



# ISABELLE CREEK

canyon v4a4VI ★★ ★

## Location

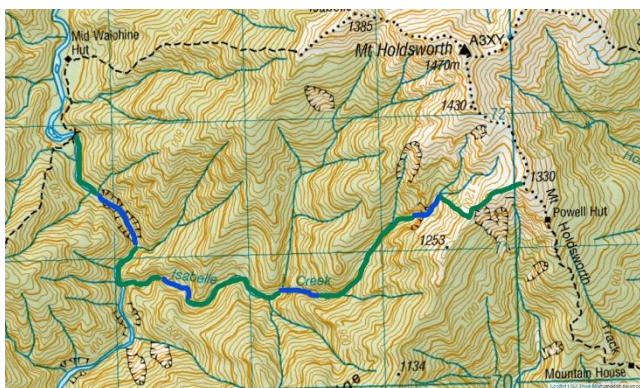
Tararua; feeding the Waiohine River from the Southern flanks of Mt Holdsworth & Mt Isabelle.

## Character

Isabelle Creek is Chamberlain Creeks big sister! A stunning, vertical, sunny creek with a chequered history. It has 3 distinct canyon sections that successively grow in interest and stature during descent - topped off by a trip up one of the best sections of the Waiohine River Gorge to exit. This is an adventure canyon, river and tramping trip that will keep you busy for 48 hours. The recommended schedule is to walk into Powell Hut on the evening of day one. Canyon to the Mid Waiohine Hut on day two (12+ hours) and walk out on day three.

## Map

BP33 Featherston & BP34 Masterton



## Approach by Car

From Carterton in the Wairarapa, drive to the Holdsworth Lodge road end car park beside the Atiwhakatu River.

## Approach on Foot

Walk up to Powell Hut (3 hours).

From Powell Hut head up the Mt Holdsworth track to Point 1330 (30 minutes) before heading WSW down High Ridge (15 minutes) and dropping down a spur to a confluence of streams and the start of the first canyon section (30 minutes).

## Rock

Greywacke, generally good quality with a few exceptions.

## Water

Moderate flow in a dry summer. The trip requires a sustained good weather window to be completed safely.

*Warning!! The canyon is graded as it was found late on in a dry January (2022). The canyon clearly takes substantial volumes of water regularly. The Waiohine River exit also requires compulsory gorge swims.*

## Catchment

Growing from 0.5 to 5 km<sup>2</sup> through descent.

## Anchors

The canyon is currently "exploration" rigged. The few double bolt anchors generally secure access to the biggest drops, getting in the flow and retrieving rope.

Many drops have single bolt anchors, slings with rings round trees or were descended by pulling the rope over dead logs. All anchors should be approached cautiously and parties should be prepared to build their own anchors.

There is much evidence of high flows in the canyon. As such the anchors are generally found above the "high flow" level, sometimes involving an exposed climb "on belay" to access them.

## Gear

Rope; longest drop 70m. Minimum 2no 70m ropes & 1no 50m rope recommended. Both 70m drops require committing access abseils and so the 50m rope provides retreat redundancy.

Bivy gear; a competent party moving efficiently will likely take a full 12 hours to get from Powell Hut to Mid Waiohine Hut. As such it is recommended parties take provision to bivy in the canyon or on the banks of the Waiohine River overnight should the need arise.

## Route Description

### Upper Canyon

On entering the stream, the first canyon section starts almost immediately with high walls closing in on a narrow mountain streamway. Soon a slide 3m is encountered followed by two successive jumps of 2m – all these have specific landings so scout them first.

R1 15m down 2 drops. DBA TR

Slide 3m

R2 20m into pool. Sling round log TL.

Around the corner down climb 2m to access....

R3 7m into pool (Clarkson's pool). Stay on rope for a further 15m slide or down climb to the exposed lip of R4. SBA TL.

R4 70m upper falls on topo map. DBA TL – from the lip of the falls the anchor is accessed by climbing out of the flow on the TL to a ledge. Note; 30m down the upper falls rappel a SBA on ledge (TL) can be swung to in case you have any doubt about your rope lengths. However, if your rope is short and you do use this option - you will need to exit the canyon before the 'Middle Canyon'.

Note; downstream from R4 tramping literature suggests an arduous escape is possible up a spur on the TL to High Ridge and an unmarked track back to the start.

Otherwise, open walking and boulder hopping for 45 minutes downstream.

### Middle Canyon

The generally wide stream way closes in and the canyon restarts with numerous down climbs typically 2 to 3m in height before reaching....

R5 15m. Sling round tree TL.

More down climbing in an enclosed canyon.

