

# WALKING TECHNIQUES

The vast majority of us do not have the luxury of living, working or studying outside an urban environment. We're so used to walking on flat terrain (footpaths, corridors, roads, etc.) that when we walk through the bush we have to actually consciously think how to do it. It's pretty embarrassing and painful to crash and burn on a flat piece of open firetrail but it does happen.

## FLAT TERRAIN WALKING

(Trip on the hike? Catastrophic!)

The kilometres just seem to disappear on flat ground. You tend to switch off and start contemplating life. The navigation is neglected and conversations start to involve more than two people. However, complacency can lead to accidents. These tips will help to minimise mishaps.

- ➔ Always lift your feet. You're not walking on a concrete footpath or a bitumen road. It's far easier to lift your feet than to lift your entire body after a fall.
- ➔ Don't step on anything you can step over. Don't step over anything you can step around.
- ➔ Test any rock or log to make sure it won't slip before committing your weight to it.
- ➔ Use a trekking pole or hiking staff on a flat track to give you more stability.
- ➔ Be particularly wary of bridges, puncheons (those short stumpy thingies over swamps), walkways and steps. Wood can get very slick in the rain or when there is a frost.
- ➔ Step carefully on wet leaves, mossy rocks or a wet sloping ground. Shorten your stride and place your boot securely on the surface before taking the next step.
- ➔ When travelling in scrub avoid branches lashing back from the person in front by keeping well back but still in sight. In dense scrub, keep very close to avoid losing each other and catch the spring back branches.

## UPHILL WALKING

(Trig the goal? Classic!)

The best views are definitely at the top of the furthest mountain. And that mountain is only accessible by putting one of your feet slightly higher than the other over and over again. Getting there can either be a mild workout or a daunting ascent. Try these tips and soon you'll be able to enter in your track notes "... without oxygen!"

- Focus on consistent, steady movement. It's not a race. There's nothing like reaching the top of a mountain but if you have to lie there for twenty minutes while you recover, it may lose some charm.
- As the early European explorers discovered, you follow spurs up and creeks down. Avoid gullies and stay on the ridgelines.
- Look for natural "steps" made of rock and walk with your heels down as much as possible. This takes the strain off your calves.
- Stop now and then and watch the view unfold as you ascend. This is not a rest. It's part of the experience to enjoy your environment changing around you.
- Use a trekking pole or hiking staff to help "pull" you up.
- Learn the "rest step." On a really steep track, the rest step can keep you moving steadily and decrease the amount of rests you'll need to have. Here's how:
  - Start by putting all your weight on the downhill leg that you keep straight. Lock your knee to transfer the weight from your muscles to your bones. Pause momentarily on the downhill leg. This gives it a momentary rest. Step up, placing all of your weight on the other leg, which then becomes the downhill leg. Pause again, giving your other leg the same chance to rest. Slightly increase or decrease the length of the rest depending on how you feel.

## DOWNHILL WALKING

(Wrap the knee in plastic)

Walking uphill is hard work. However, you're not likely to hurt yourself doing it. Downhill is different. Your knees and ankles take the impact of your body plus your pack and you can injure yourself very easily. Here are a few ways to lessen the impact.

- Resist the temptation to break into a gallop. The only things that will slow you down are friction caused by your body's contact with the ground or an unyielding eucalypt.
- On downhill legs, your feet will slip about a bit inside your boots. This increases the possibility of blisters. Before beginning a descent, tighten up your laces around your ankles. This will keep the weight off your toes. Put some duct tape or Band-Aids on any "hotspots" you may have on your feet.
- Take a break now and then and admire the view while you still have one. Treat any new hotspots on your feet as soon as you feel them.
- Use a hiking staff or trekking pole to support your descent. This will lessen the impact on your knees and ankles. Bushwalkers with knee problems should consider having one in each hand.
- Take it slowly. Make sure each foot lands squarely before putting your weight onto it. Don't lock your leg. Flex your knee to allow your leg muscles to absorb the weight of each step.
- On rough or rocky tracks, plan a route that will give you the shortest practical steps. It may take longer to reach the bottom but time saved rushing down will be lost in recuperation later.

## RIVER CROSSINGS

(Dip in the creek? Ecstatic!)

Stream crossings can be gangs of fun. Even shallow streams. Here are some precautions you can take to ease the crossing and protect yourself from accidents.

- ≈ Don't be afraid to decide you're not going to cross.
- ≈ Waterproof your pack and your gear as much as possible. Check your route on your map and pack everything in plastic bags before you leave home.
- ≈ Be wary of crossing at the narrowest point. It is often the most dangerous because the current is strongest there. A wider, shallow crossing is safer.
- ≈ If you are thinking about crossing a river near the end of a long day, consider waiting until morning. Rivers tend to drop slightly over night due to the cool. Setting up camp with the possibility of wet gear is not fun. It's better to get wet during the day when the sun and your own movement can help dry you out.
- ≈ Long pants have more drag on you than shorts. Cross in shorts or even in your underwear. Once across, you can warm up by dressing in your dry clothes.
- ≈ Always wear something on your feet when crossing creeks, streams or estuaries. Wear your boots or your camp shoes. Skinning your ankles on a rock makes it hard to put your boots back on. Water shoes are good. Give them some consideration if you're coast walking or likely to encounter more than one river.
- ≈ Release your hip belt and sternum strap when fording. You can easily discard your pack if you lose your footing or are knocked over. It's easier to recover your pack and gear downstream than your life.
- ≈ When crossing rapids on your own, face upstream and move sideways like a crab. Hold a hiking staff or trekking pole in front of you to keep three points of contact with the riverbed. Move only one point of contact at a time.
- ≈ When crossing rapids in a group, face across the stream, link arms and move forward in a line. The strongest person should be on the upstream side of the line so they can break the current for the rest. Look after your smaller party members by putting them in the middle of the line.