

# Tongariro Northern Circuit TRACK GUIDE



Duration: **3–4 days**  
Distance: **45 km (loop)**



Department of  
Conservation  
*Te Papa Atawhai*

## Plan and prepare

It is important to plan your trip thoroughly to ensure you stay safe and have a great time. Before you go, know the **Outdoor Safety Code** – 5 simple rules to help you #MakeItHomeNZ.

1. Plan your trip
2. Tell someone
3. Be aware of the weather
4. Know your limits
5. Take sufficient supplies

### TELL SOMEONE YOUR PLANS

Tell someone you trust your plans and when they should hear from you next. Include the national/international emergency service numbers: 111-Police for points of contact in New Zealand, +64-4-381-2000 for international. Find more information at [www.adventuresmart.nz](http://www.adventuresmart.nz).

### For in-depth local knowledge, visit:

Tongariro National Park Visitor Centre  
Whakapapa Village, State Highway 48, Mount Ruapehu  
Phone: +64 7 892 3729  
Email: [tongarirovc@doc.govt.nz](mailto:tongarirovc@doc.govt.nz)

[greatwalks.co.nz](http://greatwalks.co.nz)

Share your experience – [facebook.com/docgovtnz](https://facebook.com/docgovtnz)

Published by: Department of Conservation, Marketing Team  
PO Box 10420, Wellington 6143, New Zealand | November 2019 | R160827

This publication is produced using paper sourced from well-managed, renewable and legally logged forests.

New Zealand Government

## Welcome to the *Tongariro Northern Circuit Track*, one of ten unforgettable journeys.

From alpine herbfields to forests, and tranquil lakes to desert plateaux, journey through a landscape of stark contrasts with amazing views in this dual World Heritage site. Winding past Mount Tongariro and Mount Ngauruhoe, you will be dazzled by dramatic volcanic landscapes and New Zealand's rich geological and ancestral past.

You are strongly recommended **NOT** to attempt this track between early May and late October (outside the Great Walks season). The winter environment in Tongariro National Park is very cold and wet, with ice, snow and the risk of avalanche, as well as short daylight hours. Alpine-specific trip planning is critical for your safety. For more information, see 'Outside the Great Walks season' at [greatwalks.co.nz/tongariro](http://greatwalks.co.nz/tongariro).

## Plants and wildlife

**Plants** in the area vary considerably, from alpine herbs to thick swathes of tussocks and flax; from the hardy, low-growing shrubs of the Rangipo Desert to dense beech forests. In spring and summer, you'll enjoy stunning alpine flowers.



Photo: Herb Christophers

**North Island robin/toutouwai** are sparrow-sized birds found only in New Zealand. Males have dark grey plumage while the female is dark grey-brown. They are inquisitive, friendly and trusting, often coming to within a couple of metres of people. If they do approach you, don't feed them.



Photo: Ralph Powlesland

**New Zealand falcon/kārearea** can fly at speeds of more than 100 km/h and catch prey up to 6 times their body weight. The falcon does not build a nest. Rather, it makes a scrape on the ground under a rocky outcrop or in a forest tree into which it lays its eggs.



Photo: Ian McHenry

**Blue duck/whio** live only in clean, fast-flowing streams in forested upper river catchments. Nesting along the riverbanks, they are at high risk of attack from stoats and rats. You might see them on Waihohonu Stream or Ohinepango Stream near Waihohonu Hut.



