

# Hanmer to St Arnaud Road via Rainbow Station



## Introduction

The Hanmer to St Arnaud Road is a wilderness driving experience across private land, Molesworth Station and St James Conservation Area via Tophouse Road and Wairau-Hanmer Springs Hydro Road. Tophouse Road is also 4WD and cycle access to the backcountry tracks in St James Conservation Area. It is remarkable for the transition from craggy, beech-covered mountains to flowing tussock lands, where vast screes spill from ridge crest to valley floor in a lonely landscape.

Passes in the Upper Wairau Valley were part of overland routes used by Māori. Later, high country graziers moving mobs of sheep between Canterbury and Nelson/Marlborough built a chain of cob houses. The road was built in the 1950s when the electricity pylons were built through this area to supply electricity to the Nelson and Buller regions.

## How to get there

St Arnaud is the main gateway to the Upper Wairau Valley, sign posted for the Rainbow Ski Field, 85 km from Nelson or 131 km from Picton via Blenheim. Access is also possible from Hanmer Springs, 134 km north of Christchurch.



## Accommodation

Along the road a campsite is provided on private land at Coldwater Creek and DOC campsites at Lake Sedgemere, Lake Tennyson and Fowlers Camp, with toilets and a water supply. Connors Creek Hut (6 bunks), Island Gully Hut (4 bunks) and Sedgemere Sleepout (6 bunks) are within easy walking distance of the road.

In the back country, huts provide a base for hunters and climbers, and stopping points for trampers. Please purchase Back Country hut tickets before your trip.

## Hanmer to Rainbow Road

The Hanmer to St Arnaud Road connects St Arnaud to Hanmer Springs via Wairau-Hanmer Springs Hydro Road near St Arnaud; this road becomes Tophouse Road near Connors Creek and continues signposted to Hanmer Springs and Molesworth Station.

On the journey the road passes through Rainbow Station, Molesworth Station and St James Conservation Area. Rainbow Station is leasehold land and access is with the consent of the station owner.

For the summer open dates and road tolls through Rainbow Station refer to Rainbow Station website [www.rainbowstation.co.nz](http://www.rainbowstation.co.nz). A toll (payable in cash) per 4WD vehicle, motorbike, mountain or push bike (trampers free) is collected at the Old Rainbow Homestead.

To arrange access through the station outside of the summer open period to 4WD, tramp, hunt, fish or mountain bike, telephone Rainbow Station Farms Ltd (03 521 1838) or email [info@rainbowstation.co.nz](mailto:info@rainbowstation.co.nz).

For your safety we advise that the road is a wilderness driving experience. Drivers need to be self-sufficient and prepared for sudden changes in weather. You drive at your own risk.

The road is only suitable for high-clearance 4WD vehicles; there is no cell phone coverage, and breakdown services may not operate on the private road. Unseasonal snows, slips or elevated fire risk may close the road without notice.

The 112 km journey takes at least three hours.

The guide below starts at St Arnaud, distances in brackets are for the reverse journey.

### St Arnaud, 0 km (112 km)

This is the front door of Nelson Lakes National Park. A network of short walks allows exploration of the glacial landforms, forests and mountains around Lake Rotoiti. There is also a general store which sells petrol and diesel, and a range of accommodation.

**Rainbow Ski field turn-off from SH63, 9 km (103 km)**

**Rainbow Station Homestead turn-off, 12 km (100 km)**

A short side road leads to the homestead where hunting permission can be obtained. Please leave the gates as you find them.

**Rainbow Ski Area turn-off, 26 km (86 km)**

**Old Rainbow Homestead toll gate, 36 km (76 km)**

**Coldwater Creek camping area, 46 km (66 km)**

Beyond the toll gate the Rainbow experience really begins. The road fords several streams, crosses the Wairau on a bridge and then enters Hells Gate, a narrow gorge. Coldwater Creek is just above the gorge.

