

Falling from with grace.

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A recent email conversation with Margaret Metcalfe from DOC, highlighted *slips, trips and falls*, as the most frequent incident reported by volunteers. This is understandable because pretty much everything we do (e.g. track clearance and pest control) involves walking along rough tracks in native bush and even without rain it can still be very slippery under foot.

This got me thinking about how we can minimise the occurrence of slips, trips and falls and how we can reduce the risk of injury when they invariably happen.

Our safety briefings normally cover the importance of sturdy footwear with good tread and ankle protection. Some vollies resort to using mini-crampons (footwear traction cleats) but generally a good pair of tramping boots are ideal. We usually remind people "*It's not a race! Take your time and take care out there!*"

At Kaharoa we have added ropes, to help our crew negotiate some gnarly sections of track. DOC was initially reluctant to allow us to do this, as they probably jumped to the conclusion that if ropes were necessary we should not be in those areas. This is fair enough, and I suggest, if a fall is likely to result in a serious injury we should find a new route. However, in most situations where we have installed ropes, it's to help our vollies to get up a hill without the old 3 steps forward 2 steps backwards situation.

Apart from the things mentioned above there is not much more we can do to reduce the "**Likelihood**" of slips, trips and falls. The other important factor, in the Risk Management equation, is the "**Consequence**" of taking a spill in the bush.

When carrying out track clearance, we always stress the importance of snipping saplings and supplejack off at ground level so you don't leave a trip hazard or even worse a sharpened stake which could cause a serious puncture wound should someone fall on it. We must always enforce this standard.

By chance, while browsing through an August 2018 copy of Wilderness, I spotted a short article by Megan Sety titled "**How to fall over (and not get injured)**". Megan points out that most knee and ankle injuries occur when the body moves in the opposite direction to the joint. I can confirm the one knee injury I suffered over 40 years of getting around in the bush, was when my right foot and body took off downhill while my left foot stayed put, briefly ending up by my left ear....

The suggestion is, to avoid injury, don't resist the momentum. Let your body follow your knee or foot. Our muscles will go into action to help keep us upright and regain balance. Falling with rigid muscles carries a greater risk of injury, through pulling or straining, so allow your body to *melt* or *crumble* to the ground.

Hand, wrist, elbow and shoulder injuries can happen when we put a hand down to break our fall. Remember it is not the fall that hurts but the sudden stop at the bottom! When you fall try to kneel, sit down, or fall onto your pack. If you put your hand out, try to slow the impact of the fall, rather than stopping it. With any luck, it's just your ego that will be bruised.

Finally remember, despite all the precautions, accidents happen. Particularly when working alone, make sure someone knows where you are, when you are expected out of the bush, and what to do if you don't show up. There's some pretty cool gadgets available these days (e.g. locator beacons) and cell phone coverage is getting better all the time...but these devices can only be used if you are conscious.

It's ok to hope for the best, provided you plan for the worst!

Take care out there!