R6 10m. Rope around dead log TL. Note; rock graffiti at top of falls in streamway noting VUWTC.

R7 20m is the access rappel to the lower falls shown on the topo map and goes down two drops through two pools. DBA TR.

R8 70m lower falls on topo map. DBA TL. Note; to access the anchor clamber over a boulder on the bottom pools TL to find the anchor in a sheltered alcove. The rappel quickly joins the line of the falls which kicks out in a rooster tail 40m above the landing pool!

R9 10m on the TR or down climb a high-water flow bypass channel on the TL.

Note; below this a streamway joins on the TR. Tramping literature suggests this stream can be followed as escape up to the col between Mt Holdsworth and Mt Isabelle, with a few steep sections bypassed in the bush.

Staying in Isabelle Creek an open walking and boulder hopping section starts taking 30 minutes. If running late, ideal bivy spots can be found here.

### Lower Canyon

The canyon restarts with stepped down climbs avoiding short rappels before a compulsory slide of 3m or jump of 2m!

R10 10m past two drops into big pool or jump 6m! (scout first) Sling round tree TL.

R11 10m into big pool, possible jumps from ledges accessed on rappel between 2 and 6m! (scout first) Sling round tree TL.

The canyon briefly opens before closing in again introducing more small down climbs and providing access to the final spectacular feature; a huge chock stone which the creek passes under.

R12 10m under huge chock stone. SBA TR.

From here the canyon opens up for the final stretch to the Waiohine River, however not without a few more opportunities to down climb or jump into pools, typically 1 to 2m (scout first). This takes about 30 minutes.

### Waiohine River Gorge

Follow the river upstream for 1.5km until the swing bridge and track is reached. Some might prefer to stay in the Waiohine River until the hut is reached (unseen from the river). Multiple swims up to 50m and opportunities for jumps off the rocky gorge sides into deep pools exist.

### Time

Vehicle park to start of canyon	4.5hrs
Canyon descent to Hut	12hrs
Return to vehicle	7.5hrs
<b>Total</b>	<b>24hrs</b>

### Flash Flood Danger

Moderate

### Escapes

Away from the canyon sections, you can usually get up out of the stream bed quickly.

However complete escape from this remote canyon back to a track or alternative route would be difficult and lengthy. See notes after R4 and R9 in the route description for a couple of escape details.

### Notes

First descent: 22 & 23 January 2022 (Justin Hall, Gavin Holden, Alex Horvat)

Fun to effort ratio; A full weekend - big adventure trip. Everything is impressive, the setting, rappels, jumps, swims and tramping.

Access issues; Public land.

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Topo by Justin Hall  
[www.kiwicanyons.org](http://www.kiwicanyons.org)

## History

An incomplete guide to Isabelle Creeks exploration.

July 1969 saw the search and later body recovery of police constable Tweedale (a member of the Wellington Police SAR squad) from the base of R4 (upper falls on the topo map). The search had Tom Clarkson descend by rope the first couple of jumps as well as R's 1 & 2 to the top of R3 where he looked into a pool (in later literature referred to as Clarkson's pool) that fed the slide to the upper falls (R4) edge. R1 also had evidence of the Victoria University of Wellington Tramping Club (VUWTC) building an anchor around a boulder.

3 months later in better (less wintry) conditions, constable Tweedale's body was found at the base of R4.

Tramping literature and rock graffiti in the canyon also suggest forays into the open sections of Isabelle Creek occur with some regularity.

A rock in the streamway immediately above R6 bears the etching VUWTC, presumably an indication of the furthest point downstream in the middle canyon section reached on a tramping trip which dropped in on the creek between canyon sections. This was impressive as it would have involved steep scrambling around R5 in the bush and wet down climbing of smaller falls not marked as rappels.

Further to this, Tararua Tramping Club (TTC) trip reports indicate several rappels / series of rappels can be bypassed in the bush by scrambling steeply around spurs and slopes – though this would mean missing many of the best canyon sections.

One report describes how the feature of R12 was reached both top and bottom over two trips by the same person – looking onto where they had stood previously however unable to make the connection.

As for our trip, we are grateful to JD of Amalgamated Helicopters Carterton who dropped us off on High Ridge the evening of Friday 21 January and Julian Dunster (not JD) who met us midday at the Mid-Waiohine Hut on Sunday 23 January to help carry out our gear. The first descent included a bivy at the top of R10, which was christened the 'Soft Rock Hotel'.

