

# ESSENTIAL MAINTENANCE MODULE

## MARKING THE TRAIL



Jonathan Riley

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

Able to follow standards for blazing A.T. and side trails

Familiarity of the use and standards for posts and cairns to mark the Trail

Iconic to the Appalachian Trail, hikers follow white blazes from Maine to Georgia.

On the A.T. a blaze is a crisp white rectangle painted onto trees, primarily. Blazing refers both to the collection of blazes and the act of painting them.

Proper markings help make for an enjoyable experience. Too many blazes blight the primitive nature of the Trail, while too few blazes lead to lost hikers.

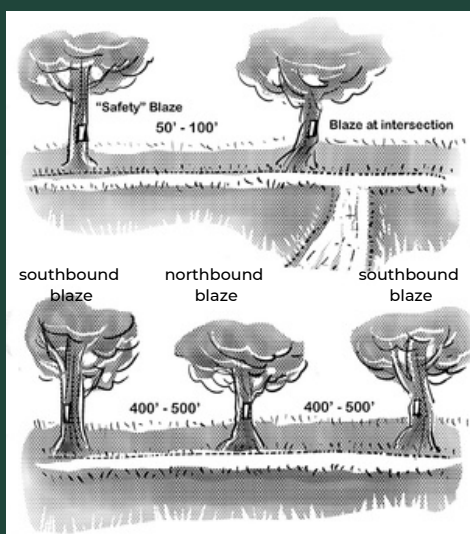
### BLAZING PLACEMENT AND FREQUENCY

Blazes should be uniform, tidy, and easy to see. Avoid over-blazing. However, areas that could be confusing should be sufficiently blazed to prevent hikers from losing their way.

#### Guidelines for Blazing:

- White painted blazes 2-inches wide by 6-inches tall should be placed at roughly eye height, generally on the right side of the Trail, optimizing the sightline from down the path.
- Blazes should be on an adequate diameter tree (6 inches or more at eye height) to ensure the blaze is visible against it; blazing of rocks is discouraged.
- Stagger northbound and southbound blazes.
- Blaze at regular intervals. If the Trail is obvious, blazing at 5-minute intervals (800-1,000') is standard.
- No more than one blaze is visible at any point in time, except at junctions so as to reassure hikers they have taken the right direction.
- Judge visibility during leaf-off season. Maintain blaze sightlines during the growing season by removing interfering vegetation and branches.
- Never add new blazes without considerable thought, however blazes lost due to blazed trees falling over may need replacement.
- Blazes are rectangles, not arrows, nor do they offer directional (n/s) instruction.
- At junctions, along roads, through open areas, more blazing may be required to limit confusion and lost hikers; a reassurance blaze might follow after a blaze at an intersection 50- to 100-feet further down the trail and be visible from the intersection.

### Blazing Standards



Upper Image: A.T. runs left to right. Due to the intersecting trail from the side, an additional reassurance blaze at the junction helps hikers identify the A.T.



A dollar is a close approximation to the size of a blaze.



### FOUNDATIONS OF BLAZING

Sharp corners and clean edges make blazes stand out.

Over-blazing diminishes the character of the Trail.

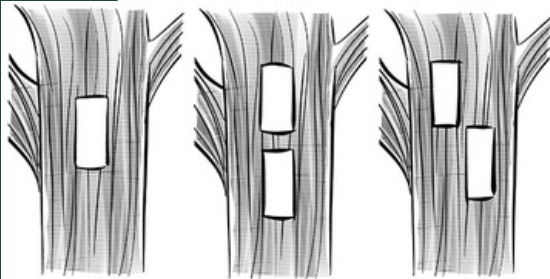
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### MORE ON BLAZING



#### In-line and Offset Double Blazes

Double blazes are used to alert hikers to changes in direction, confusing intersections, etc. They are not intended for use with switchbacks.

In-line and offset double blazing are set two inches apart. For offset double blazes, the upper offset blaze indicates the direction of change. They should be used sparingly since when used too frequently they become meaningless. Know and follow your organization's guidance for in-line or offset double blazes.



#### Blazing Side Trails

Side trails to the A.T. are painted sky blue. Select a sky blue that contrasts from dark bark, avoids being too close to white, or too bright that it diminishes the character of the wild. There is no blazing on side trails in Wilderness. Only the A.T. itself has the federal legislative exemption for its white blazes in Wilderness.

#### Blazing on Posts

Used in areas lacking sufficient trees, posts can be used for blazes. Posts should be four-to-six inch diameter rot-resistant, native wood rather than metal t-posts which are un-natural. Sunk at least two feet into the ground, it should be tall enough to have the blaze on top rise above surrounding vegetation. Pressure treated round or milled logs can be used when native wood is unavailable. New posts should not be added unless appropriate conditions exist and A.T. supervisor approves.



#### Cairns

Cairns mark the trail in the absence of trees across either stretches of bedrock or where weather frequently makes visibility poor to see posts, such as fog, mist and snow. If you feel a new cairn is necessary, report in the Trail Condition Assessment.

Along the length of the Trail, dismantle visitor-made cairns (stone stacking) to facilitate clear wayfinding by other hikers.