*Aciphylla* sp). Lower down, snowgrass (*Chionochloa rigida*) is mixed with shrubs and native herbs.

Wetlands and tarns are common. They host an array of mosses, cushion plants, herbs and sedges. A small stand of tōtara at the northern end of the range is a remnant of forests that once grew on the lower slopes. Lianas, fuchsia (*Fuchsia perscandens*), native ferns and mountain flax/harakeke, are found in scattered gullies.

Left: Tors and Hebe shrubland on the crest of the Rock and Pillar Range. (J Barkla)

## Fauna

The height of invertebrate activity coincides with late summer flowering when, in good weather, geometrid moths flit about feeding on nectar. The tarns and bogs also support numerous life forms, most notably diurnal stoneflies and caddis flies.

Many of the insect species in this environment are relatively large, compared to similar lowland species. On the open tops the mountain stone weta (*Hemideina maori*), which grows to 65mm in length, is both unique to Otago and well adapted to its conditions. It can survive months of extreme, snow-covered conditions, due to antifreeze properties in its blood.

A species of flightless chafer beetle (*Prodontria montis*) is endemic to the Rock and Pillar's alpine cushionfields, and another beetle, (*Megadromus bullatus*), is easily recognised by its large size and greenish metallic sheen.



Mountain stone weta (J Barkla)

On sunny days it is possible to see skinks basking on the schist outcrops. Tōrea, the South Island pied oystercatcher, can be seen in summer, along with the banded dotterel/tūturiwhatu and the black-backed gull/karoro. Our two raptors are also present: the Australasian harrier/kāhu, and soaring and gliding in the updraughts in search of prey, the New Zealand falcon/kārearea.

## Access

Foot access to the conservation area is available via nine different routes. The routes described here are for visitors who are both experienced and at least moderately fit. The weather here is very changeable. Be prepared for extreme conditions at any time of year, and get an up to date weather forecast prior to setting out.

Because of the fragile environment on the summit crest there are limited opportunities for vehicle access to the Rock and Pillars. These are a combination of public roads, conservation land and easements through private property. Should people want 4WD access, they should contact DOC's Coastal Otago office, 77 Lower Stuart St, Dunedin, Phone 03 477 0677

The relevant topographical maps for the area are: NZTopo50 series, Sheets CD15 Paerau and CD16 Middlemarch.

## Hunting

Hunting is permitted in the Rock and Pillar Range. A Department of Conservation hunting permit is required.

## Big Hut



Photo: B Mason

In 1946 the Otago Ski Club opened their 70-bunk ski lodge, Big Hut, near the summit plateau. Building it was a major volunteer undertaking, hauling some 30 tons of material 1,000 metres up the range's steep eastern face. It became the venue for large weekend parties of enthusiasts from Dunedin. They travelled on the Otago Central Railway and walked up to the ski fields. By 1954, though, the ski field by Big Hut was no longer popular; Coronet Peak's easier access and better slopes had become irresistible.

The hut fell into disrepair, until the 1980s when local tramping clubs maintained it. Big Hut has now withstood 60 years of alpine conditions – gale force winds and months-long snow cover. It still provides accommodation for trampers, naturalists, and photographers.

Big Hut is in the Rock and Pillar Conservation Area, owned and maintained by the Rock and Pillar Hut Trust, and sleeps a maximum of 10 casual overnighters. This may be expanded in the future; with a warden it may accommodate up to 40 people. It has mattresses but no heating or lighting. Visitors need to bring their own cooker & utensils. Groups of six or more, need to book. Email: [bighut@middlemarch.co.nz](mailto:bighut@middlemarch.co.nz), Phone: (03) 447 3554, Cell phone: 0274 358311

Hut fees: \$10.00 per night, per adult, paid at the hut or posted to the Rock and Pillar Hut Trust, RD 1, Omakau. Special fees for educational or commercial ventures.