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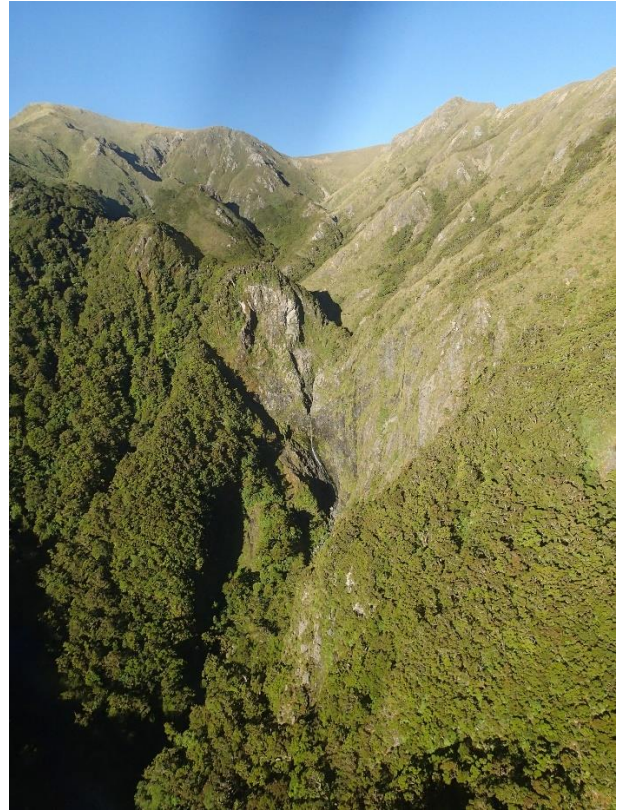
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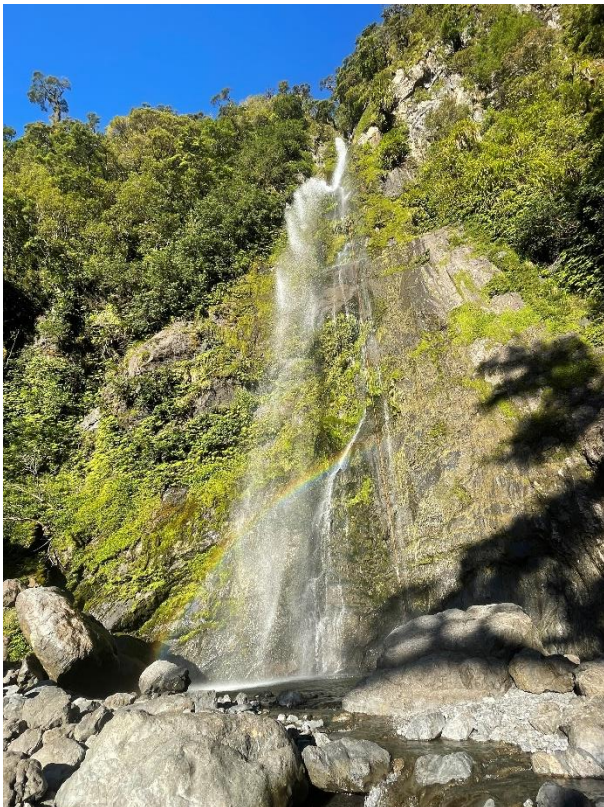
# Photos



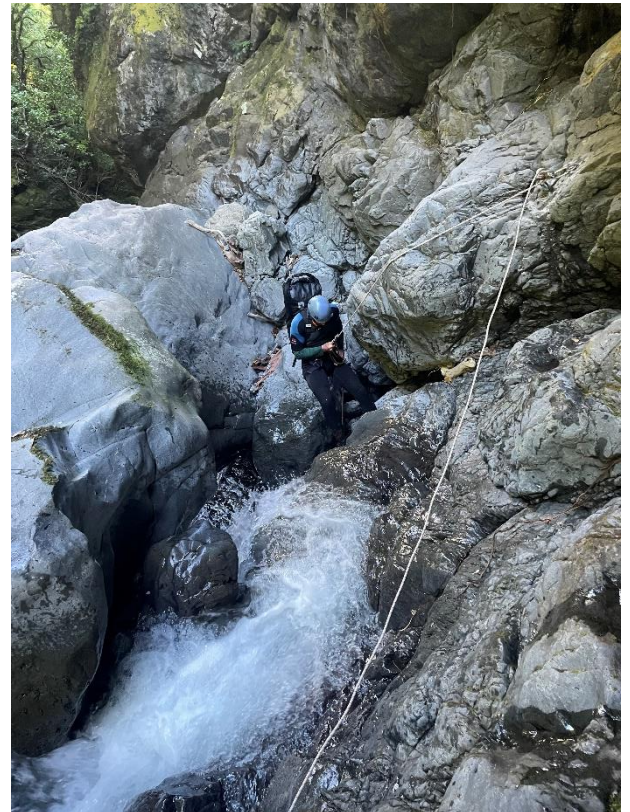
R11 (possible jump).



