

## Clearing coastal heath – A new approach

A substantial length of the Track on the south coast passes through dense, highly diverse coastal heath. Track maintenance in this area is arguably the most labour intensive in order to keep the trail adequately clear of regrowth; but potential volunteers are less common locally and it is a long way from the main source of regular labour in Perth. Information on keeping the trail clear in this vegetation type was touched on in a previous edition of Maintenance Matters.

The extremely high rainfall of last year has promoted plant growth substantially. To cope, local volunteers in Albany District have been refining techniques for clearing regrowth, aided by a powerful new tool...



Typical Track condition before clearing...

Mike and Sue G. took on the section on the cliffs below the Sandpatch wind turbines, just over two years ago. For a while they did their best with the standard tools of secateurs, loppers and a battery-powered reciprocating saw, but the difference made for work put in was demoralising. Close to giving up, they were saved by the initiative of local Support Volunteer, Wes Fokkema.

Wes researched and recommended a powerful, commercial-grade Husqvarna hedge trimmer. It is well balanced, making it easy to use despite its weight, and powerful. One useful feature is the ability to alter the angle of the blade relative to the body of the unit. A trimmer was purchased by the Foundation for trialling in Albany District and has already proven very useful on several overgrown sections.

As avid gardeners, Mike and Sue approached their task with a sense of the landscape context of vegetation – gullies, slopes and ridges all vary in growth habit. The dense regrowth is always in the gullies; with Peppermints (*Agonis flexuosa*) the most vigorous and persistent and Coastal Woollybush (*Adenanthos sericeus*) also dominant. Where the Track crosses slopes, the north-facing edge (the south side) of the trail corridor will always regrow more vigorously. Meanwhile, on the open and exposed ridges the vegetation stays low. The use of hand tools to trim this regrowth is unergonomic and can risk grit getting into the equipment, so it is better handled with a brushcutter.

Their suggested technique – only possible with the assistance of the hedge trimmer – is:

- Aim to remove anything thick, heavy or woody for 1m either side of the tread. It is more labour intensive than tip pruning, where only the end of branches is removed, the next prune needs to be a bit further out and must deal with the inevitable increase in shoot density. However, it will hopefully mean future trimming is much easier. Sue says it's a lot like painting the Harbour Bridge!
- Use the trimmer to remove the density of the shrub, allowing visualisation of the thicker inner branches
- Then use the loppers (ratcheted models, used with the correct action, are the most powerful) or reciprocating saw to cut these back to the trunk.
- Light trimmings are left on the trail for stabilisation; woody trimmings are placed off the trail with cut ends facing away from the walker where possible.
- Also clear a short distance beyond the end of water bars to allow for future maintenance work





The hedge trimmer in action



Ratcheted loppers are useful



Mike delves into a Woollybush

There are several immediate advantages to this method:

- The avoidance of small cut ends very close to walkers
- “Pruning with purpose” – the neat finish is more attractive, especially when covered with light regrowth. Spending the time on bigger plants like the Woollybush shapes them for future shade. They are already seeing small plants coming through on the north facing verge which is receiving much more light than previously – they hope to promote the growth of orchids and other small flowering plants.
- The sunlit verge allows snakes to bask off the tread itself and with much better visibility!



...and after the job is done!

Progressing this way, they say they cover about 100m in a 4-6 hour session – once they have flattened both batteries they are ready to go home! As well as the hedge trimmer they take secateurs, lopper and reciprocating saw.

This clearing method will be evaluated as the stretches already cut regrow over the next year or two. We are hoping the technique pays off in overall efficiency, but time will tell!

We are also keen to trial the hedge trimmer on sword grass to see if it will be useful in that context. Acquisition of more such tools for volunteer use is under discussion.

Do you have a tip which you have worked out over time, like Mike and Sue? Let us know...