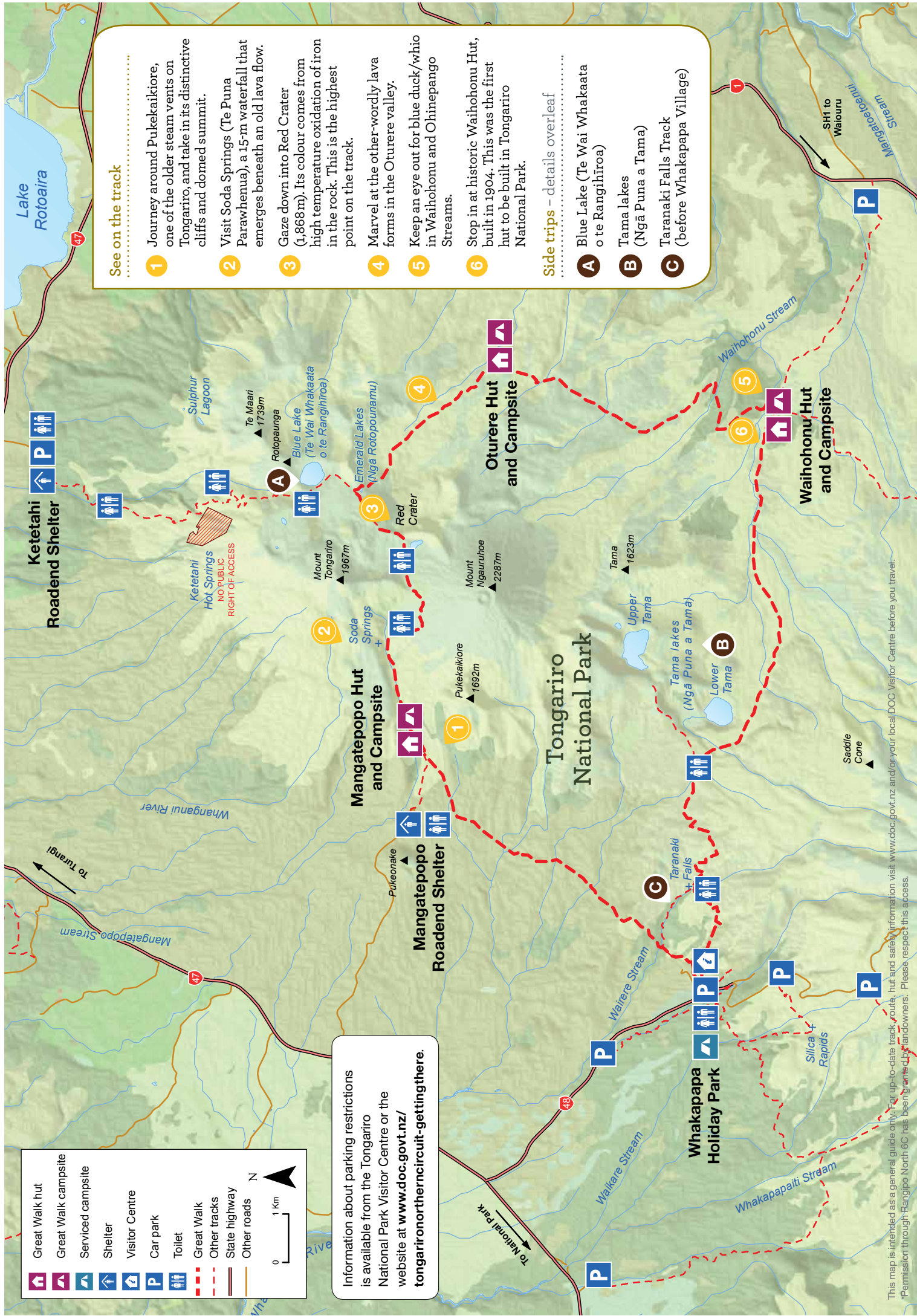
Photo: Bubs Smith

**Rifleman/tititipounamu** are New Zealand's smallest bird. They are constantly in motion, producing a characteristic high-pitched cheep and 'wing-flicking' movement while foraging up and down tree trunks. The rifleman belongs to one of the most ancient bird lineages in this country, the New Zealand wren family.



Photo: M F Soper





## TRACK GUIDE

*Tongariro Northern Circuit can be hiked in either direction. The track is well marked and signposted, but some sections may be steep, rough or muddy. See the Safety section for more information about how to stay safe on this hike.*


You are strongly recommended NOT to walk the track outside the Great Walks season (May to October), as harsh winter weather makes the track dangerous.

Walking times are approximate and will vary according to your fitness, direction of travel and the weather. Always allow extra time.

### Whakapapa Village to Mangatepopo Hut

4 hr, 9.4 km

Begin behind the Chateau Tongariro at Ngauruhoe Place and go along the lower Taranaki Falls Track. After about 20 min the Mangatepopo Track branches off from the Taranaki Falls Track.

 Heavily eroded in places, the track crosses many stream beds. It can be boggy and challenging in wet weather and stream levels may become impassable and unsafe.

Ahead and to the right is Pukekaikiore, thought to be one of the older vents of the Tongariro complex. To the left is Pukeonake, a low scoria cone. Both Pukekaikiore and Pukeonake witnessed the last ice age when glaciers from Tongariro carved down through Mangatepopo valley. The giant cone of Ngauruhoe and the flatter form of Tongariro are visible ahead. Ngauruhoe is a younger cone on the side of Tongariro.

For the last hour the track skirts around Pukekaikiore until it reaches the Mangatepopo Track. The Mangatepopo Hut is 5 min off the main track.


### Mangatepopo Hut to Emerald Lakes

3 hr 30 min, 8 km

The track joins the popular Tongariro Alpine Crossing Track. This track follows Mangatepopo Stream up the valley, climbing into an alpine environment over a succession of old lava flows from Ngauruhoe. The youngest, very black, lava flows erupted from Ngauruhoe in 1949 and 1954.