Upper canyon with R4, the visible thin white ribbon.



R8 with 40m high rooster tail.



R12, about to drop 'inflow' below the chockstone.

**ISABELLE CREEK**

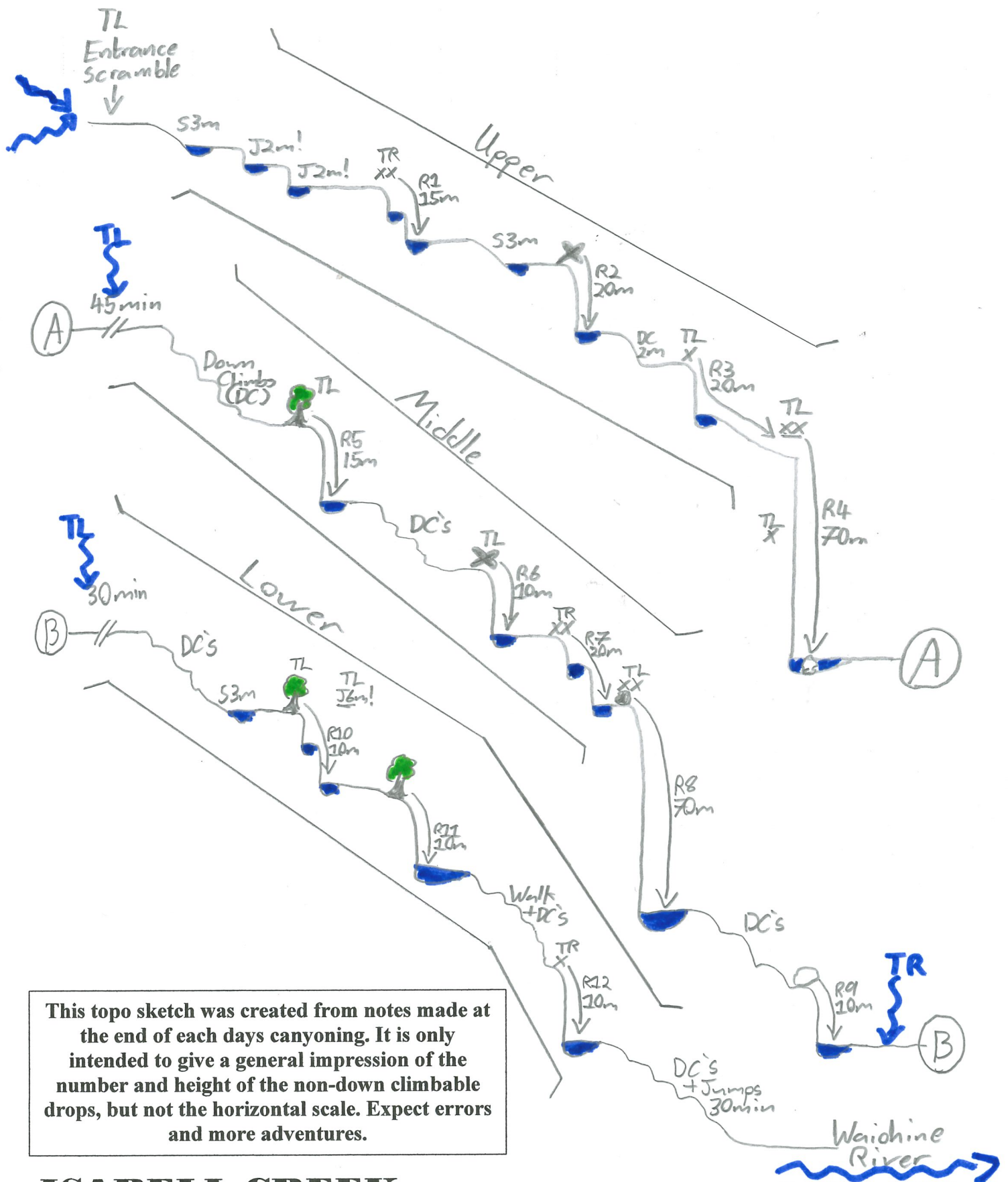
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# Isabelle Creek Canyon



This topo sketch was created from notes made at the end of each days canyoning. It is only intended to give a general impression of the number and height of the non-down climbable drops, but not the horizontal scale. Expect errors and more adventures.

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