Outdoor Access Commission
Herenga ā Nuku Aotearoa

Public access and pig hunting

Factsheet
October 2026

Public land access is a patchwork of land types, each created under different legislation, each managed by a different agency, and each with its own access rules. This factsheet explains what kind of public land you're standing on and what that means for hunters.

A note before you start: if land is publicly accessible it does not automatically mean hunting or carrying a weapon is permitted. Access rights and firearms/hunting rights are two different things, covered separately below. Always check current permit conditions with DOC or the local council before you head out.

Conservation land

This is the land most hunters are already familiar with — DOC estate, national parks, conservation parks, stewardship areas and more. The Conservation Act and National Parks Act both guarantee a right of public access, so you can generally walk onto conservation land freely.

Carrying a firearm and hunting are different from general access. You need a DOC hunting permit to hunt on conservation or DOC managed reserve land, and permit conditions (species, methods, closed areas) will vary from block to block. Some areas have tighter restrictions to protect sensitive ecosystems. You may also need a separate access permit to carry a firearm in some areas. Always check current permit requirements directly with DOC.

Reserves

There are different types of reserve, each created for a different purpose, and each with different access rules:

Reserve type	Public access
Recreation reserve	Full public right of access
Historic reserve	Access allowed, with some restrictions to protect the site
Scenic reserve	Access allowed, with some restrictions to protect the site
Nature reserve	Permit only
Scientific reserve	Access may be restricted to permit holders
Government purpose reserve	At the discretion of the managing authority
Local purpose reserve	Usually allowed, but the local authority or Minister can restrict it depending on what the purpose of the reserve is.

Reserve land may be managed by DOC or by another authority and will require a hunting permit from whoever manages the land. But hunting and firearms are also commonly restricted by local council bylaw, especially on reserves close to towns. Check with the managing authority before assuming a reserve is huntable, even if your map shows it as public land.

Unformed legal roads

These are often called paper roads. They are legal road corridors, usually about 20m wide, that are surveyed but not built. There are roughly 55,000km of them around the country. Because they are not formed, they're often indistinguishable from the surrounding land, and they will not show up on a standard topo map — you'll need the commission's maps to find them.

The public has a right to pass and repass along unformed legal roads without obstruction. Adjoining landholders cannot legally block a road, though many are unmarked, fenced, or run through farmland — a courtesy heads-up to the neighbouring landholder is often worthwhile.

For anyone carrying a firearm: you cannot hunt on an unformed legal road, but it's legal to carry an unloaded firearm along an unformed legal road for a lawful purpose (such as travelling to or from a hunting block), provided it's carried safely, no local bylaw restricts it, and you do not stray off the road onto private land. Carrying a loaded firearm on a road, or in a vehicle on a road, is an offence — see "Carrying a gun" below.

Rivers and lakes

There is no guaranteed access along water margins, but several types of public access run alongside many rivers and lakes.

Marginal strips. These are DOC-administered Crown conservation land, generally 20m wide, that sit alongside some coast, lakes over 8ha, and rivers over 3m wide. Public walking access is guaranteed; other access (dogs, bikes, firearms) varies by location. You need a DOC hunting access permit to carry a firearm along a marginal strip.

Esplanade strips. Easements over private land, usually 10–20m wide, are created when land is subdivided and agreed between the landowner and the local council. Usually, these move with shifting water boundaries so, over time, they are always beside the river. Access must be compatible with conservation values and can be restricted. Most esplanade strips allow walking access only — no bikes, dogs or firearms.

Esplanade reserves. Land vested in the local council alongside water, of any shape or size. Unlike esplanade strips, these are fixed and do not move with the water boundary. Public access is provided by default, but it can be prohibited — check locally.

Riverbed access. Depends on what the river adjoins:

- If it borders legal road, esplanade reserve, reserve land or DOC conservation land, you can generally access the riverbed up to the river's midpoint.
- If the river is navigable (able to be travelled by boat or barge), the riverbed itself is usually Crown-owned and accessible, aside from a few exceptions such as the Whanganui River.
- If an unnavigable river borders private land, that half of the riverbed is also usually private.

