



New Zealand Alpine Club

The Craigieburn Range - Ski Touring Notes

The Craigieburn Range is a Forest Park managed by the Department of Conservation (DOC) and is one of Christchurch's favourite winter playgrounds. The range is made of shattered sedimentary rock, with long shingle slips and beech forest at lower elevations. The skiing is above the bush line, in broad basins and open faces of moderately steep grade. The peaks and ridges contain some rocky knolls with narrow chutes between, although there is usually an easy way around if you are traversing the ridge. The highest peak is Mount Enys (2194 metres) and the winter snowline lies around 1300 to 1400 metres. Snow conditions are usually best from mid July to late September, but can start earlier and persist into October in a good year. Both westerlies and southerlies can bring good snowfalls. Snow reports are found on the web at www.snow.co.nz. The map to buy is the 1:50 000 scale topographical map **260 - K34 Wilberforce**, which is available from DOC offices and map retailers, and covers the whole range, except for the Porter Heights skifield which lies just off the lower edge of the map.

There is downhill skiing on 5 small ski areas, with possibility for ski touring between. Most of the ski areas are operated by ski clubs, with lodge accommodation on the mountain. These ski clubs sell Ski Weeks, which are all-inclusive packages of accommodation, food and lift fees. Staying at the ski club lodges can be good value, great fun and a handy base for touring the range, climbing a peak or crossing from one ski area to the next and returning the same day. Often when snow is stable and the weather fine, there are quite a few people going out beyond the ski areas to ski or snowboard the "back basins" without ski touring equipment, creating foot trails part way along the ridges.

Snow conditions can be highly variable, depending for example upon slope aspect, and often quite different in adjacent basins. Ridges are frequently wind affected, and can be quite icy. Beware also of cornices on the high ridgelines. The Craigieburns have their fair share of avalanches, and everybody in the group should carry and be familiar with transceivers, probes and shovels. If you are going out from a skifield it is both courteous and potentially life saving to consult the Ski Patrol about backcountry avalanche risk before going out, particularly if you intend leaving your car in their car park! The ski areas all have backcountry risk advisory boards, and some way of leaving intentions. **N.B. Make sure that you check out with the patrol when you return, or unnecessary searches can be started!!!**

To get to the Craigieburns, follow Yaldhurst Road out of Christchurch and continue on Highway 73, the West Coast Road, through Springfield and over Porter's Pass. The skifields are well signposted, all of them up gravel roads which often require chains in winter, roughly 75 to 90 minutes drive from downtown Christchurch – slightly further to Mt Olympus, which is via Windwhistle rather than Porter's Pass.

NORTH OF CRAIGIEBURN VALLEY

Grade 1

600 metres

Immediately to the north of the Craigieburn Valley ski area is **Middle Basin** – a well-known "back basin" for Craigieburn skiers. Check at the information board that the basin is open, and ride the rope tows to the top. Middle Basin descends steeply at first, and then the gradient eases to reach the skifield access road at a prominent bend at 1200m elevation. A 750m walk with 100m height gain takes you

back to the lowest rope tow to repeat the whole process, which you'll be keen to do a few times after a good powder dump. A good fitness work-out, and one of Canterbury's best lift-accessed back basins.

CRAIGIEBURN VALLEY TO BROKEN RIVER

Grade 1 120 metres

A short and straightforward crossing. Check with the ski patrol at Craigieburn Valley about snow conditions. From the top of the ski tows, skin or walk up to the summit of **Hamilton Peak**, (120m climb - about 20 minutes away), and from there you are looking south-east down to **Alan's Basin**, adjacent to the Broken River ski area. It's a great ski down into Alan's Basin, traversing to the skier's right at around 1580m elevation and crossing the ridge that comes off Nervous Knob to reach the ski area. There are often skier tracks to follow. Broken River ski club honour Craigieburn Valley ski tickets (and vice versa) so you can do a few runs here before returning.

To return, ride Broken River's highest rope tow, that leads up the ridge to Nervous Knob. Ski along the ridge to the north-east and from there it's a further 15 minute climb along the ridge to just below the top of Mt Hamilton, where you look down onto the col separating Alan's Basin and Hamilton Face. Ski down and left onto that col, and down the Hamilton Face back to Craigieburn. Alternatively return directly over the summit of Mt Hamilton.

BROKEN RIVER TO CHEESEMAN

Grade 1/2 380 metres

From the top of the main rope tow at Broken River, put on skins and travel south-west along the undulating ridge to the spot elevation 1884. A quick ski down to a saddle, and then re-apply skins for the short climb up to another small bump (grid ref 018850), where the ridge to Mount Wall heads east. Roughly 30 minutes from Broken River ski area, the day lodge of which is still visible.

The basin that descends to the north-east of here is known as "**Yukon bowl**", and is a pleasant 240 vertical metre ski descent down to a flat area where skins can be re-applied for the climb back out. There are steep rocky slopes below here, and on either side, so going back up the fall line is the best option, rather than trying a short cut directly towards Broken River.

