

A vertical photograph of a deep, narrow canyon. On the left, a waterfall cascades down dark, layered rock. On the right, a person in a blue harness and white helmet rappels down a steep, mossy rock face. The canyon floor is filled with white water. The overall scene is rugged and scenic.

Guide to the Waitaha Valley Canyons

Whirling Water
Bartrum Creek
Scamper Torrent

By Leo Tregret,
Richard Bramley,
Sid Tinney

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DISCLAIMER

This document is available for free at www.kiwicanyons.org. Check the site for the latest updates before your trip. Conditions can change rapidly due to floods and this guide may contain mistakes, so be prepared for unexpected challenges. Canyoning is dangerous, and the routes described here are among New Zealand's most difficult, with risks including serious injury or death. Use this information at your own risk and responsibility.

CONTACT

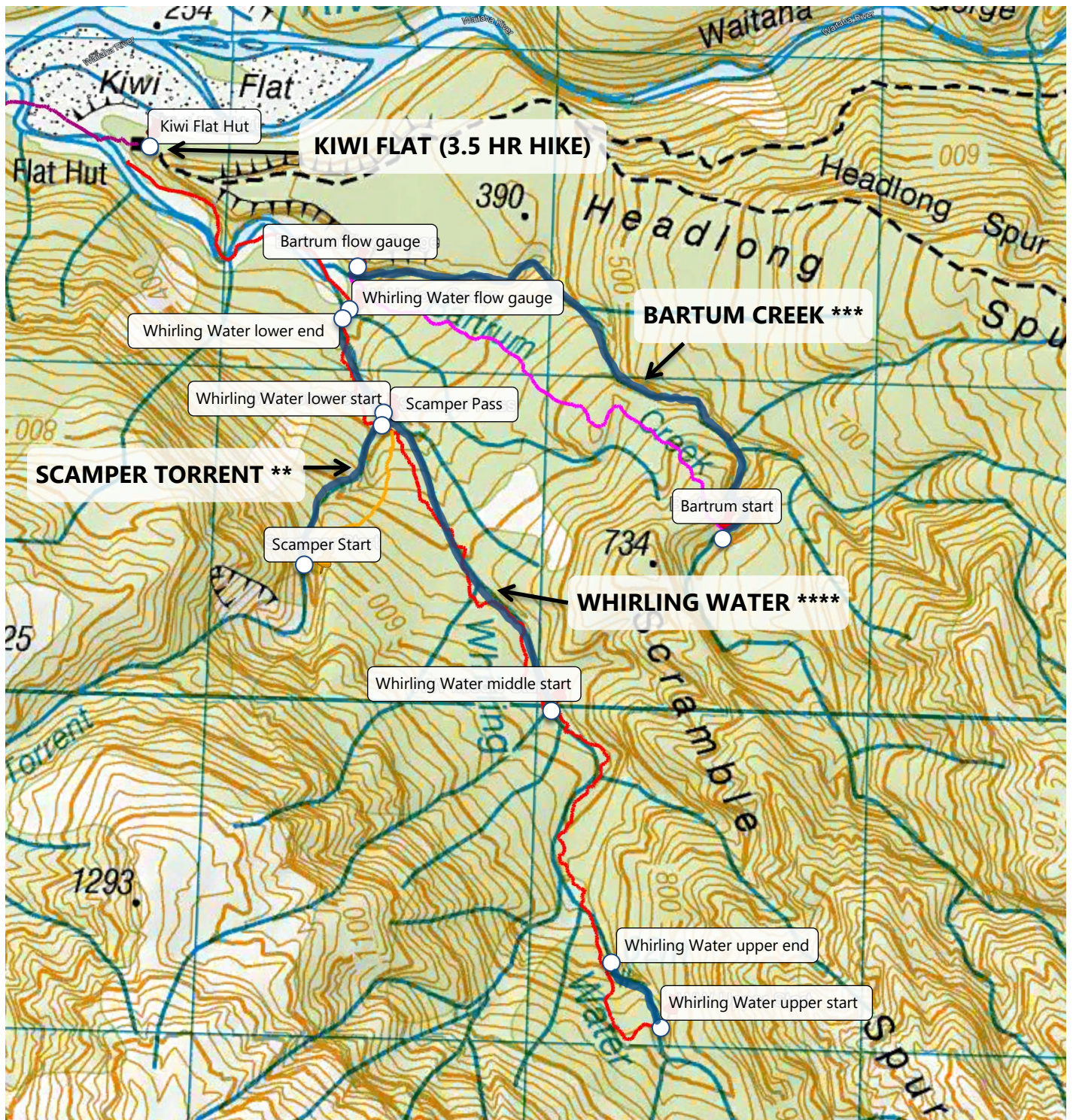
For questions, comments, or suggested edits, contact richardbramley@gmail.com or leotregret1@gmail.com

VALLEY MAP

[Download the KMZ file](#)

[Download the GPX file](#)

[View at NZ Topo](#)





THE WAITAHA VALLEY

OVERVIEW

The Waitaha River flows from the Southern Alps to the West Coast, carving through rugged gorges, canyons, and pristine bushland. About 50 km south of Hokitika, it is a favourite for whitewater kayakers, trampers, and hunters. The Waitaha valley is home to some of the best canyons New Zealand has to offer – Whirling Water, Bartum Creek, and Scamper Torrent. It is a paradise of stunning deep schist chasms carved over aeons by turquoise-coloured glacial meltwater.



HISTORY

The Waitaha River Valley is significant to Ngāi Tahu and earlier Māori iwi, who used it as a key route for gathering pounamu (greenstone) and revered it for its spiritual importance. Its name reflects the Waitaha people's deep connection to the land and waterways, with Māori traditions emphasizing its sacredness and guardianship (kaitiakitanga). In the 19th century, European settlers explored the valley for gold and resource surveys.

HYDRO SCHEME RISK

The Morgan Gorge of the Waitaha River, which is the apex of whitewater kayaking in New Zealand, has faced threats from hydroelectric schemes for years, with past proposals denied. Its classification as “stewardship land” rather than National Park leaves it vulnerable to development. As of 2025, power companies continue to push for a hydro scheme. The Waitaha River valley, with its internationally significant canyons, is a true natural treasure that must be protected as the world's untouched environments diminish.



POSSIBLE CANYONING ITINERARY

4 or more days

A multi-day trip is ideal to explore this area, tackle several canyons, and visit the stunning hot springs during good weather. Kiwi Flat Hut, a basic six-bunk hut with tent space, serves as an excellent basecamp, just a 4-hour walk from the carpark. The itinerary will vary based on weather and group skill, with a sample shown on the right.

- **Day 1: Hike into Kiwi Flat Hut** - Just an afternoon/evening
- **Day 2: Bartum Creek canyon (3 stars)** - A perfect warm up for Whirling Water
- **Day 3: Whirling Water middle and lower canyons (4 stars)**
- Leave an escape rope at the top of the lower section in case the group runs out of time. A highly skilled group might add in the upper section
- **Day 4: Visit the hot pools and hike out**
- **Optional extras:** Whirling Water upper section, Scamper Torrent canyon (2 stars), hike the fantastic Smyth range traverse (3 days)



DRIVING TO THE ROAD END

45 minute drive from Hokitika

If travelling from Hokitika, travel south on State Highway 6 for 43km. Just before crossing the Waitaha River, turn left onto Waitaha Road.

From Wanaka/Haast Pass, follow State Highway 6 northbound, passing through Fox Glazer, Franz Josef and Harihari before crossing the Waitaha River. Shortly after crossing the river, turn right onto Waitaha Road.

Follow Waitaha Rd down the TR/West side of the Waitaha River for 11km past various farms. The road terminates at a T-Junction with Anderson Rd - turn right, and continue on to a dirt track heading West, towards the river. Park at the end of this road.

[Google Maps link to car park](#)



HIKING IN TO KIWI FLAT HUT

3.5 hour hike from the road end

Over the years, many walking tracks on both the TL and TR of the Waitaha River have been maintained by DOC to access the lower reaches of the Waitaha Valley. However, landslides have damaged most of these tracks, and as of January 2025, the track marked on the LINZ Topo maps is incorrect.

From the carpark, follow sporadic signs and orange DOC triangle markers upstream along the TR bank of the Waitaha River. At [-43.11627, 170.73021], a large orange triangle directs trampers up a small tributary on TR - this denotes the newest, correct access track. This track winds its way up and over a knoll on the TR bank, with ladders and chains installed to navigate a particularly steep section. The track descends back to the Waitaha River just above the Morgan Gorge, where a spectacularly positioned swing bridge gives a view into the wild geology of this place.

