

How does ATES apply in Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park?

The majority of the park and surrounding terrain is serious avalanche country.

There is very little **simple** terrain and a moderate amount of **challenging** terrain. The majority of the park is complex avalanche terrain, which demands respect from all who use it. *See insert*

All park visitors should consider carefully the class of avalanche terrain they are going into, and check the avalanche-danger advisory prior to undertaking any trip.

Avalanche season

At higher altitudes avalanches can occur at any time of the year as snow falls year-round in the park. Climbers can be at particular risk during the summer at higher elevations.

During winter and spring, avalanches can occur on some park tracks, and on the Ball Hut road. To reduce risk, the following applies at three sites:

Hooker Valley Track

- During periods of high risk to people at the outlet end of the lake, this track is closed. You should not go beyond the outlet end of the lake unless you have the right avalanche experience.

Ball Hut Road

- Large avalanches regularly cross the road each winter and into the spring. You should not stop in any of the marked avalanche paths. Check with the visitor centre for the latest avalanche information prior to walking or four-wheel driving here.

Mueller Hut Route

- The route to Mueller Hut travels through complex avalanche terrain. There is no way to avoid being exposed to avalanche danger on this route when there is enough snow in the start zones to produce avalanches. Check at the visitor centre to see if avalanches are likely to be an issue.
- If you lack experience at travelling in avalanche terrain, our recommendation is that you should only go up or down from the hut when the avalanche danger is low.
- If staying overnight in the hut, you need to be prepared to stay longer if the danger level rises while you are there.

Be avalanche aware!

If you are going into places avalanches could occur, make sure you:

- have checked the ATES class for where you want to go and the BAA for the avalanche rating
- have the skills for the ATES class you are going into
- take an avalanche transceiver, a snow shovel and a probe. Know how to use these tools!

Risk statement

ATES and the BAA should be used together for evaluating hazards and managing personal risk in the backcountry.

There are inherent risks in backcountry travel, and most of the routes described here will at times be unsafe due to potential snow avalanches. The Department of Conservation has done its best to provide accurate information describing the terrain characteristics typical of each general region, based on its current knowledge. However, it is up to you to use this information to make your own risk-management decisions and learn the necessary skills for safe backcountry travel, to access additional trip-planning materials, and to exercise caution while travelling in backcountry areas. This information is no substitute for experience and good judgement.

BAA – Backcountry Avalanche Advisory

The Backcountry Avalanche Advisory is provided by the Mountain Safety Council, and is available at www.avalanche.net.nz

5 Extreme		Don't go
4 High		
3 Considerable		Experts only
2 Moderate		Basic avalanche skills
1 Low		

Published by Department of Conservation
Canterbury Conservancy
Private Bag 4715
Christchurch, New Zealand
2010

www.doc.govt.nz

newzealand.govt.nz

be avalanche alert



AVALANCHE TERRAIN RATINGS

AORAKI/MOUNT COOK NATIONAL PARK



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Avalanches are part of life in the mountains. They can occur in any season, but are more common in winter and spring. Anytime that snow and steep slopes are combined there is potential for an avalanche.

Is it worth the risk??

If you travel through backcountry terrain exposed to avalanches, you must accept that you are taking a risk. You need to understand these risks before setting out.

What is the Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale system (ATES)?

The traditional model for rating avalanche danger in New Zealand – the Backcountry Avalanche Advisory – is based on the stability of snow. The advisory may be updated on a daily basis as stability changes regularly through weather changes and storms. Terrain does not change with the weather. The angle and shape of the ground or the number of established avalanche paths do not vary. By using the Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale (ATES), you can begin to measure your skills, experience and risk tolerance against the terrain you plan to travel in.

Do I still need to read the Backcountry Avalanche Advisory (BAA)?

Yes – if a BAA is available you should use it to help decide if your trip 'is worth the risk'.

When the avalanche advisory is rated 'moderate' or above, you should select very conservative terrain. Alternatively, when the avalanche advisory is rated 'low', it might be appropriate to consider that next level of terrain you have been contemplating.

The two scales should be used together to appropriately manage your risk in the backcountry.

The Backcountry Avalanche Advisory is provided by the Mountain Safety Council, and is available at www.avalanche.net.nz and at DOC visitor centres.

When should I use this system?

These ratings are intended as a supplement to your pre-trip planning material. When planning your trip, read the guidebook, study maps and photos, talk to friends, check weather and avalanche conditions, and refer to the ATES ratings. This combination will give you a better sense of the route you are choosing.

ATES – Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale

Description	Class	Terrain criteria
Simple	1	Exposure to low-angle or primarily forested terrain. Some forest or bush openings may involve the run-out zones of infrequent avalanches. Many options to reduce or eliminate exposure. No glacier travel.
Challenging	2	Exposure to well defined avalanche paths, starting zones or terrain traps; options exist to reduce or eliminate exposure with careful route finding. Glacier travel is straight forward, but crevasse hazards may exist.
Complex	3	Exposure to multiple, overlapping avalanche paths or large expanses of steep, open terrain; multiple avalanche starting zones and terrain traps below; minimal options to reduce exposure. Complicated glacier travel with extensive crevasse bands or icefalls.

Challenging terrain

- Challenging (Class 2) terrain requires skills to recognize and avoid avalanche-prone terrain – big slopes exist on these trips. You must also know how to understand avalanche advisories, perform avalanche self rescue, basic first aid, and be confident in your route-finding skills.
- In places where an avalanche advisory exists, you should take an avalanche course prior to travelling in this type of terrain.
- If there is no advisory you or someone in your group should have done a four-day avalanche course.
- If you are unsure of your own, or your group's ability to navigate through avalanche terrain – consider hiring a professional guide, normally an NZMGA qualified guide.

Complex terrain

- Complex (Class 3) terrain demands a strong group with years of critical decision-making experience in avalanche terrain. There can be no safe options on these trips, forcing exposure to big slopes.
- A recommended minimum is that you, or someone in your group, should have taken a four-day avalanche course and have several years of backcountry experience. Be prepared! Check the avalanche advisory regularly, and ensure everyone in your group is up for the task and aware of the risk.
- If there is no advisory, then it is recommended that everyone in the group has done the four-day course. This is serious country – not a place to consider unless you're confident in the skills of your group.
- If you are uncertain, hiring a professional NZMGA qualified guide is recommended.

How much experience do I need for the trip I am planning?

Simple terrain

- Simple (Class 1) terrain requires common sense, proper equipment, first aid skills, and the discipline to respect avalanche warnings. Simple terrain is usually low-avalanche risk, ideal for people gaining backcountry experience.
- These trips may not be entirely free from avalanche hazards. On days when the Backcountry Avalanche Advisory is rated 'considerable' or higher, you may want to re-think any backcountry travel that has exposure to avalanches, e.g. stay within the boundaries of a ski area.
- If there is no advisory, you or someone in your group should have done an avalanche-awareness course.