



Mt Owen caving guidelines

A guide for overseas cavers

Summary

1. **Check your plans out with local cavers** – ideally, invite local cavers to join your expedition.
2. **Go on a good weather forecast** – and be prepared for wet, cold weather at any time of the year.
3. **Leave an itinerary with someone** who will act if you don't return as planned. In an emergency contact the Police by phoning 111. The Police organise cave rescues in New Zealand. There is no cost to anyone rescued.
4. **You are in Kahurangi National Park.** You will need to follow the Department of Conservation environmental code: www.doc.govt.nz .
5. **Helicopter access in Kahurangi National Park is restricted.** Check with local helicopter companies to see if you are allowed to fly into an area. Be prepared to walk out in case the weather prevents a helicopter flying. For longer trips you will need to pay for a helicopter to fly out your gear and rubbish.
6. **Keep the number of people at a campsite small.** Smaller parties have less impact on the environment and other users. The number of people camping at Bulmer Lake should not exceed 20.
7. **Surface water is scarce.** Make sure you use hygienic practises around Bulmer Lake, streams, and tarns.
8. **Know how to cross rivers safely.** Be prepared to wait a day or two for river levels to fall.
9. **Do not leave rubbish behind.** Carry out what you brought in.
10. **Carry antihistamines** as common wasps and German wasps can reach plague numbers in Mt Owen beech forest in summer and autumn.
11. **New Zealand cavers have a two-week camp at Bulmer Lake from late December.** Other groups will need to camp elsewhere or plan their trip for another time of year.



Left: Mount Owen from Granity Pass

*Photograph:
A. Shanks*

Caving in New Zealand

The best way to go caving in New Zealand is with local cavers. Cavers comprise a very small community in New Zealand and there are only about two hundred active cavers in six clubs scattered from Auckland to Christchurch. Please do not take offence if there are just no trips on at a time that may suit your travel plans. The nearest caving club to Mt Owen is the Nelson Speleo Group (NSG) with about 80 members.

A good way to meet cavers is to stay at caving club huts, which are at Waitomo in the North Island and Tākaka Hill and Charleston in the South Island. These can be booked through the local club contacts.

Liaison with New Zealand Speleological Society (NZSS)

The national caving organisation is the New Zealand Speleological Society, a member of Union Internationale de Speleologie. UIS guidelines (1997) set out the requirements for overseas expeditions. UIS states that overseas expeditions must liaise with national caving organisations, be willing to incorporate local members, and provide copies of reports and surveys.

To contact NZSS see www.caves.org.nz. NZSS can put overseas cavers in contact with individual cavers who may be able to provide more information.

Your group can help NZSS maintain a record of exploration information from your expedition:

- Follow the system for tagging new caves on Mount Owen with small aluminium markers pre-stamped with numbers. Contact Mike Allen (NSG) for the rules and tags.
- All cave names must be submitted to NZSS for approval. UIS guidelines state that cave names should reflect the local topography.
- Drafted maps must be provided to the NZSS South Island Maps Officer (current contact is Bruce Mutton of NSG).
- Trip reports are to be made available to the NZSS Bulletin Editor (current contact is Marcus Thomas) who will liaise over publication.
- All original survey data for Bulmer Cavern is stored with NZSS once no longer required by the surveyors.

NZ caving ethics

New Zealand cavers adhere to a set of caving ethics and leadership guidelines that are likely to be similar to those in your country. Please read them to make sure you understand any differences: see the Minimum Impact Code at www.caves.org.nz.

There are no maps available with cave locations marked, or lists of GPS co-ordinates for cave entrances.

It is NZSS policy that cave entrances are not publicised outside the caving community. Please do not publish grid references or GPS co-ordinates in your reports or on maps.

Caving style

Mt Owen caves are about six degrees Celsius, so warm clothes are necessary. The harsh, abrasive marble requires gloves, sturdy footwear, and oversuits. Some of the caves have very little water so water must be carried. Almost all caving trips are day trips, even trips up to 20 hours long.