After the swing bridge, take note of a small track on hikers' right which leads to the hot springs (via the old track out). Continue along the main track down to the river. Although there is no track shown on the topo map, markers again point to where a track briefly heads into the bush on TL, before emerging again upstream of the confluence of Whirling Water and the Waitaha River. Cross Whirling Water to the eroded TR bank, where a large orange triangle marks the path up to Kiwi Flat Hut.

There is weak cell phone reception at the tent spot next to the hut.

VISITING MORGAN GORGE HOT SPRINGS

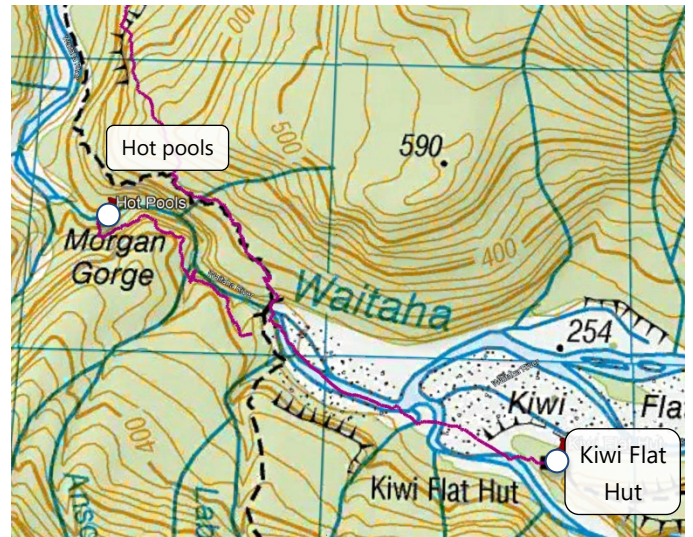
1 hour 15 minute hike from Kiwi Flat

No visit to the Waitaha would be complete without a visit to the stunning natural hot springs in Morgan Gorge, where a scalding bath can soak away any canyoning injuries while Class VI rapids churn downstream, mere metres away. From the TL side of the Morgan Gorge swing bridge, a faint track heads uphill, marked by occasional pink DOC triangles. The track fades in and out, crossing a landslide, then Anson Stream roughly 100m upstream from where it tumbles into Morgan Gorge. The track continues alongside the gorge through dense scrub, 100m above the gorge. At [-43.12848, 170.72965], an old landslide, now covered by ferns, provides a glimpse of the river below.

Shortly afterwards, a small stream, unmarked on the maps, crosses the path at [-43.12872, 170.72844]. Follow this stream down towards the gorge, guided by the increasingly potent smell of sulphur. A 2m downclimb leads to a slippery ledge (a hand line may be useful), with rapids roaring below. The ledge leads upstream to a crack in the wall, where scalding water pours out.

The small pool directly underneath the crack can fit one or two people, and a larger basin underneath can fit significantly more, although it may or may not be hot depending on how much river water is lapping into it.

To return to the car park from the hot pools, you can either retrace your steps to the Morgan Gorge swing bridge, or you can continue on the old track until Glamour Glen, which you then follow down to Waitaha river level. Boulder hop your way down the river until a 50m long flat section with bedrock sides, which you will need to swim across to access the true right. Then follow the river bank until you hit the Kiwi Flat DOC track. Overall, this alternative route back to the car will take around 4 hours (excluding time in the hot springs).







WHIRLING WATER

v6a6V ★★★★★

Location

Waitaha Valley, Westland

Overview

Whirling Water is undoubtedly the crown jewel of the Waitaha Valley canyons. Imagine Wilson's Creek and Griffin Creek got together, had a baby and fed it steroids from birth.

This is a beast of a canyon, with 3 distinct sections. The short vertical upper section, the super slotted crux middle section, and the super high volume lower section.

The classic trip is the middle and lower sections, which makes for 1.4km of continuous canyon.

This is a very technical high-volume canyon not to be taken lightly. It involves a lot of rigging and a lot of whitewater problem solving. Please see the thoughts from Daniel Clearwater on the next page for an independent perspective.

Whirling Water is sure to become a classic NZ test piece for strong teams that are keen to take on something challenging but also incredibly beautiful.

Approach by car

When travelling south from Hokitika, turn left onto Waitaha Road just before crossing the Waitaha River. Follow Waitaha Rd down the TR side of the Waitaha River for 11km past various farms. The road terminates at a T-Junction with Anderson Rd. Turn right there and continue on to a dirt track heading West, towards the river. Park at the DOC sign at the end of this road.

Approach on foot

Approach to Kiwi Flat Hut: Follow the DOC track to Kiwi Flat Hut (3-4 hours). Note that some topo maps show old versions of the DOC track – the correct track directs trampers up a small tributary on TR at [-43.11627, 170.73021] and then above the bluffs.

Approach to lower section: From Kiwi Flat Hut, follow Whirling Water upstream for 30 mins. Look out for the beautiful 'Eye of Whirling Water' in the bedrock as you

approach. There is a flow gauge rock just after the eye, a bit below the last rappel [-43.14024, 170.75484]. This also marks the point at which to leave the river by scrambling up small rock spur on the TL bank, and begin the bush bash. Trending uphill, head South East through the untracked forest, following Whirling Water but staying safely clear of the increasingly steep riverbanks. The confluence of Whirling Water and Scamper Torrent, at [-43.14313, 170.75585], is the start of Whirling Water lower section. 50m upstream of the confluence, abseil 15m down into Scamper Torrent and climb back out the TR of Scamper Torrent via the wall opposite ("Scamper Pass"). Leave the access rope in place at Scamper Pass, as an escape option if the flow in the Whirling Water lower section is too high to safely descend or you run out of time.

Approach to middle section: From Scamper Pass, hike uphill along the TL bank of Whirling Water, crossing several unmarked streams. At 550m, a tributary flows down slippery slabs into Whirling Water. Descend the TL of this tributary into the canyon proper. This is the beginning of the middle section.

Approach to upper section: Follow Whirling Water upstream at river level until [-43.15646, 170.76357]. Leave the creek and slowly traverse the stream uphill on the TL. At 800m, contour towards the stream and then descend steeply down to the creek. This is the start of the upper section.

Rock

Bomber schist. May be slippery in low flows, but normally super grippy

Water

Very high flow, deep pools, hazardous water features. See section on flow gauges.

Catchment

Lower: 17km²
Middle: 11km²
Upper 7km²

Anchors

Upper section: Single bolted anchors, removeable bolt

Middle and lower sections: Double bolted, V threads.

Gear

3x 60m ropes, anchor building equipment and materials, V threader, Dyneema cord, 8mm removeable bolt for upper section, wire brush if descending at low flows (to help with slippery climbs), climbing etrier (helpful but not essential).

Time

Lower section:

Kiwi Flat to lower entry (Scamper Pass)	1h - 1h30
Descent of lower section	2h30 - 4h
Return to Kiwi Flat	30m
Total Lower only	4h - 6h

Middle section:

Lower entry to middle entry	1h - 2h
Descent of middle section	4h - 6h
Total Middle + Lower	9h - 14h

Upper section:

Middle entry to upper entry	1h30 - 2h30
Descent of upper section	1h30 - 3h
Total Upper + Middle + Lower	12h - 19h30

Flash flood danger

Extreme risk due to alpine catchment and lack of escapes, although large catchment should buy some time. Catchment is not glacial fed and therefore snowmelt is not normally an issue in summer months.

Escapes

Lower section: Several escapes.

Middle section: No escapes until Scamper confluence.

Upper Section: No escapes until creek walk in between upper and middle sections.

Notes

First full descent: 20/3/24. Richard Bramley, Leo Garnache, Reto Bubendorf, Troy Watson, Andrew Humphreys, Adrien Paris, Leo Tregret, with (injured) Justin Venable on the rim

Upper section first descent: March 2024. Leo Garnache, Reto Bubendorf, Madie Garnache, Leo Tregret

Middle section first descent: Feb 2023. Pete Choate, Sid Tinney, Jason Bilsborow, Charlotte Mason, Leo Tregret

Lower section first descent: Jan 2021. Richard Bramley, Justin Venable, Keith Riley, Phil Palzer

Comment on the grade: The team initially graded Whirling Water as v5a6, thinking its rope work was likely easier than that of Gloomy Gorge (v6a6). However, shortly after completing the first descent of Whirling Water, team members descended Gloomy Gorge and reassessed their comparison. They noted that while Gloomy Gorge features more sustained rope work, Whirling Water includes similar technical challenges, such as difficult re-belays, technical multi point hand lines, and aid climbing. As a result, the team decided to publish the grade of Whirling Water as v6a6 to better reflect its overall difficulty.

[View the YouTube video](#)

Caution

A few thoughts and perspectives from Dan Clearwater, author of the *Canyoning in New Zealand* guidebook

“Whirling Water is undoubtedly the most impressive and challenging canyon I’ve ever descended. Good preparation, specifically training as an individual and a team, is essential for a safe and efficient descent.

