

Adopt a Track Bellthorpe – Saturday 4 July 2015

My second outing with the club started at CJ's Bakery in Woodford just before 8am on Saturday. Having never experienced an 'adopt a track' event before, I brought along a few hand saws, gloves and safety glasses - not really knowing what to expect.

While waiting for the Rangers to arrive, Grizzly and Vince were keen to talk about their imminent trip to the cape and their last minute preparations prior to their departure the following Sunday. After a conversation on tyres and storage drawers, a coffee and something to eat, Colin arrived. Vince confirmed that due to work commitments from others of those listed on the trip sheet, there would be a total of four of us from the club in addition to two Rangers.

Rangers Mark and Wayne arrived at around 9am and the paperwork began. We all needed to complete an official volunteer's form and then once the club trip sheet was completed Mark explained his intentions for the day which sounded like a rather ambitious and lengthy list of chores.

We left Woodford on the D'Aguilar Highway and proceeded to the Bellthorpe State Forest. Heading into a restricted area of the forest, our first stop was around 10am at a creek crossing on Stony Creek. It was a cemented crossing laid over concrete pipes, however due to recent rainfalls the inlets had become partially blocked and therefore water was building up on the upstream side. We spent some time clearing the pipe inlet of debris and also dug out the creek bed in close proximity, in an attempt to keep the creek flowing freely.

There were also some fallen trees laying in the creek bed which were dragged out by using straps and the Ranger's Landcruiser. Wayne then sectioned these with his chain saw and we helped to scatter the pieces onto the sides of the track.

Moving on from the first crossing it was obvious that the tracks weren't open to regular traffic. Grass was high in the centre of the tracks and in a lot of places it was even encroaching onto the tracks themselves. Mark later told us that there had been a lot of damaging rain over the past twelve months and most of the creek crossings had been impacted significantly – some mostly destroyed.

The next few stops were for the purpose of checking a series of drain heads along a higher section of track overlooking the creek below. The drains were basically a header which consisted of rocks at the high side leading into a pipe section buried under the track with an outlet on the low side. The purpose of these were to limit washouts and the general erosion of the tracks. Marks' plan was to return to these later with a team for the purposes of cleaning out the debris, removing some of the rocks which had fallen into the headers and locate the drain pipe ends to ensure that they would work effectively.

For now it was time to move onto the main job for the day – the culvert. Stony creek has about ten culverts which provide the ability for vehicles to easily cross the creek as well as limiting damage to the creek beds. Arriving at the site, we each got out of our vehicles, and traipsing through the mud arrived at a clearing and got an understanding of the damage rather quickly.

Mother Nature had clearly flexed her muscles during the recent downpours. We were looking at what was originally a triple length, double pipe culvert – however, two of the concrete drain pipes and one double apron had been washed several meters downstream.

Mark had decided that instead of reassembling the triple length culvert, we would leave it as a double length instead – as we really didn't have the time to gather enough materials to fill it adequately by hand. This meant that "all we had to do" was relocate the apron washed downstream onto the two pipes that were still in situ. Mark had planned to reclaim the two spare pipes for another project.

It looked like an impossible task, however Griz and Vince had done this sort of thing before – though they admitted that the last time it had been a single culvert. Mark and Wayne had brought with them lengths of Brooker rod which were to be used to reinforce the union of the concrete components and hopefully provide a more resistant front to flooding in the future.

So, it was time to start work. The first job was to relocate as many of the rocks that had been washed downstream back up stream as possible. Some we could manage by throwing them into position, others we could carry and place them - others of a large size dictated the need to use a stretcher and either employ two or four of us to convey them back up onto the culvert and into position. Now I

understood how the pyramids were built!

With this job pretty much complete, the next task was to clear the downstream ends of the concrete drain pipes to facilitate the mating of the apron. Other chores which could be done in parallel were the digging of a shallow trench either side of the pipes to allow the Brooker rod to connect both aprons, and the drilling of the holes in the aprons through which the rods would brace the ends together.

To prepare for winching, vehicles were relocated – but first – lunch! The morning had been a hard slog, especially for those of us who inhabit the confines of an office during the week. Speaking for myself - I was already knackered, but the challenge of putting right what nature had wronged was reward enough to push us all to our physical limits.

During lunch Mark told our group of the funding issues that his department has to deal with and the cost of adequately maintaining the parks. He went on to tell us about the damage that rain and fire inflicted and that the offer of help from clubs and volunteers is always appreciated. He told us about some of the tracks and clearings that we would find interesting, as well as handing over some of the park maps to Vince (as well as mentioning a key.....).

After lunch, Mark asked for a volunteer to accompany Wayne back to the various drain heads for the purposes of clearing them, as well as to return to the culvert with as many rocks as possible as fill. I was the obvious candidate, as Vince and Griz were needed to man their winch equipped vehicles, and Colin had to remain behind to supervise and coordinate the work of the crew. Unfortunately this meant that I would miss the winching....

Wayne and I left the others in the Rangers Landcruiser and headed back down the track the way we had come. We parked close to each of drain heads in turn and began the laborious task of digging out rocks and debris – then transferring as many rocks as we could recover onto the flatbed tray of the truck. We could hear a fair amount of commotion at times in the background and assumed that the winching was well under way. Once we had finished and had a full load of rocks on-board we returned to the culvert.

The rest of the team had managed to position the apron and were now attempting to get the pipes correctly located so that the apron could be seated into its final position. However this was proving an issue and even with the Brooker rod in place and being used to effectively wind the aprons in together by force, the repositioned apron wouldn't seat properly against the pipes.

Crowbars were employed to chip away the pipe edges and to lever the apron into place, and shovels were used at various points to clear more earth and rock away from the corners and underneath – but still to no avail. Even using our combined weight we couldn't get the apron to seat squarely – including the idea of jumping up and down in unison (and in a rather comical and semi-coordinated effort).

Paul was full of energy still and started prodding at the sides and underneath the apron. It was then that he realised that there were several large rocks stopping our progress. We all took turns in pairs at plunging the shovels under the apron in an attempt to get the required clearance. This is when things took a turn for the worse and Grizzly's shovel became the first casualty of the day. His little mate was killed in the line of duty, his head separating from his shoulders without a whimper nor complaint. However the rest of us needed to go on, so his remains were cast aside and another shovel took his place on the front line.

Finally everyone was convinced that that we were on a winner. After a lot more digging, picking, swearing, huffing and puffing (and the sharing of ideas and frustrations) in addition to the tightening of the nuts on the Brooker rod - finally it all came together. We then used the rocks collected from the back of the Landcruiser as fill, as well as harvesting more rocks from the creek bed.

Just before 3:30 we called it a day – but not before a few group photos were taken. It was then off for a quick drive with the Rangers and then onto the camp site for the night.

A very rewarding day and something that I look forward to participating in again. If you do enough adopt a tracks - no gym membership is required, you get out into the wonderful outdoors, meet the people who maintain our treasured parks and reserves – but mainly you get to give something back to our great outdoors.

David Johnston