Camping in caves only occurs when there is no other option to continue exploration.

Rigging style

Most caves have pitches, requiring SRT and ropes. To find out about the rigging in the cave talk to cavers who know the cave well. Rigging guides are not published because many pitches are rarely visited. Caves such as Bulmer Cavern are extremely complex and have multiple routes and variations; however major "commuting" routes (regularly used routes) have fixed rigging.

Rigging is put in place by the first explorers and upgraded by individual cavers to meet their own requirements, thus rigging practises vary between trips and groups. Rigging is not independently audited. This means that you must carefully assess the rigging and use it at your own discretion. If you are unsure of its age or integrity do not use it. Never leave any gear rigged in a dangerous state.

New Zealand cavers generally use natural protection as first resort rather than always placing bolts. This is to expedite exploration and to reduce the impact on the cave. You will come across slings around boulders and stalagmites, chocks in cracks, and wire strops around rock threads.

At present there is no national written standard for rigging in caves. NZSS does a guide for bolting from 2018, which is available on the NZSS website. Ask local cavers to explain current practice for bolt hardware and bolting in the areas you wish to visit.

Cave conservation

The universal conservation ethics of caving apply. Cave lightly. Minimise your impact on the cave. See www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/things-to-do/caving/caving-guidelines .

Important conservation measures for Mount Owen caves are:

- Carry red plastic tape to mark a walking route though delicate areas on the initial discovery.
- Leave bones where you find them. Only move bones to the side of a passage if they are in danger of being walked on – consider changing the route first. Most bones in New Zealand caves are from extinct native birds and have high scientific value.
- No cave material, such as speleothems, bones, insects, or water samples, may be removed from the cave without a collecting permit from the Department of Conservation.
- Do not paint, chisel, or permanently mark cave entrances - use cave tags.
- Do not permanently mark survey stations with chisel marks or paint. Instead use waterproof paper, red plastic tape, or make a small cairn (rock pile).



Eggshell from a Moa, a large extinct flightless bird, marked with tape and left where it was found.

Photograph: D. Cade

Location

Mt Owen karst covers a 7000-hectare area from montane beech forest covering valleys and lower hill slopes, to subalpine tussock grassland around 1300-1600 metres, topped by bare alpine karst-fields rising to 1875 metres at the summit of Mt Owen. The Owen Massif is the southern end of a band of Palaeozoic (Ordovician) marble (metamorphosed limestone) extending south from Tākaka Hill to an outlier at Springs Junction. The area has been heavily glaciated and the glacial legacy is cirque basins with scoured, rounded steep sides, and deep shafts filled with shattered scree.

Mt Owen is separated into the North Owen and South Owen areas by a watershed – the South Owen drains into the Owen River or the Fyfe River, and the North Owen into Blue Creek, Granity Creek, and Nuggety Creek. The Mt Owen area contains New Zealand's best examples of ice speleothems.

Māori cultural values

Be aware that local Māori people view the landscape that you see differently. To *tangata whenua* (Māori for “people of the land”), *Papatūānuku*, the Earth Mother, one of the primal parents, is personified in all land, including karst. Through cave systems, people can return, literally, back into the safety and care of *Papatūānuku* for whatever purpose or occasion. The water and its source have special spiritual significance. Cavers can honour the Māori understanding of the land by appreciating the water resources, practicing hygienic toileting, and leaving as little sign as possible that they have camped and visited.

History

Although the area looks remote and untouched there are many signs of human influence and modification of the biodiversity. Numerous moa bones in caves and the rare find of a Haast Eagle skeleton are reminders of New Zealand’s unique pre-human past as the land of birds, before humans introduced mammals from other countries.

Gold found in the 1870s in the Wangapeka and Owen valleys brought miners, canvas towns, sluices, deforestation, and wholesale reorganisation of alluvial material on the river terraces. As well as gold mining, there was a silver mine on the south side of Mt Owen.