There’s a lot of canyon in there, but only a handful of features are simple. The rest require excellent judgement, teamwork, strength, advanced techniques and courage to safely overcome.

The sustained level of challenge makes Whirling a major step up from other hard canyons in New Zealand. Other hard canyons have a couple of crux features requiring some advanced moves, where you can muddle through with rusty skills, or get less competent teammates through. But for hours and hours, Whirling demands such a range of advanced canyoning techniques again and again, that every person and every team needs to be highly proficient at each technique.

There are long tethered swims through current to slopy exits above sucky pour-overs. Floating anchors, guided rappels and difficult-to-reach rappel deviations avoid high vertical flow, dangerous hydraulics or landing in a sieve at the bottom of a free-hanging pitch



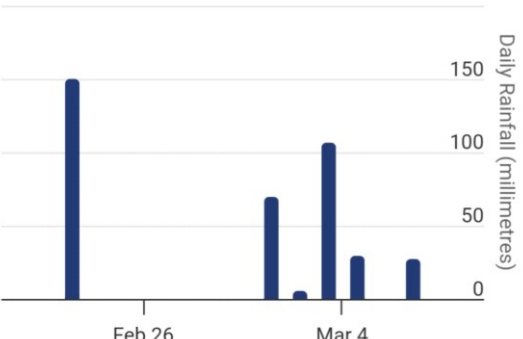


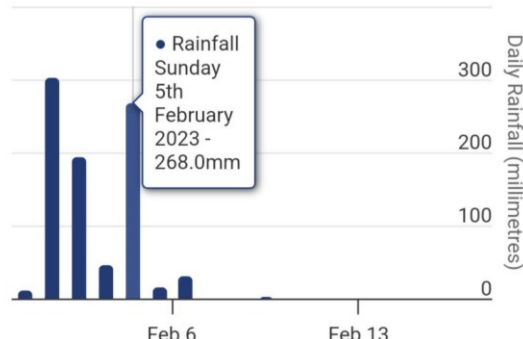
Multi-point safety lines require excellent coordination between the leader and belayer and perfect management of rope tension. Setting the lines involves exposed, insecure and strenuous free climbing plus A0 aid climbing to pass through bulges, overhangs and slippery sloping ledges. They also require careful forethought and textbook rigging to avoid excessive friction during retrieval.

Before you can regroup, your team will need careful planning, teamwork, and communication as it gets strung out on complex sequences of sustained features. These include multi-pitch rappel sequences with hanging belays followed by tenuous pendulums to reach the next anchor. Additionally, it is difficult to protect the numerous exposed, slippery climbs above and around hazards.

There are only a handful of escape points, and long sections of total commitment, where helicopter rescue would be completely impossible. Even a sprained ankle would be extremely serious. Any official rescue attempt would be complex, lengthy and at best, it would be many hours before SAR teams made first contact with a group in distress. If any of that sounds intimidating, you need to do more training. Whirling is a magnificent adventure, just make sure you come well-prepared.”

Flow gauges

[View the WCRC rainfall gauge for nearby Tuke River \(Westland\)](#)

Flow level	Date of photo and recent rainfall
<p>Very high flows May not be descendable at this flow, except for very expert teams</p> 	<p>9/3/24 4 days since ~200mm rain event</p> <p>Daily Rainfall for Tuke Rv at Tuke Hut (NIWA) </p> <p>Custom Date Range: 22-02-2024 to 09-03-2024</p> <p>All ▾</p> 
<p>Mid flows Doable flows</p> 	<p>18/2/23 11 days since very big event (>500mm)</p> <p>Daily Rainfall for Tuke Rv at Tuke Hut (NIWA) </p> <p>Custom Date Range: 01-02-2023 to 18-02-2023</p> <p>All ▾</p> 

Mid to low flows
Ideal flows



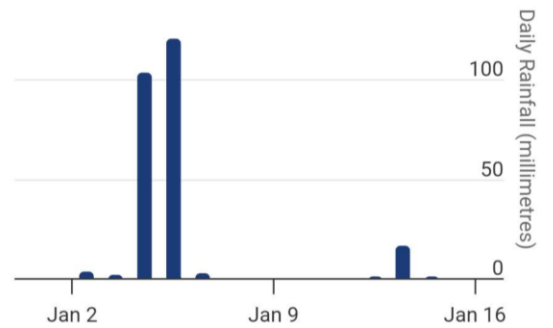
17/1/2023

10 days since last major event (220mm)

Daily Rainfall for Tuke Rv at Tuke Hut (NIWA)

Custom Date Range: 01-01-2023 to 17-01-2023

All ▾



Very low flows

Oh you should be so lucky



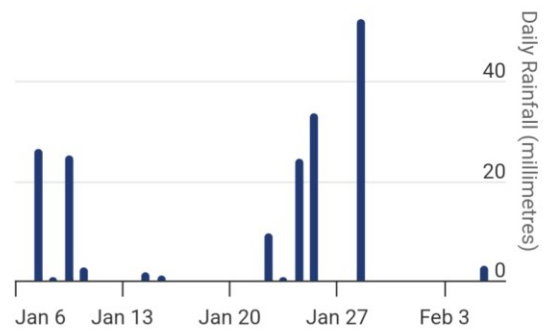
7/2/2025

Only 180mm in the last month, a week since a small event

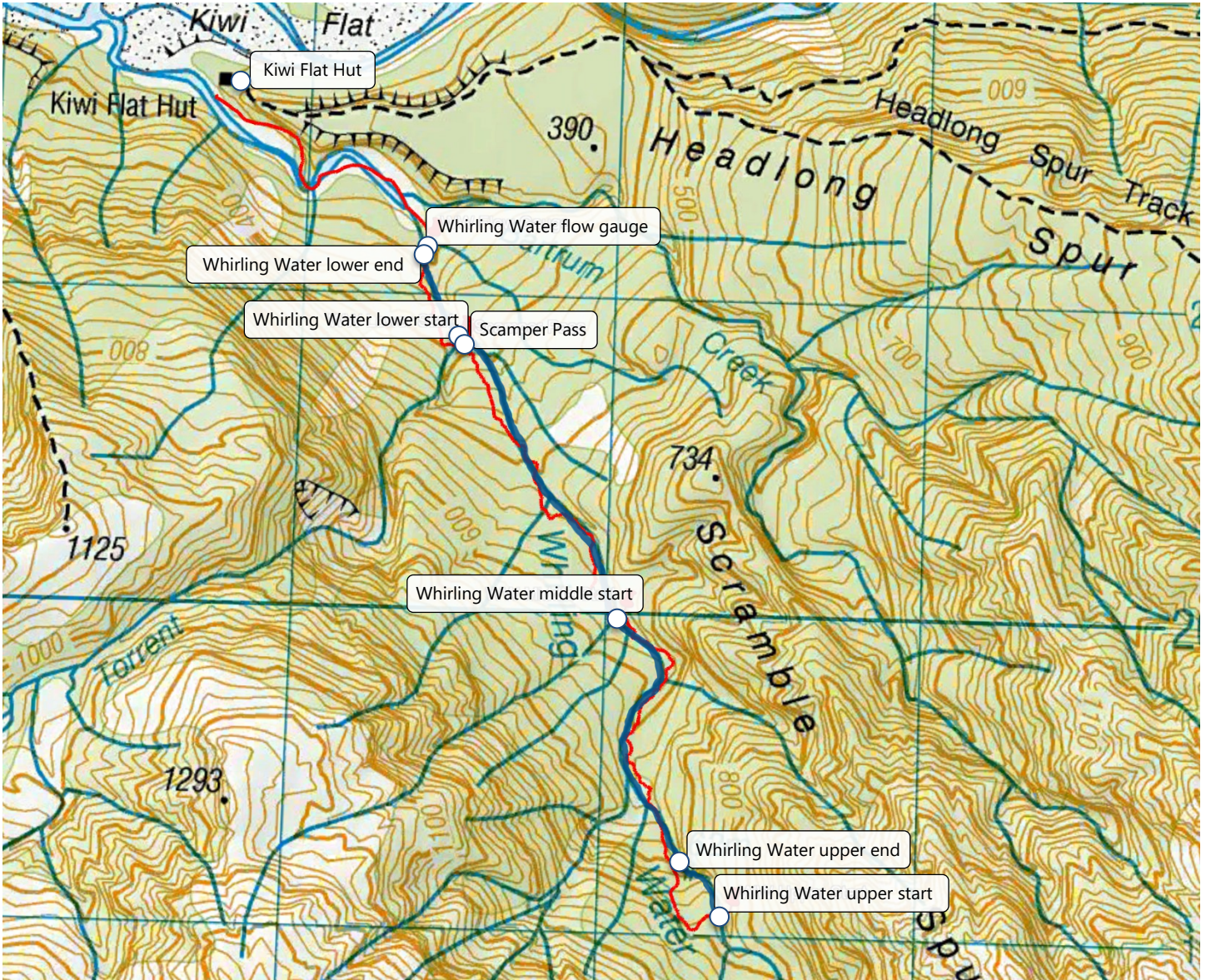
Daily Rainfall for Tuke Rv at Tuke Hut (NIWA)

