

ST. BATHANS RANGE



Approaching Michael Peak, St. Bathans Range.

1. Landforms

The St. Bathans Range and its northern extension, the Wether Range, lie on a north-south axis between the catchments of Dunstan Creek and the upper Manuherikia River.

This is the highest range in Central Otago, with the main ridge rising over a distance of 16 kilometres from 600 m at the township of St. Bathans, to Michael's Peak (1986 m) and Mt. St. Bathans (2088 m). The range continues northwards for another 18 kilometres on undulating crests, dropping from 2134 to 1750 m at the Wether-Dunstan range junction. (*The Dunstan Range is separate from the Dunstan Mountains further to the south-west.*)

The western escarpment rises dramatically in an uninterrupted face the full length of the range, rising over 1200 m from the bed of Dunstan Creek. It is a very prominent feature when viewed from the upper Clutha basin. A series of parallel catchments dissect the considerably gentler back-slope, draining eastwards into the west branch of the Manuherikia River and the Omarama Stream.

Eastern slopes are composed of greywacke and argillite, with the summit crest and western slopes being non-foliated semi schist.⁽¹⁾ There are frequent rock exposures along narrow ridges and on steep faces, but with a general lack of tor formations. Screens are extensive on the western escarpment, and on other steep faces.

A series of over-steepened cirques occur along the eastern side of the range crest, and are occasionally occupied by tarns and small lakes. Headwall plucking of the steep western escarpment has tended to narrow and break up the main ridge crest to a greater extent than most Central Otago ranges.



Cirque with tarn above Omarama Saddle; Ewe Range and northern Hawkduns rear.

The range is connected to the Hawkduns by a relatively low divide at the head of the Manuherikia catchment, and to the Lindis Pass by the short Dunstan Range.

2. Vegetation

Burning and grazing has contributed to an almost total depletion of tall tussock grasslands above 1200 m. Remnant clumps of the slim snowgrass survive on 'islands' of soil raised above the prevailing angular rock fellfield. In some localities, blue tussock provides a more contiguous cover. Lichens and a few herb species cling to stable and sheltered surfaces, in particular on rock outcrops.

Below 950 m tall tussock grasslands are severely to extremely depleted overall⁽²⁾, with bare surfaces exposed between widely spaced tussocks. Vegetative cover generally increases with decreasing altitude, although snowgrasses are being progressively replaced by fescue and silver tussock. Shrub species such as matagouri and snow totara, on shady faces and in gullies and valley floors, are indicators of pre-pastoral vegetation, as are isolated clumps of snowgrass, protected within rock outcrops from the ravages by fire.

The fullest possible vegetation altitudinal sequence in Central-North Otago is available on the eastern face of the range.⁽³⁾

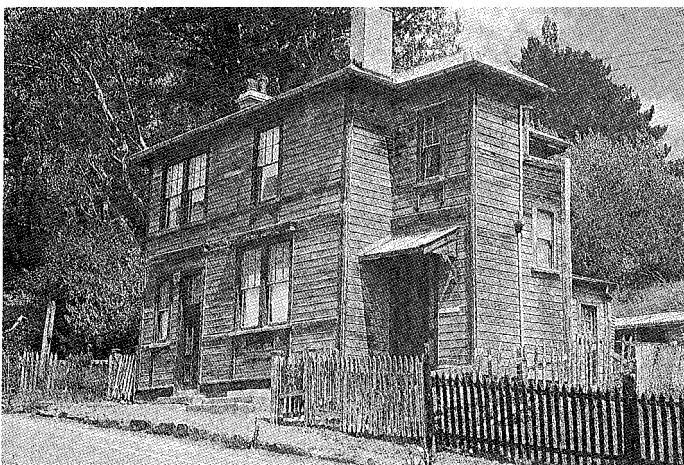
The range is within the St. Bathans district of the Waitaki Ecological Region.

3. History and Land Use

3.1 Gold

A gold rush to Dunstan Creek in 1863 provided the beginnings of a turbulent period of mining history. 'Deep lead' gold deposits were found as a result of the rush, which led to large scale open-cast mining at Surface Hill and St. Bathans, at the southern end of the range.

Using refined techniques of hydraulic sluicing and elevating, huge quantities of am-iferous deposits were processed, with the wastes deposited via sludge channels in to nearby creeks. The picturesque Blue Lake now fills a large depression left by mining. These gold workings and the immediately adjacent goldfield town of St. Bathans are a unique historical precinct on the fringe of the St. Bathans massif.



St. Bathans Post Office.

3.2 Pastoralism and Tenure

Pastoral occupation commenced in 1858 when the first depasturing licences were issued to Hawkdun and Omarama Stations. Part of the western escarpment provided a boundary for the huge Morven Hills run.⁽⁴⁾

Seven pastoral leases and one pastoral occupation licence currently share the range. A public foot accessway is provided to the summit of Mt. St. Bathans up a boundary of the licence area. Other than Section 58 strips part-way up Dunstan Creek, this is the only provision for public access to the range.

A recreation reserve covering the St. Bathans Blue Lake, plus historic reserves within the town are collectively managed as part of the Otago Goldfields Park.