**Lake Sedgemere, 57 km (55 km)**

Soon after Coldwater Creek the road crosses the Wairau and arrives at the boundary between Rainbow and Molesworth stations. The road enters that classic South Island landscape of rounded, tawny-coloured hills, scrawny matagouri, long scree and azure skies. The road re-crosses the Wairau River and a short side-road leads to Sedgemere Sleepout (standard hut, 6 bunks). From the car park is a route to a viewpoint over several beautiful lakes supporting fragile wetland communities.

Some of the place names here—Turk Ridge, Mt Balaclava, Crimea Range—date the area’s European exploration to the Crimean war in the 1850s.

**Key**

- Nelson Lakes National Park
- Rainbow Conservation Area
- Leatham Conservation Area
- St James Conservation Area
- Molesworth Recreation Reserve
- Other conservation areas
- State highway
- Sealed road
- Unsealed road
- Hanmer to St Arnaud Road
- Acheron Road

**Walking times from the road:**

Rainbow Ski Area	2 h
Lees Creek Hut	3 h 30 min
Connors Creek Hut	20 min
Rainbow Hut	2 h 30 min
Paske Hut	6 h
Begley Hut	6 h
Tamdale Lakes	30 min
Island Gully Hut	5 min
Sedgemere Sleepout	1 min

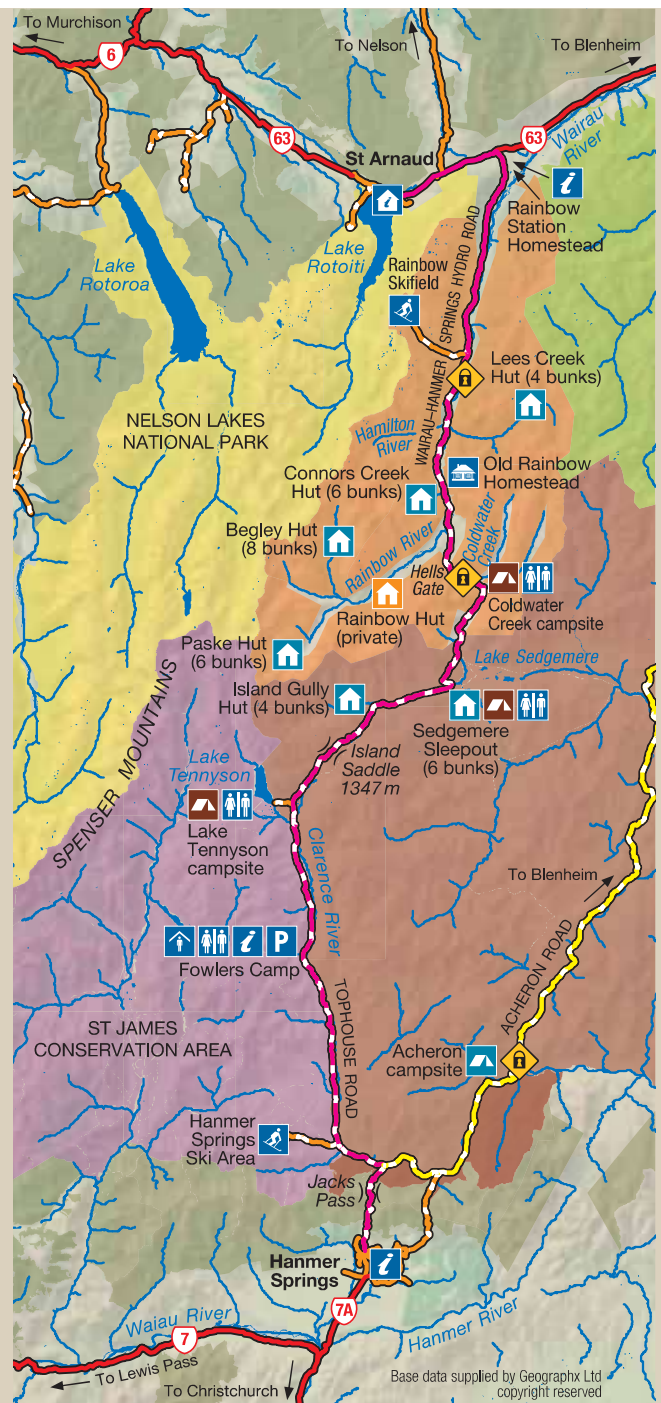


- Locked gate
- Visitor centre
- Car park
- Shelter
- Information
- Old building
- Toilet
- Private hut
- Skiing