Custom Date Range: 07-01-2025 to 07-02-2025

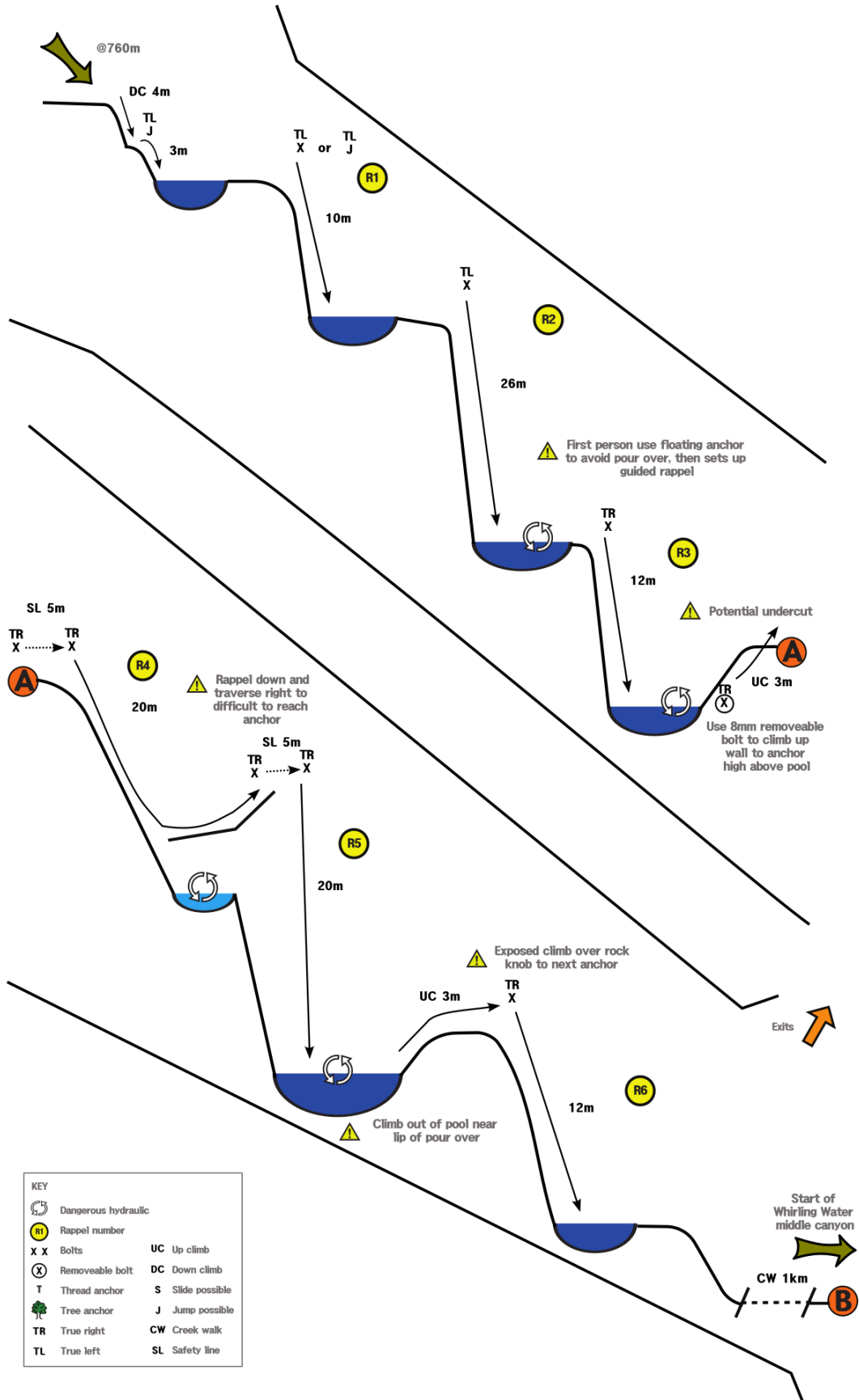
All ▾



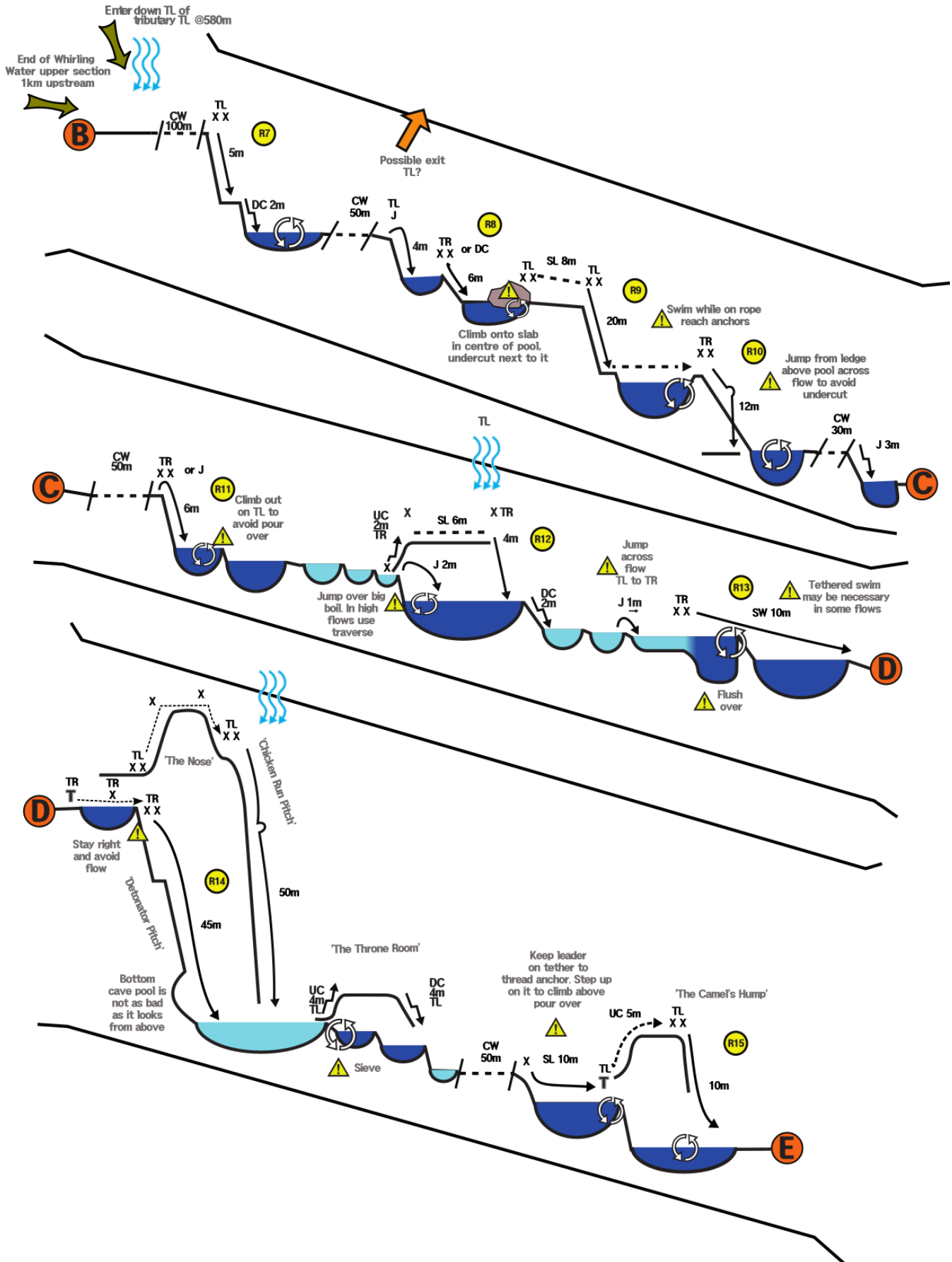
Map

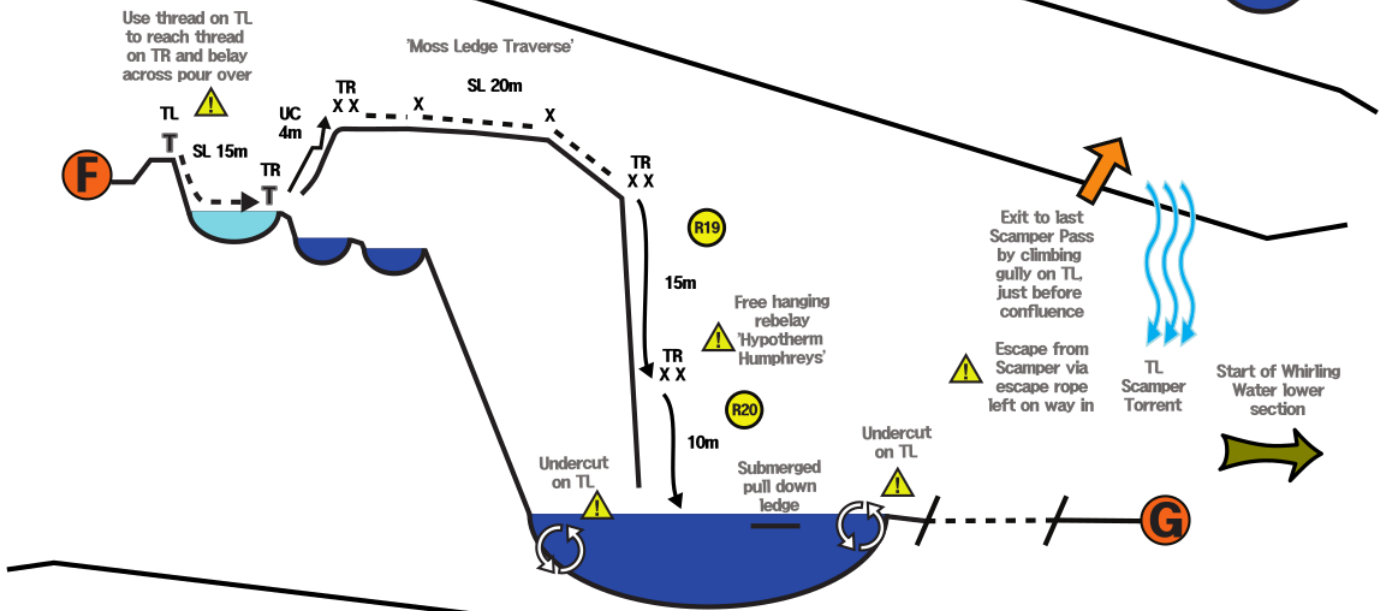
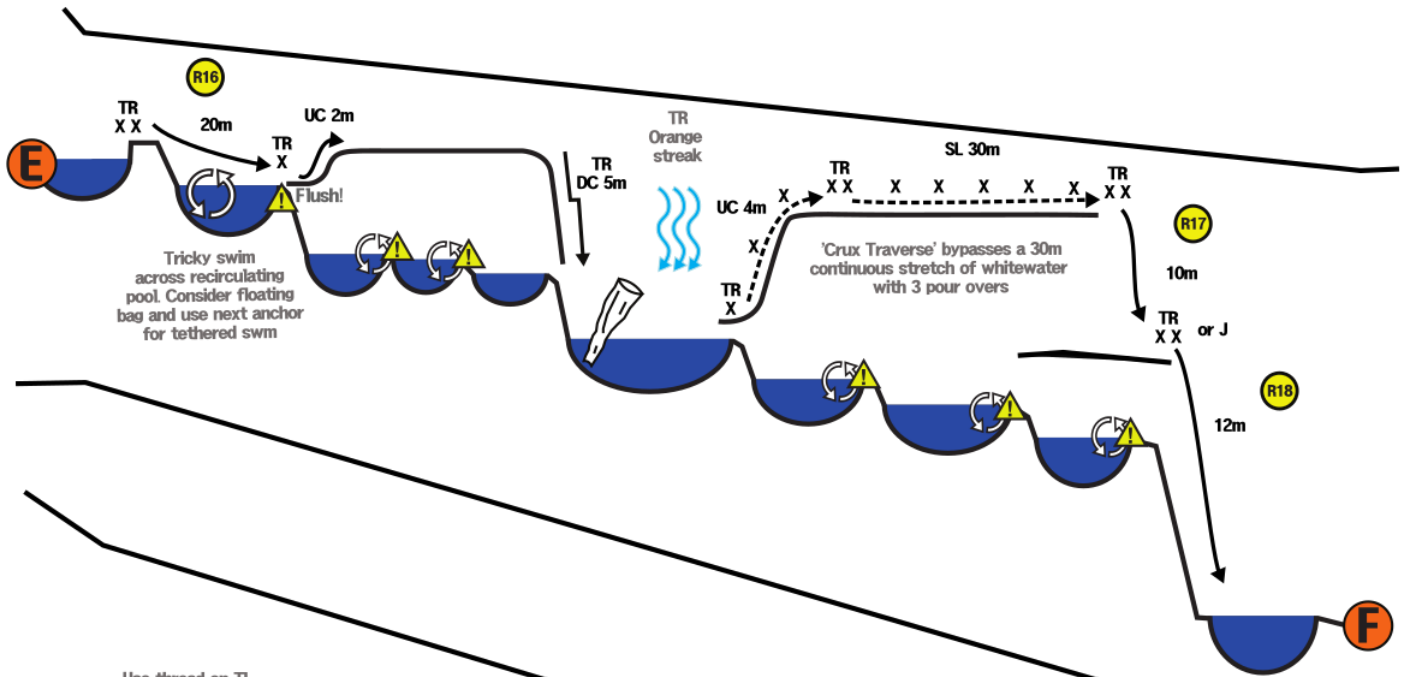


Topo drawing - Upper section



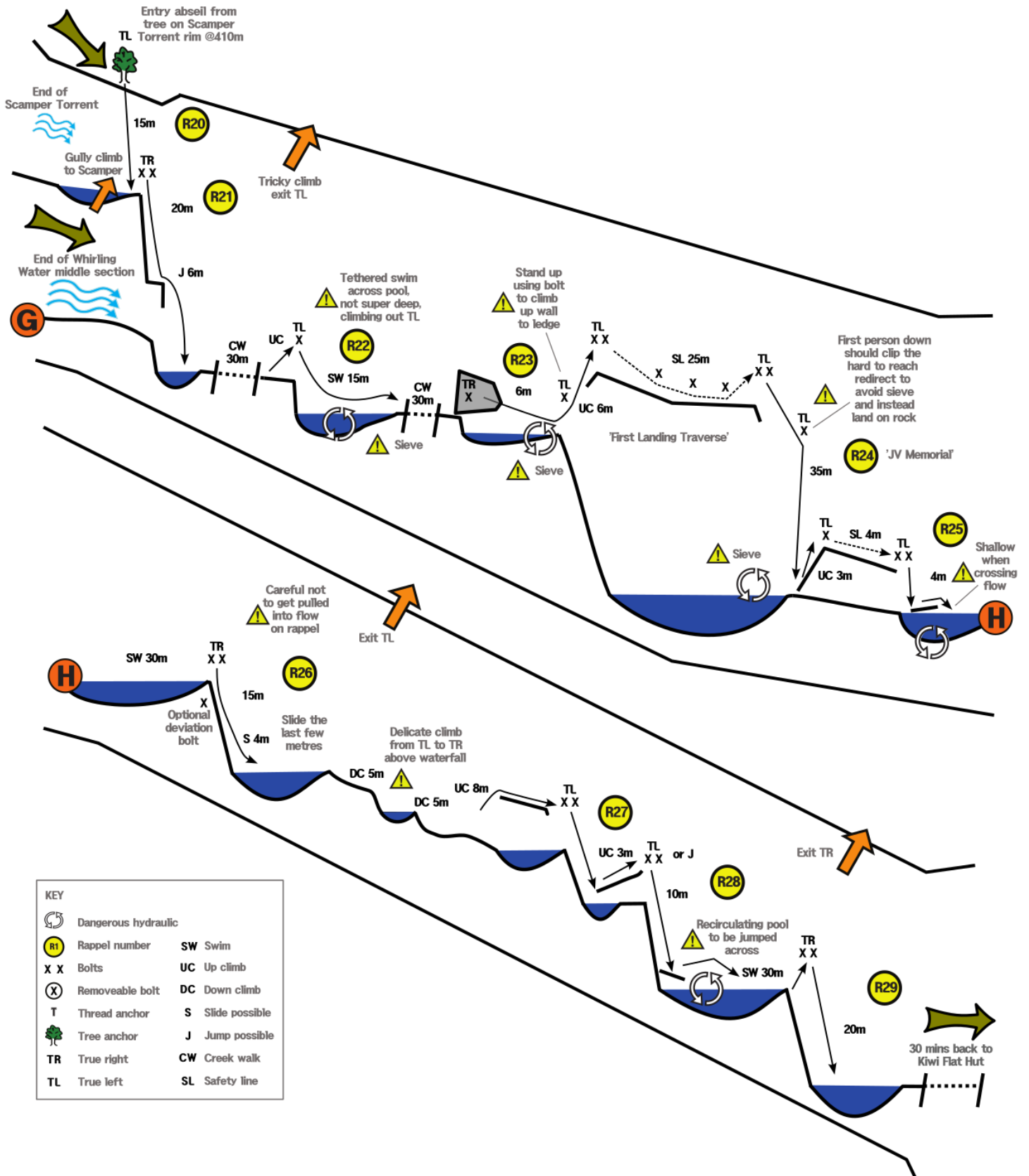
Topo drawing - Middle section





KEY	
	Dangerous hydraulic
	Rappel number
	SW Swim
	Bolts
	UC Up climb
	Removeable bolt
	DC Down climb
	T Thread anchor
	S Slide possible
	Tree anchor
	J Jump possible
	TR True right
	TL True left
	CW Creek walk
	SL Safety line

Topo drawing - Lower section







BARTUM CREEK

v4a4IV☆☆☆

Location

Waitaha Valley, Westland

Overview

Bartrum Creek is Whirling Water's little brother. It is a great warm-up or first objective when arriving at the Waitaha Valley. Although significantly easier than its big brother, it is still a committing and technically challenging canyon.

