How does ATES apply in the Wakatipu and Wanaka areas?

These regions have lots of terrain that can produce avalanches.

See the ATES schedule for popular backcountry tracks in the Wakatipu-Wanaka areas. Only the more popular tracks have been classified.

Visitors should consider the classification of the track, check the current Mountain Safety Council avalanche advisory and have the skills required.

When do avalanches happen?

The avalanche season in the Wakatipu and Wanaka areas is usually from May into November. Avalanches are most likely during periods of heavy rain or snow, and for 24 hours after the end of a storm.

Can an avalanche reach the track?

Avalanches can reach the valley floors below the snowline as smaller side valleys funnel the avalanche down and into the valley far below.

This is especially likely in the spring and early summer when warmer temperatures or rain make the snow heavy and unstable.

Even if you cannot see snow from the track there may be enough snow in upper slopes above you to form an avalanche that could reach the track.

Care should be taken if crossing old avalanche debris, especially in bad weather, as this provides a smooth surface for the next avalanche to travel down on.

The Routeburn Track

Avalanche paths exist on the Routeburn Track between Routeburn Flats Hut, Harris Saddle and Howden Hut.

Avalanches on the Routeburn Track are managed by DOC staff during the Great Walks season (late October to the end of April).

Outside of this period, avalanches on the Routeburn Track are not managed, so users need to inform themselves of the ATES and BAA current conditions before departure.

Other tracks

Many other tracks (eg Rees/Dart, Greenstone, West Matukituki valley, Cascade Saddle and Gillespies Pass) have avalanche paths that reach the valleys. Avalanches can occur in the winter, spring and early summer.

These tracks are not managed for their avalanche risk, so it is essential that users inform themselves of the ATES and BAA current conditions before departure.

Be avalanche aware!

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

- Have checked the ATES class and the BAA for the avalanche rating for the area where you plan to go.
- Have the skills for the ATES class you are going into.
- Have checked what avalanche advisory and alert information is available from the DOC visitor centre nearest the area you are going into.
- When appropriate take an avalanche transceiver, a snow shovel and a probe and know how to use these tools!

Risk statement

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.

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Be avalanche alert

AVALANCHE TERRAIN RATINGS

WAKATIPU AND WANAKA AREAS

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 because snow 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 ATES (described in more detail below), 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 – reading both ATES and BAA helps you to 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.

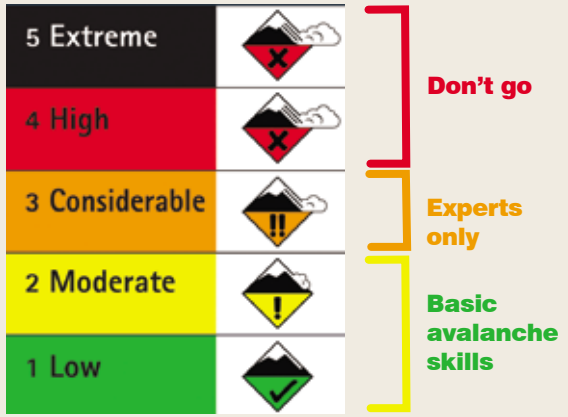
The two scales must be used together to appropriately manage your risk in the backcountry.

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.

BAA – Backcountry Avalanche Advisory

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



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 straightforward, 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.

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 BAA 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.

Challenging terrain

- Challenging (Class 2) terrain requires skills to recognise and avoid avalanche-prone terrain – big slopes are encountered 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 before 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, usually an NZMGA-qualified guide.

Complex terrain

- In Complex (Class 3) terrain, you need to be part of a strong group with years of critical decision-making experience in avalanche terrain. There can be no safe options on these trips, where the terrain forces 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.
- Even if there is no advisory, 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.