The open grassland on the north of Mt Owen attracted farmers. Sheep were released into the “Hay Paddocks” with grass seed rubbed into their backs in an early attempt at over-sowing European pasture grasses. At this high altitude the growing season was short and consequently grazing was discontinued. In the 1940s and 1950s wild deer numbers increased dramatically. Forest understory was eaten out and sub-alpine scrub grazed down by deer. The local farmer, Ken Farrell, pioneered a route up the Bulmer Creek bluffs to hunt deer in the 1940s. Helicopter shooting and live capture of deer decreased numbers so much that today deer sightings are rare.

Invasion by possums and goats has seen changes in the species composition of the forests, shrubland, and grasslands as they ate the most palatable plants. The competition for food and reduction in certain trees and shrubs favoured by birds led to a reduction in indigenous bird numbers.

Cavers have been visiting the area since 1960s, concentrating exploration first on North Owen. In 1984 John Patterson led a trip to South Owen and discovered Bulmer Cavern. Bulmer Cavern was explored, primarily through a series of summer expeditions, to become New Zealand’s longest cave (about 75 km in 2026) and third deepest cave (-755 m).

Mt Owen has become a popular destination for tramping (hiking) groups, especially after some of the scenes in the movie *Lord of the Rings* were filmed on the mountain. The tracks and trails are listed in guide books, so although this is a less popular area, you may be sharing the mountain with others.

The land is national park

All of Mt Owen Massif is owned by the Government of New Zealand and became part of Kahurangi National Park in 1996. Kahurangi National Park is administered by the Department of Conservation (DOC) from DOC offices in Motueka, Tākaka, St Arnaud, and Karamea. A small part of the Owen River catchment is outside the Park boundaries as it contains minerals and mining claims.

Public land means that all people have the right to roam. However, there are still laws and rules.

- You are not allowed to collect plants, insects, or rocks without written permission from DOC.
- You are not allowed to light fires in a closed fire season.
- You are not allowed to carry out commercial activities (including filming) without a concession from DOC.
- You are not allowed to pan for gold outside designated areas.
- You are not allowed to hunt for deer without a permit.
- You are not allowed to shoot ducks outside a designated duck-shooting season.
- You are not allowed to fish for trout without a fishing licence.

Check the rules at a DOC office; see www.doc.govt.nz.

The weather

The weather can be summed up in one word: changeable. Snow is not confined to winter and can fall at any time of the year. Northerly winds bring rain, westerly winds bring rain, and southerly winds bring cold rain. The prevailing wind is from the west. Plan for cold, wet, windy weather. Sun brings its own problems – beware of sunburn in the bright, clear alpine air. Check out www.metservice.net.nz and www.metvuw.com.

Navigation

Mt Owen is often foggy – use a GPS app, or map and compass, to orientate yourself. Route-finding back across the karst field on a dark, moonless night is difficult. Be prepared in case you get lost. Don't forget when you become lost that the whole area is full of hidden shafts and bluffs, and almost certainly you will not be able to follow the straight line your GPS app suggests.

In New Zealand you will need a Zone 5 compass or a global compass. Set your GPS app to New Zealand Map grid. Maps are produced using the New Zealand Transverse Mercator (NZTM) projection, and data can be readily downloaded from Land Information New Zealand (LINZ).

Online maps can be viewed at www.linz.govt.nz/products-services/maps/new-zealand-topographic-maps.



*Snow on Mt Owen in summer.
(1 January 2007).*

*Photograph:
A. Shanks*

Access

The North Owen area is accessed from the Wangapeka Valley that runs west from Tapawera, 45 minutes south of Motueka. Cars can be driven along a gravel road and left at the end of the road at Courthouse Flat, where there is a basic DOC camping ground (water from river, one toilet). Camping fees of \$10 a night are deposited in cash in the secure box provided. Be aware that the ford at Courthouse Flat floods. There is public transport to Courthouse Flat, see www.nelsonlakesshuttles.co.nz.

From Courthouse flat there are two possible marked tracks that converge at the top of Billies Knob. From here the track goes down into Ghost Valley, where there is a DOC hut at Granity Pass that has twelve bunks. This hut is very popular since scenes in the film *The Lord of the Rings* were shot on Mt Owen, so a tent should be carried in case the hut is full.