It is likely to become renowned as a New Zealand classic because of its mix of beauty and fun features. It is alone worth a visit to the Waitaha Valley.

Its character can be described as a combination of Robinsons and Cross Creeks (in the Haast Pass). Stunningly clear turquoise water has eroded steep-sided schist walls into otherworldly, beautiful amphitheatres, separated by plenty of jumps, some fantastic slides, and some striking abseils landing in flushing pools. Several features in this canyon require deft ropework and efficient teamwork to safely navigate.

If Bartrum challenges you or takes you more than 4h to descend, then perhaps Whirling Water is not for you.

Approach by car

When travelling south from Hokitika, turn left onto Waitaha Road just before crossing the Waitaha River. Follow Waitaha Rd down the TR side of the Waitaha River for 11km past various farms. The road terminates at a T-Junction with Anderson Rd. Turn right there and continue on to a dirt track heading West, towards the river. Park at the DOC sign at the end of this road.

Approach on foot

Approach to Kiwi Flat Hut: Follow the DOC track to Kiwi Flat Hut (3-4 hours). Note that some topo maps show old versions of the DOC track – the correct track directs trampers up a small tributary on TR at [-43.11627, 170.73021] and then above the bluffs.

Approach to the canyon: From Kiwi Flat Hut, follow Whirling Water upstream to its junction with Bartrum Creek. Walk up Bartrum Creek to the last waterfall of

the canyon where there is a flow gauge rock [-43.13891, 170.75478]. Leave the creek on a rock slab on the TL of the creek and follow the spur uphill. Eventually you will reach a high point where a small gully needs to be crossed at [-43.14267, 170.76460]. Continue up the spur until reaching the top of the spur at [-43.14547, 170.76783]. Descend steeply to reach Bartum Creek.

Rock

Bomber schist

Water

High flow, deep pools

Catchment

5 km²

Anchors

Double bolted, natural anchors.

Gear

2x 30m rope

Time

Kiwi Flat Hut to start of canyon	2 - 3h
Canyon descent	3 - 6h
Return to Kiwi Flat Hut	30m
Total	5h30 - 9h30

Flash flood danger

High risk, although there are quite a few escapes from water level, even if not from the canyon proper.

Escapes

Long, inescapable sections - but several escapes likely possible in between

Notes

First full descent (including the upper sections): Feb 2023. Leo Tregret, Sid Tinney, Charlotte Mason, Jason Bilsborow

First descent of the lower section: Jan 2023. Richard Bramley, Troy Watson, Justin Venable, Sandra Hyslop