3.3 Land Use Capability

All the crests and steep faces are Class 8 with mid-altitude flanks Class 7. The confined valley floors of Dunstan Creek and the west branch of the Manuherikia are Class 6.^(2,5)

The Otago Catchment Board considers that all the Class 8 and much of the Class 7 lands should be destocked completely so that vegetation rehabilitation can be encouraged. The Board further considers that restricted cattle grazing be permitted on the valley slopes below the retired areas, and notes potential for increased pastoral production on the lower Manuherikia slopes and in Dunstan Creek.⁽²⁾

3.4 District Scheme Zoning

Three territorial local authorities have jurisdiction over the range.

West of the range crest is zoned Rural 1 within Vincent County. This has few specific ordinances for landscape protection.⁽⁶⁾

The upper south-east of the range is within Maniototo County's Rural B (High Country Protection) zone, with vehicle tracking a discretionary use.⁽⁷⁾ St. Bathans township is zoned Residential 4 (Historic), with the surrounding 'visual catchment' Rural H.

The Dunstan and Wether Ranges, St. Bathans crest and upper Manuherikia catchment is zoned Rural D (soil conservation) within the Waitaki County, with the Omarama Stream catchment and Lindis faces Rural C (extensive farming and scenic).⁽⁸⁾

4. Recreational Opportunities

4.1 Skiing

Winter conditions provide the predominant potential for public recreation.

In 1960 reconnaissance surveys began for a skifield in one of the eastward-facing valleys. Since then intermittent investigations have been made, in particular at the head of Rocks Creek, where there is up to 600 m vertical relief above snowline, with gradients suitable for novice to intermediate skiers. Despite its south-east aspect, which should ensure good snow retention, frequent strong westerlies tend to blow snow out of this basin, leaving insufficient coverage over the angular fellfield.

An adjacent basin to the north may have greater scope than Rocks Creek, however no detailed investigations of this site have been made. The period of general observations has spanned 20 years, involving a private investigating company for half that period. It appears unlikely that operation of a skifield on the St. Bathans Range is a realistic proposition.

Increasing use is being made of the range for cross country skiing, indicating its greatest potential for recreational use. A two-day traverse of the Range is possible, as well as a traverse across to the Hawkduns when snow conditions are favourable. The highest ridge crests tend to be narrow and rocky, providing some obstacles to ski use. No huts are available for shelter.

The high altitude and alignment of the range across the prevailing winds can result in rapid snow loss. However the lower Dunstan and Wether Ranges appear less affected by wind. Even leeward basins and ridge crests tend to be affected, exposing extensive fellfield, or creating a rock hazard just under the snow surface. For these reasons the St. Bathans Range is generally less suitable for cross country skiing than the lower Hawkdun Range to the east.

4.2 Tramping

The ascents of Michael Peak and Mt. St Bathans are interesting tramps, particularly if approached from the Manuherikia tributaries and eastern cirque basins. The enclosed valley of the Manuherikia West Branch provides pleasant walking through tussock grassland. The headwaters have *semi remote experience* characteristics.

4.3 Landscape Appreciation

Being the highest Central Otago range, the summit provides an excellent panorama of the alps between Lake Tekapo and the Remarkables. Outstanding perspectives of the Mackenzie basin and of Mts. Cook and Aspiring are obtained. The summit can be approached by foot, and part way by 4WD, from the south and east.

The major public 'use' of the range, however is viewing it from the Clutha Valley. The 1200 m high western face is an imposing feature, during winter appearing as a long white wall.

4.4 Walkways

A long distance walkway has been suggested between the townships of St. Bathans and Naseby. This is unlikely to have popular appeal as it would traverse relatively featureless low country.

Greater public walking opportunities around St. Bathans and associated gold workings would meet a more immediate need. A circuit walkway around St. Bathans is worthy of consideration, traversing both reserve and private land.

5. Zoning

5.1 Natural Experience

The remaining natural values of the range warrant protection; the only recreational justification for modification would be for skifield development where the impact can be confined to one, out-of-sight, catchment. In this instance detrimental impacts on natural values could be off-set by the regional benefits arising from a skifield relatively close to Dunedin.

Some modification of the range's landscape has occurred through farm access tracking, particularly up the leading ridge from the St. Bathans township. Other tracking on eastern ridges above Rocks Creek has had less of a visual impact.

5.2 Open Space

The surrounding flanks of the range are zoned *open space*. There are particular requirements for landscape protection on the Longslip Creek faces of the Dunstan and Wether ranges and for provision of public foot access through the zone.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Class 8 and severely eroded Class 7 lands be progressively removed from pastoral tenures. Any future grazing to be regulated by grazing permits. Such lands to be collectively managed as a Conservation Area by the Department of Conservation (DOC).

6.2 Crown controls be exercised over earth disturbances, such as farm tracking and fence-line benching, on the western and Lindis faces as well as in the West Branch of the Manuherikia.

6.3 A Protected Natural Areas survey determine priority areas for protection.

6.4 Establish legal rights of public foot access to Dunstan and Wether ranges from State Highway 8, up Dunstan Creek, and up the leading ridge from St. Bathans township.

6.5 Ensure continuation of a public access-way to Mt. St. Bathans on expiry of the pastoral occupation licence.

6.6 DOC instigate an interpretive, circuit walkway within the environs of the St. Bathans township.

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