The route from Granity Pass onto Mt Owen is simple and straightforward in fine weather, but it is easy to become confused in the rolling karst grassland with the frequent foggy and wet weather, and trips are best postponed to a clear day.

The **South Owen** area is approached from Owen River Junction, half an hour north of Murchison. There is basic camping in the Owen Junction domain below the Pub (water, toilets, \$10 per night). Travel up the

East Owen Road 11 km to the end. A sign directs you to where cars can be parked in a paddock. The farmer must always be asked before the area can be used by a helicopter (Ross Farrell, ph 03-523-9280) to make sure it will not interfere with his stock or farm work. No camping is allowed in the paddocks at the road-end.

The track up the Owen River is rough and unmarked after the junction of Bulmer Creek. In the gold-mining days there was a track over Granity Pass to the mining areas in the Wangapeka Valley.

At the junction of the Owen River and Bulmer Creek it is necessary to cross the Owen River – normally a straightforward crossing little more than knee deep. However, like all New Zealand rivers, this can become uncrossable after rain.

Trampers usually head off up the DOC Sunrise Ridge track, but this is not recommended as the route is very steep and exposed on the section above the bushline, and on arrival at Sunrise Peak it is far from obvious where to go.

Cavers use the rough track following Bulmer Creek. This is not a DOC track and the track markings were installed by cavers and not reliably maintained. From the creek head the track goes steeply up through the cliffs on the left side of the creek, culminating in a climb up the cliff using a rope ladder and ropes installed by Czech cavers in the 1990s and maintained by local cavers; use your own judgement as to their safety. However, a permanent steel ladder is intended to be installed in 2026.

The cavers' track ends at Bulmer Lake. Before the Lake an indistinct branch to the left takes you to the "Swamp" campsite.

An alternative route used by cavers travelling to the Bulmer Cave Lower Levels camp veers off below Bulmer Creek Resurgence and heads up untracked grassland and bluffs, marked only with intermittent orange flagging tape. This is very steep in places, and extreme caution must be taken to avoid serious falls, especially when the tussock is wet and slippery.

Although normally benign, Bulmer Creek and Owen River can become impassable in high water. All trips that cross the Owen River must plan for delays when the river is too high to cross safely. Always reserve some food in case you must wait on the other side for a river level to drop. The Bulmer Creek catchment is feed from Bulmer Cavern and the river rises and falls at a different rate to the Owen River. Make sure you know good river-crossing techniques. See www.mountainsafety.org.nz.

There is a DOC track up the **Fyfe River** to the six-bunk Branch Creek Hut. There is a route from the hut up onto the North Owen karst-field.



Cavers must be prepared to wait if the rivers cannot be crossed safely. The photo shows the crossing at the confluence of Bulmer Creek and Owen River in high water.

Photograph: A. Shanks

Helicopter access is a privilege

Permission must be sought from DOC to land a helicopter in Kahurangi National Park. The Department of Conservation has an Air Access Strategy for Kahurangi National Park to balance the wishes of visitors to fly into the Park and the wishes of those visitors who go there for peace and quiet and a wilderness experience.

Mt Owen is designated a **Medium Frequency** area with up to two landings per day and no more than ten per month allowed. Check with the Department of Conservation Motueka office, and the local helicopter companies to see if you are able fly into an area.

To the north there are helicopter companies based at Wakefield and Brightwater, and to the south at Murchison. Helicopters are often delayed by cloudy or wet weather, so always plan for a couple of days' delay and have an alternative plan that does not depend on a helicopter. Never walk in without sufficient food and gear to return, in case the helicopter is not able to fly.

For week-long expeditions it is usual to fly gear, and occasionally cavers, into a caving area and walk out. This means that arrangements must be made for a back-flight to pick up all gear and rubbish. The cheapest way is to ask the pilot if he is willing to leave a net to be packed for later removal. As it may be several weeks before the helicopter is back in the area all gear must be in water-proof and animal-proof containers.