Flow gauges

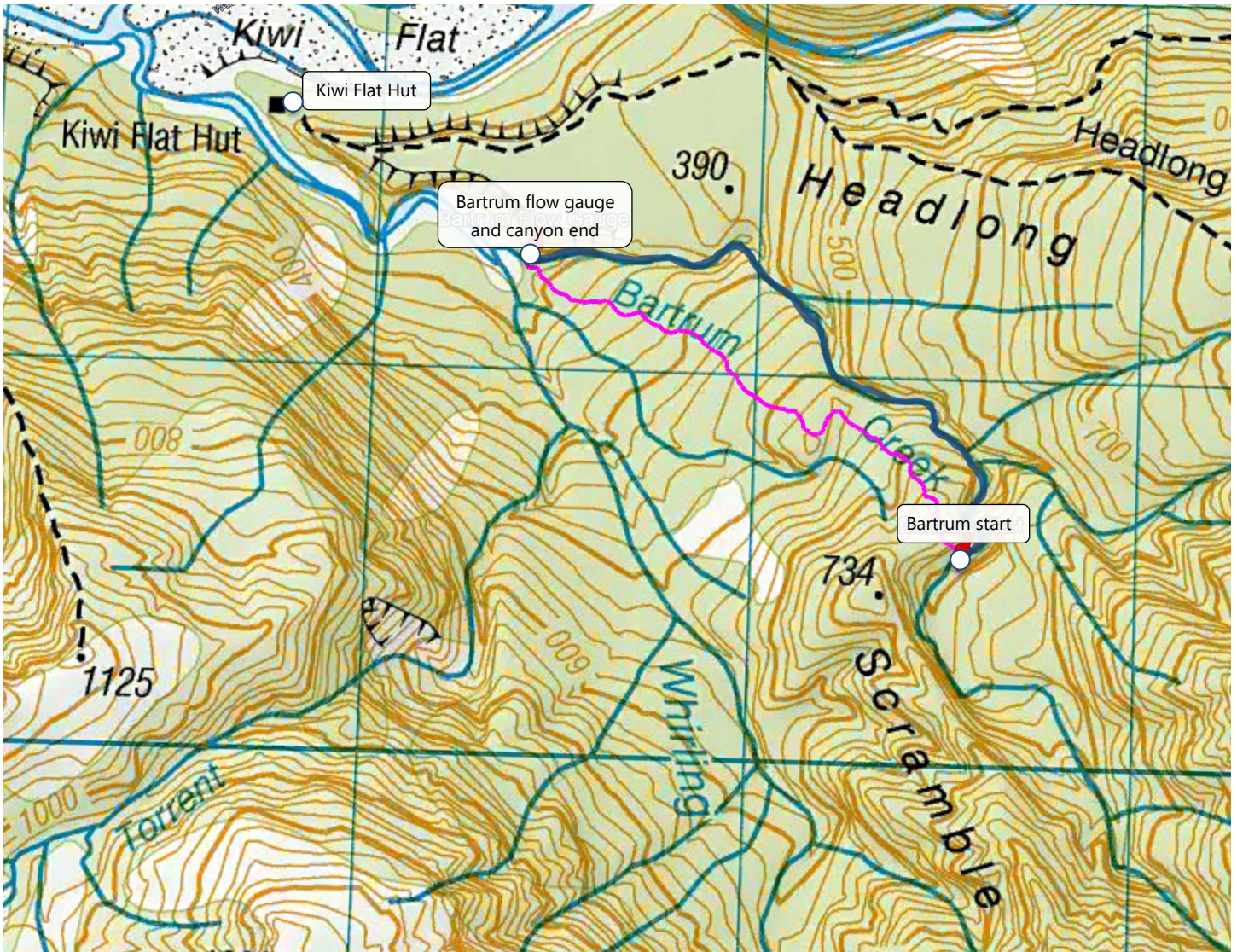
Medium flow



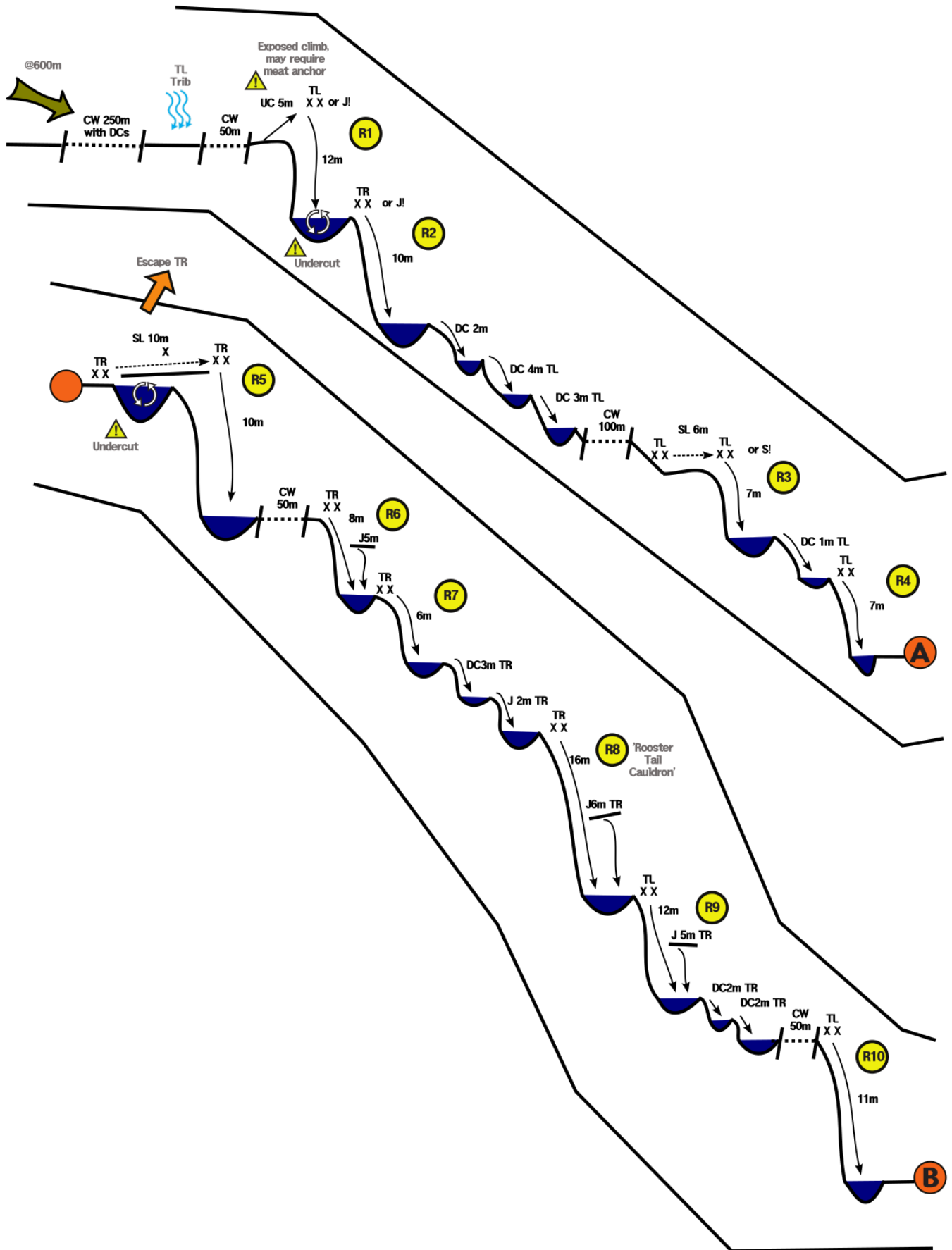
High flow

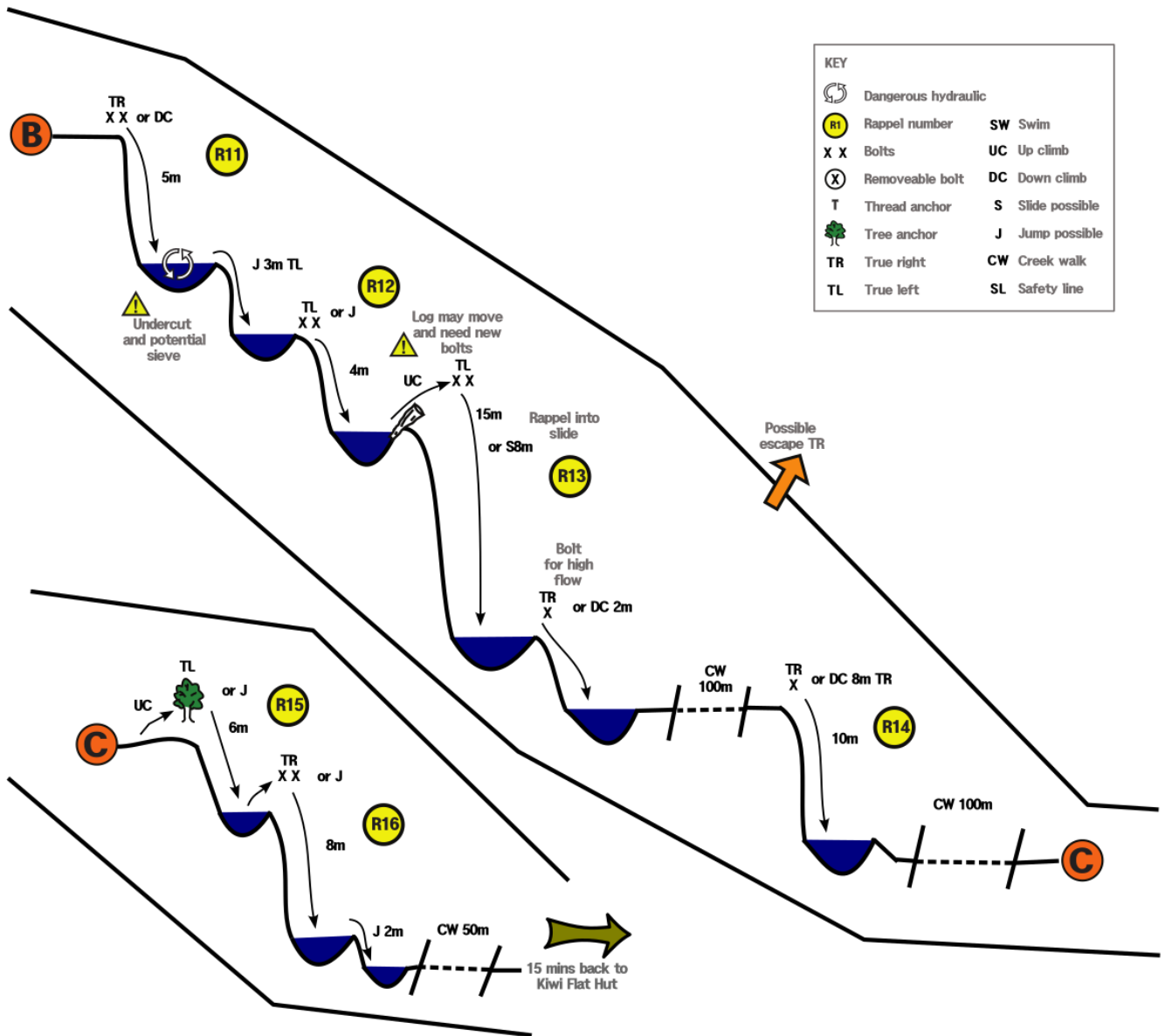


Map



Topo drawing









SCAMPER TORRENT

v4a3lll ★★

Location

Waitaha Valley, Westland

Overview

Scamper Torrent is a great introduction to canyoning in the Waitaha Valley, with three distinct sections of the canyon providing unique challenges.

Access from Kiwi Flat Hut is a relatively simple off-track affair. It requires a 15m abseil to cross the bottom of Scamper (at the confluence with Whirling Water) and leaving this rope in place for the end, or the party would be committed to the lower section of Whirling Water.

The first section of the canyon consists of beautiful, sunny amphitheaters and small jumps. At R4, the canyon changes from flowing and cutting perpendicularly through schist, to cutting parallel through the strata, resulting in a dramatic change in the character and intensity of the canyon. The narrowing walls concentrate the flow. Some technical down climbs are required in the canyon. In the future, some of these might best be bolted to become abseils.

R8 provides a reprieve, as the canyon suddenly opens out, with beautiful views across the remote valley from the longest abseil in the canyon. A final creek walking section provides a few more jumps before arriving back at the access rope.

Approach by car

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Approach on foot

Approach to Kiwi Flat Hut: Follow the DOC track to Kiwi Flat Hut (3-4 hours). Note that some topo maps show old versions of the DOC track – the correct track

directs trampers up a small tributary on TR at [-43.11627, 170.73021] and then above the bluffs.

Approach to bottom of canyon: From Kiwi Flat Hut, follow Whirling Water upstream for 30 mins. At the Whirling Water flow gauge rock, leave the river by scrambling up small rock spur on the TL bank, and begin the bush bash. Trending uphill, head South East through the untracked forest, following Whirling Water but staying safely clear of the increasingly steep riverbanks. The confluence of Whirling Water and Scamper Torrent, at [-43.14313, 170.75585], is the start of Whirling Water lower section. 50m upstream of the confluence, abseil 15m down into Scamper Torrent and climb back out the TR of Scamper Torrent via the wall opposite (“Scamper Pass”). Leave the access rope in place at Scamper Pass.