The steep climb known as Te Arawhata, required to reach the Mangatepopo saddle, rewards

climbers with views of the valley and, if clear, Mount Taranaki to the west. From the saddle the track crosses South Crater – not a true crater but a drainage basin between the surrounding volcanic landforms.

 The trail from South Crater up to Red Crater is steep and crosses loose material for much of the way. Care must be taken in freezing conditions, as the steep slopes surrounding the trail may be icy and dangerous even if the trail is ice-free.

The main track continues past the rim of Red Crater, offering splendid views of Oturere valley and the Kaimanawa range to the east. From the high point of Red Crater, the trail descends down a steep scree slope to Emerald Lakes (Ngā Rotopounamu). The lakes remain frozen for most of winter.

The Tongariro Alpine Crossing continues from Ngā Rotopounamu to Ketetahi. Do not follow this route – instead, follow the Tongariro Northern Circuit Track into the Oturere Valley.

### Emerald Lakes (Ngā Rotopounamu) to Oturere Hut

1 hr 30 min, 4 km

From Ngā Rotopounamu the track descends steeply into the Oturere valley with views of the valley, the Kaimanawa range and the Rangipo Desert. The track weaves through an endless variety of unusual jagged lava forms from early eruptions from Red Crater, which filled the Oturere valley.

This is a magical place to visit, especially on a clear day. Oturere Hut is nestled on the eastern edge of these flows. There is a pretty waterfall over the ridge from the hut.

### Oturere Hut to Waihohonu Hut

3 hr, 8.1 km

After leaving Oturere Hut the track undulates through a number of stream valleys and open gravel fields. Plant life here has been constantly repressed by volcanic eruptions, altitude and climate.

The track gradually sidles around the foothills of Mount Ngauruhoe, descending into a valley and crossing a branch of the Waihohonu Stream. Continue through a beech-clad valley before climbing towards the ridge top. Waihohonu Hut is in the next valley.

### Side trip – Blue Lake (Te Wai-Whakaata-o-te-Rangihīroa) (near Ngā Rotopounamu)

15 min (one way)

Blue Lake's Māori name Te Wai-Whakaata-o-te-Rangihīroa translates as Rangihīroa's mirror. Blue Lake is tapu (sacred) – do not touch the water (no swimming) or eat food around the lake. From the track junction near Ngā Rotopounamu, continue further along the Tongariro Alpine Crossing Track to see closer views of Blue Lake.




Photo: Bruce Forster

### Waihohonu Hut to Whakapapa Village

5 hr 45 min, 15.4 km

The track follows the Waihohonu Stream and gradually climbs to Tama saddle (1,300m).

 This area can be very windy as wind is channelled between the mountains.

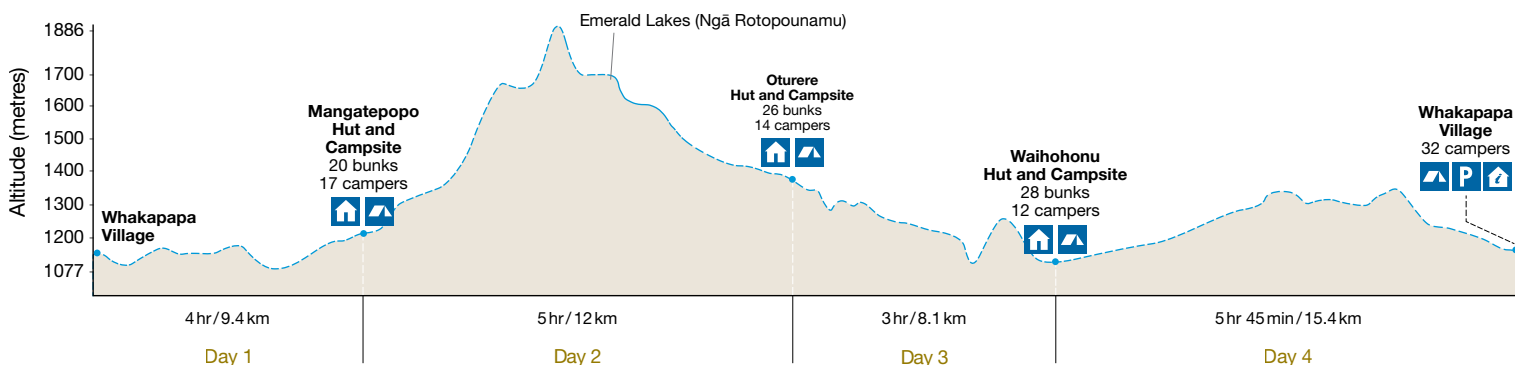
Whakapapa Village is about 2 hours from the Tama lakes (Ngā Puna a Tama) junction. After the first hour the track meets the Taranaki Falls loop walk. Follow the lower section of the track down the steps and along the Wairere Stream back to the village. Alternatively take the upper section of track through open tussock and shrubland back to the village.