This map is a guide only. For more information consult the following Topo50 maps:

- BR25 Tophouse
- BS24 Mount Robert
- BS25 Severn
- BT24 Ada Flat

- Standard huts** have mattresses, water supply and toilet. Wood heaters are provided at huts below the bush line. The Backcountry Hut Pass or Backcountry Hut Tickets are required.
- Standard campsites** have a limited range of facilities and services. Toilets (usually composting or pit variety), water supply (tap, stream, or lake) and vehicle or boat access. Wood barbeques and fireplaces, showers (cold), picnic tables, a cooking shelter and rubbish bins may be provided.
- Basic campsites** have very limited facilities so you need to be fully self-sufficient. There are basic toilets and water from a tank, stream or lake. Access may be by road or boat.
- Route**
  - Challenging day or multi-day tramping/hiking.
  - Track unformed and natural, rough, muddy or very steep.
  - Suitable for people with above average fitness. High-level backcountry skills and experience (including navigation and survival skills) required.
  - Complete self-sufficiency required.
  - Track has markers, poles or rock cairns. Expect unbridged stream and river crossings.
  - Sturdy tramping/hiking boots required.



## Island Saddle, 68 km (44 km)

At 1347 metres above sea level, this is the highest point on the road. It is also the watershed between the Wairau and Clarence rivers, and a boundary between Marlborough and Canterbury.

## Lake Tennyson, 73 km (39 km)

This scenic gem was formed behind a glacier-deposited dam of rubble. The lake shore is a lovely place for a picnic. To the west is Mt Una (2301 m), highest point in the Spenser Range. Many of the peaks in this range are named after women, all characters in Edmund Spenser's classic 17<sup>th</sup> century poem "The Fairie Queene". It is 1.5 km from the road to the lake.

## Molesworth turn-off, 104 km (8 km)

The Molesworth Experience, a 207 km drive from Hanmer to Blenheim, leaves the road here. The road is open between 26 October and 21 April or Easter Monday (whichever is later) each year. Check the DOC website for exact dates. See the separate DOC brochure for this area.

## Hanmer Springs (via Jacks Pass Road), 112 km (0 km)

This resort town, famed for its hot springs, has all the facilities travellers will need: accommodation, eating places, information, fuel and activities.



## In the back country

For the experienced back country traveller, options for trips in the upper Wairau are only limited by imagination! Good fitness and self reliance are required as there are few bridges or tracks; most travel is along marked or unmarked routes.

## Rainbow Ski Area (Six Mile Creek basin)

Outside of the ski season, the 8 km skifield road is closed for vehicle access, but open for walking. Alpine flowers, tarns and views are the summer attractions. A ridge traverse to St Arnaud via Parachute Rocks will take 5-7 hours.

## Lees Creek

Cross the Wairau River by swingbridge and follow a marked route into Lees Creek. The narrow valley gives no hint of the beautiful open flats further upstream where Lees Creek Hut (4 bunks) sits. High passes allow for trips over the Raglan Range.

## Hamilton River

A marked route starts 100 m past the road bridge over the Hamilton River, reaching the bush edge in about 1 hour 30 minutes. The eastern pass gives the quickest route to Begley Hut (8 bunks).

## Connors Creek

Connors Creek Hut (6 bunks) is about 1 km from the Rainbow Road at the end of a 4WD track. A marked route climbs steadily to the bushline in about 3 hours. A saddle above leads over to Begley Hut (8 bunks).

## The Rainbow Valley

A route up the valley starts under the pylons, just before the Wairau River bridge. After about 2 km it crosses the Rainbow and follows a 4WD track up the true right bank to Rainbow Hut, nestled in a patch of willow trees just before a gorge. Rainbow Hut is owned by Rainbow Station and requires their permission to use.