You will need to get permission from landowners if you wish to use their land as a helicopter-landing base.



*Left: Granity Pass Hut,
Ghost Valley, North Owen*

Photo: A. Shanks

Huts on Mt Owen

DOC maintains two small huts on Mt Owen. They cannot be booked in advance so always come prepared to camp outside a hut. Hut fees are paid with pre-paid tickets purchased from DOC offices and taken to the hut and displayed on your pack. It is hut etiquette to allow others to share the hut with you, especially in bad weather. Bring your own fuel or gas stove. See www.doc.govt.nz.

The huts in the area are:

- Granity Pass Hut - a twelve-bunk hut at the head of Blue Creek.
- Branch Creek Hut - a six-bunk basic hut at the head of the Fyfe River.

Both huts cost a \$10 ticket per night and cannot be booked.

Camping in tents

From the first exploration trips, cavers put in place controls on camping practises and practised 'no impact' camping.

See: <https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/parks-and-recreation/plan-and-prepare/easy-read/tiaki-care-codes-for-aotearoa-new-zealand.pdf>

Practice minimum impact at campsites:

- Keep the number of people at a campsite small – smaller parties have less impact on the environment and other users. New Zealand cavers limit the number of people camping at Bulmer Lake to less than 20 per night.
- Use established campsites, such as Granity Pass, Bulmer Lake, The Swamp, Cathy's campsite, and Poverty Basin.
- Use modern equipment that doesn't damage the environment and helps you be self-reliant. Cutting vegetation for tent poles and sleeping areas is not necessary.
- Leave the area in as natural a state as possible. It is kind to the environment and appreciated by other visitors.
- Camp on robust or sandy surfaces.
- Keep your camping sites compact; do not clutter up an area and spoil the ambiance for others.

Water supply

Bulmer Lake is the only source of reliable fresh water in the South Owen area, although there are sometimes tarns at "the Swamp", Castle Basin, Poverty Basin, and elsewhere. The lake is shallow and high in nutrients. It is full of aquatic weed and aquatic insects. In 1997 NZSS asked DOC to put up a sign to alert other users to the cavers' rules. It is in your interest to ask other groups in the area to abide by them too.

- Dig a communal toilet. Go to the toilet a long way away from the water you drink. At Bulmer Lake that is back down the track outside the lake catchment. Provide a bucket for hand washing.
- If you use disinfectant dispose of it carefully – it is poisonous to small birds.
- Make sure that toilet paper is buried – it takes a long time to decompose, and is attractive to weka.
- Wash yourself and your clothes by taking a bucket of water at least 5 metres away from the lake so that dirty water and soap residue can be filtered by the vegetation and soil before it returns to the lake.
- Absolutely never swim in Bulmer Lake or in a tarn – they are your drinking water.

Fire

Bring your own gas or fuel cooking stoves. Avoid using fires for cooking. The use of fires for cooking, warmth, or atmosphere has environmental consequences. Fires use up wood, destroy insect life, and can scar sites with blackened and charred fireplaces. Fallen wood, especially larger branches and logs, is the source of food and shelter for many forest insects and plants.

If you must use a fire:

- Be aware of fire bans and the higher fire risk during summer months. You may need a permit for your fire. Contact the local Department of Conservation or Council for details.
- Keep fires small and efficient. Use existing fireplaces if possible.
- Do not burn plastic jars or plastic-lined packages as they leave a residue. Tin foil, teabags, and tins do not burn, so carry them out.
- Use only dead wood.
- Make sure the fire is completely out by dousing it with water and checking that the ashes are cold. Dismantle the fire site, and scatter unburnt wood before leaving the area.
- NEVER leave fires unattended
- If you cause a fire on public land you will be liable for fire-fighting costs.

Rubbish

It is not acceptable to burn or bury rubbish or leave it for others to remove. Litter is unpleasant and encourages rats and mice, wasps, and disease.