Public access easements (forestry)

Public access easements run through Crown forestry licence land, usually linking a public road to DOC conservation land. They typically permit foot, bike, motorcycle or light-vehicle access, though this varies forest to forest. They can be closed at night, for safety, or to protect trees, buildings or equipment. If the underlying land later transfers to an iwi, the public access rights usually continue. Firearms access varies — check with the forestry manager, licensee, or landowner before you go. Public access easements are not reliably shown on every map, and closures are not always signposted online. Many forestry companies operate permit systems to allow hunting access, so check the forestry companies' websites.

Private land

There is no right of access on private land, unless the landholder agrees in advance.

Even where public access exists on an unformed road or marginal strip, the adjoining landholder may not know their neighbouring land has a public access right running through it and may assume you're trespassing. It's far easier to contact them in advance than to have a dispute in the field — particularly if you have dogs or a firearm on land that looks indistinguishable from their property.

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Carrying a gun

Carrying and using firearms are governed by the Arms Act 1983. The key issues are reasonableness and safety. A few essentials for hunters:

- **A hunting permit is separate from land access.** Even where you have a legal right to be on the land, you generally need a hunting permit to hunt on conservation land, reserve land, or in a regional forest park. Hunting without a permit is illegal.
- **Not every type of public land allows a firearm.** The type of access matters, not just whether the land is public. Esplanade strips are usually walking-only. Marginal strips need a DOC permit to carry a firearm. Roads allow you to carry an unloaded firearm for a lawful purpose. Check the specific access type before you assume you can carry.
- **On roads (formed or unformed):** you can carry an unloaded firearm for a lawful purpose, carried safely, provided no local bylaw restricts it, and you stay on the road. A loaded firearm in a vehicle, or in any public place, is an offence.
- **There's no legal right to cross private land**: including to reach public land beyond it for hunting or fishing, even if the public land is accessible.
- **A firearms offence, or hunting without a permit or permission, is a serious offence,** separate from the question of whether the underlying land has public access.

For full details, see the Outdoor Access Code and the Firearms Safety Authority Te Tari Pūreke's Arms Code.

Maps and apps

herengaanuku.govt.nz/maps

Pocket Maps is the commission's free app (iOS and Android) built for knowing your public access rights. It works offline, so it's useful out of cell coverage, and it shows:

- **public and private land boundaries**, including unformed legal roads and public access areas
- **a hunting and fishing layer**, hydro parcels, tracks and trails
- **your GPS position**, with the ability to draw and measure routes
- **up-to-date** DOC, council and LINZ data

Plan My Walk's custom track editor (planmywalk.nz) is worth pairing with our access maps for trip safety, even off marked tracks. It lets you build a custom route and layer in track alerts and closures, weather forecasts, a customisable gear list, and a trip planner.

Our maps show where publicly accessible land is located. If you're unsure, the commission's regional field advisors can help you determine which public access rights apply to a specific block.

Additional resources for pig hunters

- **New Zealand Game Animal Council's Better Hunting guide** (betterhunting.nz)
- **The New Zealand Pig Hunting Association's guide** for landowners partnering with responsible hunters (nzpighunting.org.nz/projects)

The bottom line

LAND TYPE	GENERAL PUBLIC ACCESS	FIREARM/HUNTING NOTES
Conservation land	Guaranteed by law	DOC hunting permit required
Reserves	Depends on reserve type	DOC permit + council bylaws may restrict firearms
Unformed legal roads	Right to pass and repass	Unloaded firearm for lawful purpose only
Marginal strips	Walking guaranteed	DOC permit is needed to carry a firearm
Esplanade strips	Usually walking only	Firearms usually not permitted
Esplanade reserves	Usually allowed, can be restricted	Check locally
Public access easements (forestry)	Varies by forest	Check with the forestry manager/licensee
Other public land	Set by the specific legislation/ agreement	Conditions in that legislation/agreement

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