Beyond the gorge are plenty of options for exploring remote mountains and the high passes leading to the Sabine and Travers Valleys. There are 6-bunk huts in the Paske and Begley Valleys.

## Other activities



### Hunting

Deer and chamois are the main game animals. Hunters require permits from both the Department of Conservation and Rainbow Station.



### Mountain biking

Permission is required for mountain bike access when the road is closed. Touring cyclists with gear should allow two days to ride from St Arnaud to Hanmer Springs.



### Skiing

Rainbow Ski Area generally opens from July to September each year. For more information visit [www.skirainbow.co.nz](http://www.skirainbow.co.nz). Information on Hanmer Springs Ski Area can be found on [www.skihanmer.co.nz](http://www.skihanmer.co.nz). There is scope for ski touring to the north and south in basins and along the St Arnaud Range.



### Kayaking

The Wairau is well suited for less experienced kayakers.



### Climbing

Fine peaks ring the Rainbow Valley, providing enjoyable climbing in summer and challenging winter conditions for the adventurous.



### Fishing

The upper Wairau waterways provide excellent trout fishing. The fishing season is from 1 October to the end of April. Each angler must carry a Fish and Game New Zealand licence.

- Plan ahead and prepare
- Travel and camp on durable ground
- Dispose of waste properly
- Leave what you find
- Minimise the effects of fire
- Respect wildlife and farm animals
- Be considerate of others



## Please remember

**⚠ Backcountry safety:** Snow and freezing conditions can occur at any time of the year and flooded rivers may extend your trip. Backcountry travellers should have adequate food, equipment and experience for their planned trip, and good avalanche awareness.



Remember your safety is your responsibility. To report any safety hazards in the outdoors call **DOC HOTline 0800 362 468.**

**⚠ Road safety:** Rain can make the many unbridged streams along the Rainbow Road impassable. There are no petrol stations, telephones or mobile telephone coverage for most of the journey. Check your spare tyre. On-coming traffic is difficult to see and stock wander freely—please drive carefully.

**🏠 Private land:** The floors of the Wairau, Rainbow and Paske Valleys are farmed. Leave gates as you find them and respect stock and property.

**🚫 Domestic animals:** Please leave dogs and domestic pets at home. Hunting dogs and horses may be taken on to private land with permission from Rainbow Station.

**🚫 Fire:** Fire is a major threat to vegetation in this area. We recommend portable cookers are used.

## To find out more

For further information visit the DOC website [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz) or contact:

### Department of Conservation Rotorua/Nelson Lakes Visitor Centre

PO Box 55, St Arnaud 7053

Ph: (03) 5211806

Email: [nelsonlakesvc@doc.govt.nz](mailto:nelsonlakesvc@doc.govt.nz)

### Department of Conservation Nelson Visitor Centre

Millers Acre/Taha o te Awa

79 Trafalgar Street, Nelson 7010

PO Box 375, Nelson 7040

Ph: (03) 546 9339

Email: [nelsonvc@doc.govt.nz](mailto:nelsonvc@doc.govt.nz)

### Hurunui i-SITE

Amuri Avenue, Hanmer Springs 7334

Ph: (03) 315 0020

For hunting permission contact the Department of Conservation in St Arnaud and:

### Rainbow Station Farms Ltd

276 State Highway 6, RD 2,  
Nelson, New Zealand

Ph: 021 768 764 (8.30am - 4pm)

Email: [duncan@nelsonhoney.com](mailto:duncan@nelsonhoney.com)

[www.rainbowstation.co.nz](http://www.rainbowstation.co.nz)

### St James Conservation Area

For gate combination details, concessions, hunting/dog permits and other information contact:

### Department of Conservation Waimakariri Office

32 River Road, Rangiora

Ph: (03) 313 0820

8 AM–5 PM, Monday to Friday

Email: [waimakariri@doc.govt.nz](mailto:waimakariri@doc.govt.nz)