Approach to top of canyon: From Scamper Pass, gain the spur on the TR of Scamper Torrent and hike uphill. At 620m elevation, views of the open upper section of Scamper Torrent become visible. A dry, scrubby gully allows an easy scramble down to a large tree and the R1 tree anchor where this gully turns vertical, at [-43.14710, 170.75346]. It is recommended to gear up at this point, as the landing ledge in the canyon is small and slopes downwards.

Rock

Schist

Water

High flow, deep pools.

Catchment

6km²

Anchors

Minimal anchors, double bolted, natural anchors

Gear

2x 60m, anchor building equipment and materials

Time

Kiwi Flat Hut to start of canyon

1h30 - 2h

Canyon descent

3 - 4h

Return to Kiwi Flat Hut

1h

Total

5h30 - 7h

Escapes

Potential escapes throughout on TL but most likely difficult.

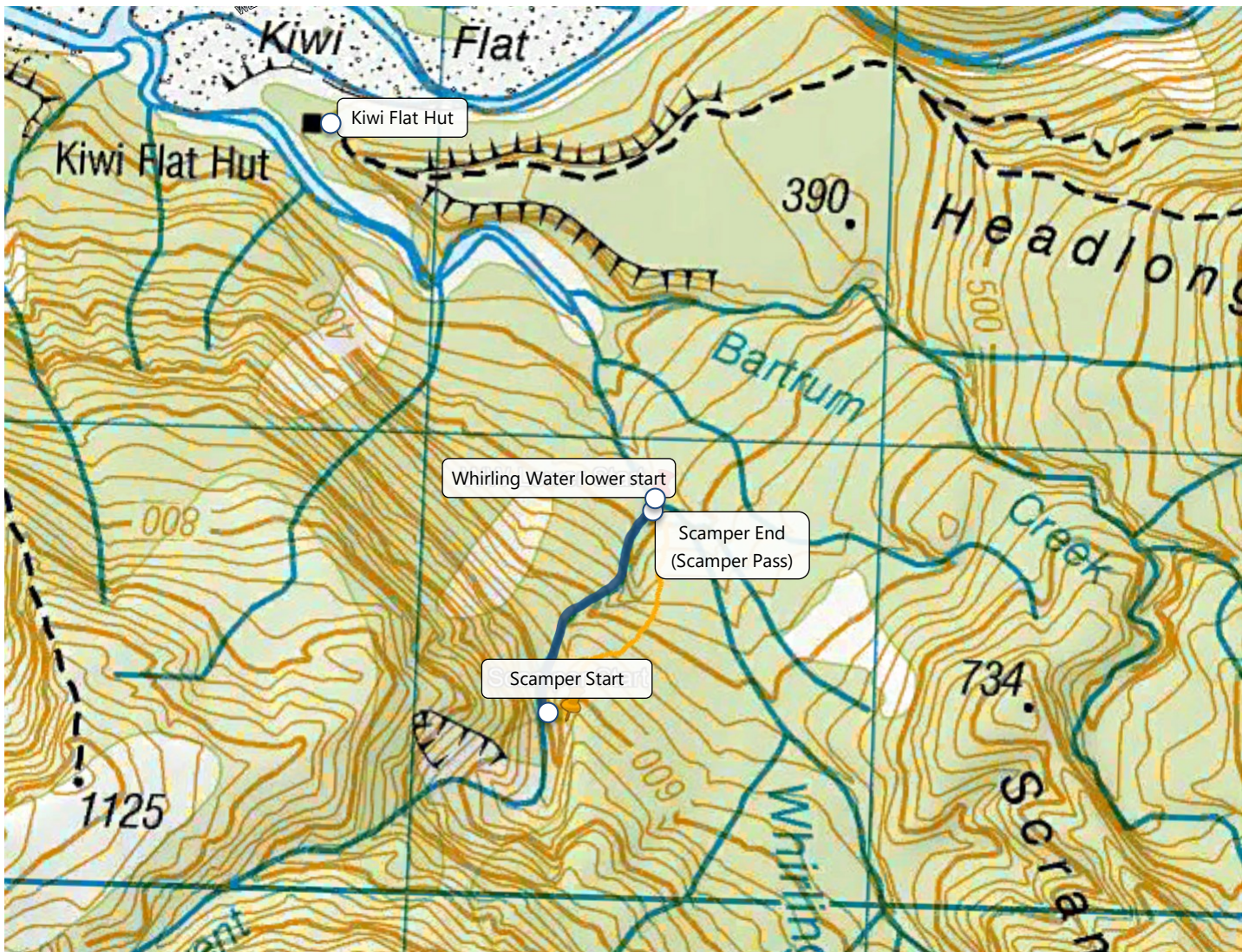
Notes

First descent: Feb 2023: Leo Tregret, Sid Tinney, Charlotte Mason, Jason Bilborow.

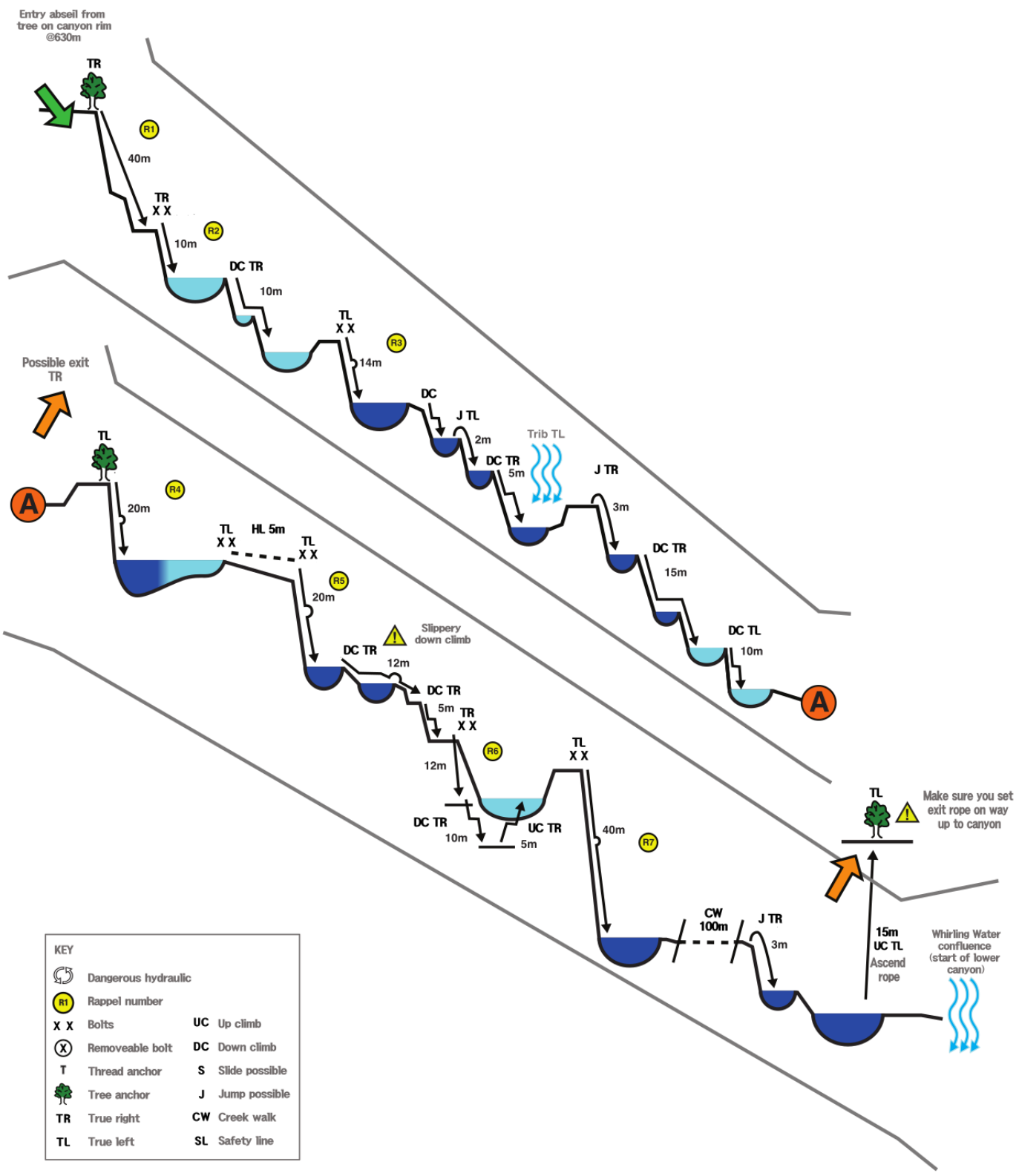
Flash flood danger

High risk

Map



Topo drawing



KEY	
	Dangerous hydraulic
	Rappel number
	Boits
	Removeable boit
	Thread anchor
	Tree anchor
	True right
	True left
	Up climb
	Down climb
	Slide possible
	Jump possible
	Creek walk
	Safety line