The alpine lakes and summits of the mountains are sacred to the local Māori tribe Ngāti Hikairo ki Tongariro. Respectfully, they ask that summits are not climbed and waterways are not touched.



Photo: Stacey Faire

## Elevation profile





## History

Ngatoroirangi, the founding ancestor of Ngāti Tuwharetoa, the local iwi (Māori tribe), ascended the great mountains of the Central Plateau 30 generations ago. It was then that he named Tongariro and the many features of the surrounding landscape, declaring this area as home for his descendants. It is from these beginnings that Ngāti Tuwharetoa maintains its intrinsic responsibility to protect the mountainous area to which they belong.

The generosity and foresight of Ngāti Tuwharetoa saw the heart of the mountainous area made sacrosanct in 1887, with the intent that the Crown would stand alongside Ngāti Tuwharetoa to ensure the continued protection of Tongariro. This led to the establishment of the Tongariro National Park in 1894, a first for New Zealand, and fourth in the world.

In 1993, Tongariro became the first area to be inscribed on the World Heritage List under the revised criteria describing cultural landscapes. The mountains at the heart of the park have cultural and spiritual significance to Ngāti Tuwharetoa and symbolise the spiritual links between this community and its environment. The park has active and extinct volcanoes, a diverse range of ecosystems and some remarkable landscapes.

The continued occupation by Ngāti Tuwharetoa in this environment ensures the cultural, spiritual and environmental values are protected and shared with all those who encounter this dynamic landscape.

Mangatepopo valley. Photo: 90 Seconds

### **B** Side trip – Tama lakes (Ngā Puna a Tama) (1,314 m)

**20min return to Lower Tama from the junction; 1 hr 30min return to Upper Tama from the junction.**

Two in-filled explosion craters are named after Tamatea, the high chief of the Tākitimu Canoe, who explored the area six centuries ago. Lower Tama's volcanic debris is slowly washing in and filling the crater.



*Beware of strong crosswinds on the ridgelines up to the Upper Tama lake lookout.*



Photo: Jimmy Johnson

### **C** Side trip – Taranaki Falls Track (before Whakapapa Village)

At the Taranaki Falls junction, turn right and go down the steps to the base of the waterfall. Then retrace your steps and continue along the Upper Taranaki Falls Track to Whakapapa Village.



Photo: Robert Dickinson

## Safety on the Tongariro Northern Circuit

### STAY ON THE MARKED TRACKS

- ▶ The track is well marked but if you become lost you should stop, find shelter and stay calm. Put on extra clothing to keep warm and assist rescuers should you hear them searching for you.
- ▶ Pay attention to signs in the Active Volcanic Hazard Zone.
- ▶ Streams on the track may rise rapidly and become hazards. Walkers should not attempt to cross any stream in flood.
- ▶ Mount Ngauruhoe is sacred to Ngāti Tuwharetoa. Climbing Mount Ngauruhoe is discouraged because of its unique volcanic hazards and alpine environment. Talk to Tongariro Visitor Centre staff for more information.

### BE PREPARED FOR ALL CONDITIONS

#### Volcanic eruptions in Active Volcanic Hazard Zone

There are several active volcanic vents along the Tongariro Northern Circuit: Mount Ngauruhoe, Red Crater and Te Maari. Volcanic hazard zones surround these vents. If you are in one of these zones when an eruption happens, you may be in danger. Volcanic risk exists at all times, including when the track is open. If you are uncomfortable with this risk, we recommend selecting an alternative track.

#### Strong winds

In alpine areas or exposed areas, you can be caught in strong and/or gusty winds. Winds over 65 km/h may knock you off your feet. Dress warmly as wind-chill danger is worse at these times.

#### Hypothermia (too cold)

Hypothermia (a drop in core body temperature) can become a serious problem.

- ▶ **Prevention:** wear warm and weatherproof clothing. Eat and drink regularly during your walk.
- ▶ **Watch for symptoms:** people may shiver, be clumsy, confused, have slurred speech, and deny they have a problem.
- ▶ **Treatment:** immediately make or find shelter; get the person into warm, dry clothing, put them into a sleeping bag, give them warm, sweet drinks, monitor them and seek immediate medical help.

#### Heat exhaustion

- ▶ **Prevention:** carry and drink water regularly throughout your walk.
- ▶ **Watch for symptoms:** headaches, thirst, weakness, dizziness, nausea or vomiting.
- ▶ **Treatment:** move to a cool shaded area to rest, remove excess clothing and give water to drink.