From 018850, to go on to Mount Cheeseman, ski down the main ridge to the south-west and skin up, over the point marked 1834 and then a few zig-zags up the north ridge of **Mount Cockayne**, which overlooks the Mount Cheeseman skifield. 3.5 km and 75 to 90 minutes in total from Broken River to Cheeseman Ski Area. In reverse, similar times from Cheeseman to Broken River.

CHEESEMAN SKI AREA - MT OLYMPUS

Grade 2/3 640 metres

The skifield of "Mount Cheeseman" is actually on the south-east slopes of Mount Cockayne – a mountain named after Leonard Cockayne (1855-1934), a well-known Canterbury botanist and conservationist. Cheeseman is a friendly little skifield, with 2 T-bar lifts, snow groomers and an on-snow accommodation lodge, and it's a good alternative to Mount Hutt when skiing from Christchurch. Cheeseman sell single T-bar ride tickets to the top of the skifield for a modest \$5, giving good access to backcountry basins. There's a backcountry avalanche risk advisory board at the top of the lifts.

The large basin to the south of the ski area, in the headwaters of Tim's Stream, is known as "**Waterfall Valley**", and is popular with skiers and boarders going out from the ski area. There are good turns to be had from the top of the lifts (1840m) all the way down to the 1500 metre level, or lower. Many people ski only as far as the frozen tarn at 1620 metre elevation, before returning via a small col on the intervening ridge at 1760m.

To head towards Olympus, tour south-west 2½ km along the ridge to the peak of **Mount Cheeseman** itself (2030m) in 75 to 90 minutes. Beware of cornices that often form on the

eastern side of this ridge. There's a good run off point 1950 east down into Waterfall Valley, and also a nice basin to the west (the headwaters of **Hut Creek**), which sees a lot less traffic than Waterfall Valley.

From the top of Mount Cheeseman itself, you look south-west into the gentle undulating slopes of the upper **Ryton Valley**. You can spend a whole day here cutting fresh tracks and return to the Cheeseman ski area, or go on to the Mount Olympus ski area.

From the peak of Mount Cheeseman, it is easy travel west on the ridge to point 1836, and then across a broad saddle and then a 300 metre climb south-west onto Mount Olympus (2094m), descending initially west then swinging south into the basin of the ski area. (around 3 hours from skifield to skifield direct).

MOUNT CHEESEMAN TO MOUNT ENYS
Grade 3 900 metres

The range immediately south of Mt Cheeseman has a few rocky outcrops which interrupt progress, so drop into the upper Ryton for 150 vertical metres or so and regain the ridge near point 1959. Continue south along the ridge to Mt IZARD (2019m), and Mt Cloudsley (2107). From here to the summit of Mount Enys (2194m) the ridge is broader with easier travel. Around 3 to 4 hours from the peak of Mt Cheeseman.

Skiing off Mt Cheeseman to the south-east takes you into the headwaters of Waterfall Creek for a ski descent of 500 metres or more. Similar basins exist to the south-east of Mt IZARD (Long Creek) and Mt Cloudsley (Whitewater Stream). The climb back to the ridge should pose no problems. The slopes on the western side of the range, facing into the lower Ryton Valley, are often wind-blasted free of snow, or melted by the heat of the sun, and are usually only worth skiing in good mid winter conditions.

PORTER HEIGHTS BACK BASINS
Grade 1/2 300 metres plus

Drive to Porter Heights skifield and consult the ski patrol about back country snow conditions. From the top of the highest T-bar, ski out along the snowcat trail to the north (signposted to Bluff Face and McNulty's Basin) for a short way then put on skins to climb north along the range to point elevations 1997 and 1981, to reach point 2029. A straightforward 3km distance, and 300 metres height gain, from the ski area - roughly 90 minutes travel. Between 1997 and 2029, to your right (east), you look down to a broad snow basin, **Crystal Valley**, where runs of up to 700 vertical metres can be taken. After good snowfalls in winter down to 1000m, dedicated skiers can ski all the way from point 2029 down to the Porter Heights road, up to 1000 vertical metres of skiing, with perhaps a kilometre of walking at the end.

There are good ski basins on the other side of the ridge (the headwaters of the Goldney River) although being north-west facing, they may not have a good snow cover. From point 1997 a steep gully descends north-west. The climb back up again is just as steep! Also from point 1981 a nice gully descends north to about 1500m elevation.

South Face descends from the Blue Hill peak down towards Coleridge Pass to the south. Divert eastwards at about 1350 metres and ski (and walk if necessary) back to the Porter Heights road. This south-facing slope is very exposed to the winds that blow through the pass, so it can be extremely icy at times.

MT ENYS FROM PORTER HEIGHTS
Grade 2/3 600 metres

Mount Enys (2194m), is the highest peak in the Craigieburn Ranges with commanding views over the Castle Hill Basin. To get there from Porter Heights, go out along the range as described above to point 2029. It's about another 300 metres of climbing, over point 2049, and past Carn Brea to get to the summit (roughly 3 hours in total from the ski area).

