

Blazes on Walking Trails



In 2008 the Gloucester Land Trust recognized that for the public to be more comfortable exploring our miles of trails on over 2,000 acres of forests we needed to create accurate trail maps and mark the trails with an easy to understand system of trail blazes. Trail blazes, also known as confidence or reassurance markers, are a time proven system of denoting the route of a trail. They can take the form of rock piles known as cairns which are used above the tree lines in the White Mountain National Forest and open plains, plastic stakes and 4"x4" posts that look like mile markers which are used to denote trails crossing fields and grasslands, and the most common of all, a simple painted mark on a tree.



The most well known trail blaze is the 2 1/4" x 6" white rectangle that since the 1950's has marked the route of the 2,200 mile long Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine. The Appalachian Mountain Club has published a handbook, now in its fourth edition, on creating and maintaining trails. The aptly titled AMC's Complete Guide to Trail Building and Maintenance is widely recognized as the bible on the subject.

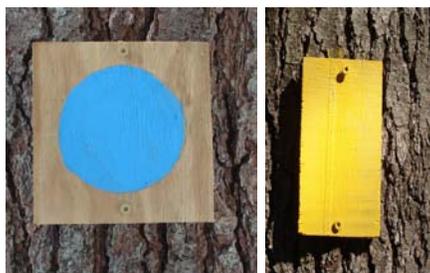
Unlike the linear Appalachian Trail, the Gloucester Land Trust properties have numerous trails that run for a mile or less and end at an intersection with another trail. To use one standard blaze to denote all trails would cause confusion to the public, thus a system was devised that each trail would have a unique blaze color and geometric shape combination. Our system is comprised of White, Yellow, Red, Blue, Orange, and Purple blazes painted in a rectangular, triangle, or dot shape. We planned the blaze system so that two trails with the same color never intersect. For example, a red dot trail never intersects with a red rectangle or red triangle trail.

Following the example of the Appalachian Trail, our rectangles are 2 1/4" x 6", the approximate size of a dollar bill, and our dots are approx 4" diameter, and triangles approx 3 1/2" wide and 3 1/2" tall. Thus for consistency our blazes have approximately the same square inch size of paint coverage.



The choice of paint is important. Latex is easy to use but it simply does not last that long in the woods. Spray paint is expensive and often does not yield the sharply defined blaze. Brush-on oil based paint gives the best and longest lasting result. We recommend the use of Nelson brush type boundary mark paint which is available in gallon cans for approximately \$30 (Nelsonpaint.com). This paint is available in White, Yellow, Red, Blue, Orange, Purple, and Green colors. We suggest not using green paint because it blends into the surroundings and may be difficult to see.

Preparation of the painting surface is also important. The tree bark ought to be dry with no rain forecasted for a day. If the bark is loose or covered with moss or lichen it should be removed with a wire brush or wood scraper. Scrapers are approx \$15 at hardware stores, paint stores, and home centers.



Sometimes the tree bark is too deeply fissured to enable the painting of a nicely formed rectangle, dot, triangle or other symbol. In those cases we have screwed small pieces of pressure treated plywood to the tree, and painted the symbol to the board. The boards are not screwed tightly to the tree. This is to allow room for the tree to grow and not pop out or split the board. By the time the tree has grown and used up the slack it probably will be time to repaint the blaze anyway. A well painted blaze will last at least five years, although we freshen up our blazes about every three years.

Blazes should be placed slightly above eye level. Place them so they can be easily seen from a distance, and are not hidden behind branches or foliage. When standing at one tree marked with a blaze you ought to be able to look down the trail and see the next blaze. Depending upon the terrain, curvature of the trail, and forest density, this distance may be as short as 30 feet away. It does not matter which side of the trail the blaze is placed.

Avoid placing blazes on both sides of the same tree. For example, if the trail runs north to south, do not paint a blaze on the north side and south side of the same tree. The reason is that if the tree should fall for whatever reason you have in essence lost two blazes, but in practice this is not always possible. Generally if the blazes are well placed apart, when you walk past a blazed tree and are halfway to the next blazed tree, if you stop and turn around you should see a blazed tree facing the opposite direction not far from you.

The blazes are painted free-hand. In other words, a stencil or template is not used to draw a pattern on the tree which is then filled in with paint. Free hand painting takes a little practice but by the fourth tree blaze you should have it mastered. We do carry with us a small 6” ruler as a guide to check our work and get us ‘calibrated’ for the day of trail blazing.



Some trail groups use double blazes to denote as a warning to stop and look as the trail may have come to an end or the route beyond is no longer well defined or blazed. This convention is not understood by the general public and may serve to confuse rather than illuminate.

Likewise some groups use offset double blazes to denote the trail is making a sharp turn. The top blaze being slightly offset in the direction of the turn. Again, this convention may not intuitive to the public.

Although some groups may frown upon the practice, the GLT uses arrows with blazes to denote a sharp turn of a trail. This is particularly

important when a trail is near a property boundary and we want to keep hikers from wandering off the trail and onto private property.



When a trail is relocated all the obsolete blazes on the abandoned trail must be obliterated. To do this the most effective method is to use a wire brush or wood scraper to remove the old paint and/or paint over the obsolete blazes with a flat gray or brown oil based paint. It is not enough to obliterate only the blazes closest to the new section of trail because some users may see the old blazes in the distance and stray onto the old route.

The cost of paint and tools used to blaze a trail is an expense eligible for funding through DEM’s RI Trail Advisory Council small grant program. Up to 80% of the cost can be reimbursed, and the 20% match can be the value of volunteer time used to blaze the trails, which as of this writing is \$18.18 per hour. The basic procedure is that a group applies for a grant, and once they receive written approval and instructions from DEM, then they can purchase the supplies. Expenses incurred prior to receiving DEM grant approval are not eligible for reimbursement.

Roy Najecki
Gloucester Land Trust
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