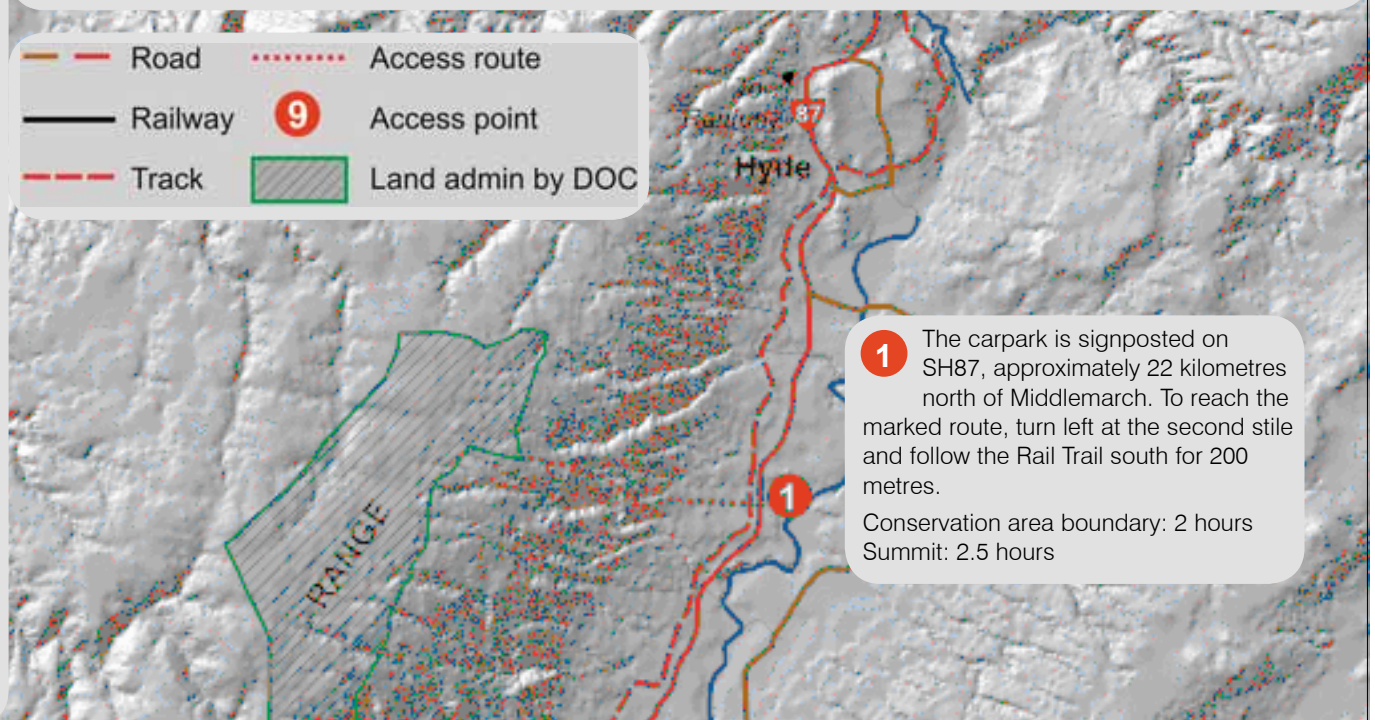
## Leaning Lodge



Photo: J Gordon

The original and aptly named Leaning Lodge was erected by the Otago Ski Club for skiers using the Castle Rock Ski Field. Well patronised for the first two years, the tow was then buried by drift snow, the slope avalanched and by 1966 the ski field was abandoned.

For many years the OTMC maintained the hut for public use. It is now the responsibility of the Leaning Lodge Trust. There are plans for the hut's eventual replacement. The current structure sleeps a maximum of 8 people, has mattresses but no heating or lighting. Visitors need their own cooker and utensils. Bookings are not required. Hut fees are \$5 per night/per adult, paid at the hut or posted to: Otago Tramping and Mountaineering Club, Box 1120, Dunedin.



**9** The Old Dunstan Road is closed in winter (1 June to 1 October) but the rest of the year is open to 2WD vehicles. Near the highest point of the road a 4WD track leads to McPhees Rock and on to the summit ridge. Permission may be required from the landowner.

**2** Parking and toilet facilities are by the Otago Central Rail Trail at the intersection of SH87 and Ngapuna Road, midway between Middlemarch and Hyde. The route is via Taieri Lake Station and sign-posted 100 metres along the Rail Trail (north), over the main road.  
Conservation area boundary: 2 hours Summit: 3 hours

**3** Mountain biking is permitted. Access and parking is at Kilmory Station, nine kilometres north of Middlemarch, just before Lug Creek.  
Conservation area boundary: 1.5 hours Summit: 3 hours

**4** Signposted from SH87 (Wandle Road), five kilometres north of Middlemarch, near the McKinnon Road junction. 2WD access to the parking area is through cattle stops on private property. Follow the marked route from the car park.  
Conservation area boundary: 20 minutes Summit: 3 hours

**5** Access is from Gladbrook Road near March Creek, midway between the corners of Browns and McKinnon Roads. Cross the stile and follow the markers.  
Conservation area boundary: 1 hour Summit: 2.5 hours.

**6** The parking area and route are reached through a farm gate by turning left at the end of Rock Road. To reach the conservation area, follow the marked route along the fence line. The marking ceases at the conservation boundary, though the route to the ridge follows the fence line.  
Conservation area boundary: 2 hours. Summit: 2.5 hours

**7** Access is through private property near the southern end of Gladbrook Road, Middlemarch. It is signposted, with markers to the conservation boundary.  
Conservation area boundary: 2 hours

**8** This provides direct access from the Old Dunstan Road, at a marked point, adjacent to the Loganburn Reservoir. Mountain biking is permitted.