- Plan your visits to cut down on potential rubbish. Repack food into bags or re-useable containers to avoid cans, plastic, glass waste, and meat trays. Cut down the amount of paper and cardboard packaging. Take wine in bladders, not bottles.
- Carry out what you carry in or organise a helicopter back-flight.
- If you come across other people's rubbish, remove that as well.

Tracks

- Keep to tracks to reduce the spread of pugging and tracking.
- Many areas are fragile and take years to recover from damage. Walk around, not on alpine turfs, herb fields, mossy beds and tarn margins and wetlands.
- Cairns (piles of stones) are sometimes used to mark routes, but keep cairns to a minimum as they may confuse trampers and hikers, and may mean nothing to other cavers.

Caches

Occasionally cavers have stored camping and caving gear near a cave to make it easier to continue exploration. The ease of taking gear in by helicopter means that it is very easy to bring in more than you need. There have been instances of gear left under the assumption that it could be useful for future trips or other cavers. It never is, and is eventually blown out as rubbish by other cavers, sometimes decades later.

Caches are only to be established:

- For your own use; do not leave anything assuming it may be useful to other people.
- Only if one person takes personal responsibility for the cache.
- When there is a plan to use or remove the cache in a defined period of time.
- Only if food is left in water-tight containers.

Camping in caves

It is NZSS policy that camping in caves is discouraged. There is only cave with a permanent camp on Mount Owen, and that is in Bulmer Cavern. Food is not to be left at the underground campsite, and all faeces and rubbish must be carried out.

Animal threats

New Zealand was a land with no land mammals, apart from a few species of bats. Therefore the, goats, chamois, deer, possums, stoats, rats, and mice you may encounter are all pests, and DOC spends a lot of money killing them. Possums are nocturnal, persistent, and stupid. You are encouraged to kill them. Mice can build up in number when the beech trees are fruiting.

The common wasp plague began in the 1980s and is more than a nuisance. Wasps compete with birds for honeydew on the beech trees. Some people are allergic to their stings, so you will need to carry antihistamine tablets.

Kea are the world's only alpine parrot. They are large, curious birds with a strong beak that can shred your gear. Do not feed them, and chase them away from your campsite.

In recent years a large ground-based native bird, the weka, has colonised the area and is now to be found throughout Mt Owen. While this is a positive aspect for native biodiversity, weka are pesky birds with a penchant for stealing food and shiny objects, and digging up toilet paper. They are difficult to discourage.

Search and rescue

All search and rescue (SAR) operations are co-ordinated by the Police. To initiate a SAR, ring the Police or ring 111 on any phone. The Police then contact cave SAR advisers who call out cavers to undertake the underground part of a rescue, supported by the NZ LandSAR organisation. For a purely surface operation, LandSAR will manage the rescue. See www.landsar.org.nz.

It is standard practice to carry a personal locator beacon (PLB). They can be hired from outdoor sports shops. Most areas on Mt Owen have cell-phone coverage, but sometimes it may be necessary to ascend to a nearby ridge.

Accident insurance

It is prudent to have travel insurance that covers the cost of medical treatment for illness and accidents resulting from caving.

If you have an accident in New Zealand, you will be covered by the Government-funded Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) for all hospital treatment. If you visit a doctor or physiotherapist because of injury from an accident you have to pay only a percentage of the cost, as the consultation is subsidised by ACC. This also means that it is almost impossible to take a claim to the courts for compensation if you are injured in an accident due to the negligence of others.

A quick-check list for expedition gear

- A contact person has a list of trip participants and their emergency contact information.
- Maps and compass, and/or GPS.
- Personal Locator Beacon.
- Group first-aid kit.
- Log-book for recording trip intentions and trip reports.
- Tags for marking new caves.
- Toilet spade.
- Separate buckets for drinking water, washing bodies, toilet hand-washing, and washing clothes.
- Animal-proof food containers.
- Liquid fuel or gas stoves.
- Large cooking pots.
- Spare tents or tarpaulins for storing gear.
- Containers for storing rubbish for flying out.



A caver checks out a cave entrance, above the Fyfe Valley, Mt Owen.

Photograph: A. Shanks