Another, usually preferable, way to reach the summit is to ski north off point 1981, as described above, into the headwaters of the Goldney. From there Mount Enys is seen

straight ahead, up a broad 700 vertical metre slope. This is about the same time from the ski area, but you get more turns in.

The return journey is slightly quicker, but beware of afternoon cloud build-up and keep to the ridge. If clagged in on the way back, be sure to descend SW off point 2029, and not SE. In years of good snowfalls, the descent from Mt Enys back past Carn Brea into Enys Stream can give over 1000 vertical metres of skiing, although then you're faced with a long and steep climb back up to the ridge. The untracked 6 km tramp across country down to Highway 73 is not recommended! Allow 2 hours if doing it.

LONGER TOURS

By joining up the sections outlined above, you can make longer tours. Mount Cheeseman skifield is centrally located in the range, and from there you can go to Craigieburn and back in a day, including skiing the basins between, or go to Olympus and the Ryton valley and back in a day. Mount Olympus ski area is also a good base for ski touring with easy access to the Ryton valley.

For a traverse, you could start at Craigieburn or Broken River, and tour to Mount Olympus in a day, stay the night at the Mount Olympus ski club lodge, and return the next day to Craigieburn, or vice versa. Make sure you have a good 2-day weather forecast, and phone ahead in advance to arrange accommodation of course.

Alternatively from Mount Olympus the next day travel over Mount Enys and all the way through to the Porter Heights skifield to cover the Craigieburn Range in a challenging and exciting ski weekend. A light overnight pack with sleeping bag and bivvy bag should be carried, along with some spare food and the usual backcountry emergency equipment including a shovel. A good early start, as soon as the lifts open, is usually the best plan. Leave written intentions, and always check in and out with the ski patrol.

Competent and fit local skiers who know the Craigieburns well, travelling fast, can cover the entire range in a day. With an early start from

Porter Heights, for example, you can ski over Mt Enys, bypassing Mt Olympus, direct to the Mt Cheeseman skifield. If time, weather and conditions are on your side you can continue through to Craigieburn by the end of the day. From there you could try to hitch back, or get a ride with one of the transport companies. You'd need to phone ahead to organise this beforehand.

If you're at Cheeseman and you have decided not to go any further, then it'll be too late to return to Porter Heights that day. Your options would be to either get a lift or hitch home from Cheeseman, or try to get accommodation for the night there. In any case, make sure that you phone the ski patrol where you started from (Porter Heights in this example) to tell them that you have safely returned.

A flexible option when doing a day trip is to leave your car beside the main highway at the bottom of a skifield access road, and hitch a lift up the skifield road. Then, after skiing to another ski area, you can catch a lift down from any of the skifields and be dropped off back at your car. Remember that the local skier traffic will mostly be going south, back towards Christchurch, in the afternoons, meaning that it's easier to return to a car at the bottom of the Porter Heights road, than to a car at the bottom of the Craigieburn road, for example. This would tend to favour a south-to-north direction of ski traverse for the sake of transport convenience.

Another factor to consider is the quality of the skiing. A north-to-south direction of travel would mean you climb north-facing slopes and would therefore allow downhill ski runs on better quality snow on the south-facing slopes. If you can sort out the transport, this would be the preferred direction.

If you are caught on the ridge in sudden nasty weather, and are forced to descend, the best way to go is to the east (i.e. heading for Highway 73). Be aware though of the terrain below you. There are waterfalls in some of these creeks (Waterfall Creek being one of these, of course) which can be a problem to get around on foot. However, if you are between Cheeseman and Broken River when caught out,

don't attempt to descend eastwards – there are bluffs just about everywhere. Instead you'd have to press on to either ski area, sheltering where practical from the worst of the gusts. The Canterbury the southerly storms are often violent to begin with, but the worst of the wind may pass within an hour or two, leaving conditions that, while far from comfortable, make ski travel and navigation possible.

SKIFIELD CONTACT INFO

Craigieburn Valley Ski Club. PO Box 2152, Christchurch. Phone (03) 365 2514, or club lodge (03) 318 8711. www.craigieburn.co.nz

Mount Olympus. PO Box 25055, Christchurch. Phone (03) 318 5840.

www.mtolympus.co.nz

Broken River Ski Area. PO Box 2718, Christchurch. Phone (03) 318 7270, or club lodge (03) 318 8713.

www.snow.co.nz/BrokenRiver

Mount Cheeseman Ski Club. 199A High St, Christchurch. Phone (03) 379 5315

www.snow.co.nz/mtcheeseman Snow report 366 6644

Porter Heights Ski Area. Accommodation – phone (025) 340 909, or (03) 348 5922.

www.porterheights.co.nz Snow report 366 7766

TRANSPORT OPTIONS

There are a number of ski shuttle operations that can transport people from Christchurch to the ski areas, such as:

Exreme Expeditions. Phone (03) 354 0130 or (025) 357 552 extremeexp@xtra.co.nz

Shuttlebug. (0800) 374 284 or (021) 641 762.

Snowline Tours. Phone (0800) 766 954.

Snowwork Mountain Tours. (0800) 766 967.