

Improved Standards for Blazing on the Entire Finger Lakes Trail system

Results of the 6 Dec 2006 meeting of the Blazing & signs subcommittee of the FLT Trail Management committee

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Contributors: Bob Emerson (chair), Bob Kremens, Ron Navik, Margaret & Ken Reek

RATIONALE

In NY State, environmental conditions such as snow and leaves make it necessary to mark the path, even though the trail corridor of the FLT system may be obvious under most other conditions. The conference has chosen to mark trees, usually with paint, except under special circumstances in which UV-resistant plastic of the same dimensions would be affixed with aluminum or small stainless steel fasteners (this would at least require permission from the landowner).

The question arises, "How often do trees have to be blazed to identify the path?" Insufficient blazing causes hikers to spend much of their time locating the trail, instead of enjoying the outdoor experience. Or worse, they may become disoriented or even lost. On the other hand, overblazing can also diminish the outdoor experience by polluting the natural visual landscape with obtrusive man-made clutter. specifying this minimal blazing environment is the task we tackle first below.

The second task we approach is a minimal but efficient means of marking the occurrence and direction of turns using a double blaze. Presently, the criteria in effect for marking a turn, and the means of indicating the direction, if any, vary considerably across the state. As implied above, marking every slight bend in the trail would contribute to visual pollution without improving navigability. Whether on straight trail or at bends, it would be inefficient to try here to specify all conditions that might affect a trail blazer's decisions. Instead, we depend on blazers' common sense while answering the question, "Is a hiker likely to stray from the path if we do not use a single or double blaze here?" or instead, "should we postpone a blaze until a more practical opportunity?" To accomplish either of the above tasks, the blazer must traverse the trail separately in each direction while blazing. In particular, we ask blazers not to take the shortcut of putting blazes automatically on both sides of a tree while walking the trail in only one direction.

RECOMMENDED BLAZING DENSITY

The FLTC Field Maintenance Manual covers acceptable means of producing a 2 x 6" blaze on a tree adjacent to the trail. Other documents (available from this committee) specify the blaze-color to be used for main, side, and branch trails. Here, we advance the principle that at any point along the Finger Lakes Trail system there should be at least one blaze visible, even under unfavorable weather and trail conditions. To achieve this goal, there will be many areas in which two blazes are visible under ideal conditions, but there should not be more than three visible. Rather than specifying a blazing interval, as mentioned above, we expect the blazer to use common sense about how easily the trail can be followed under worst conditions, such as snow on the ground, snow weighting down tree branches, snow sticking to the sides of trees and potentially covering blazes, or heavy leaf-cover that may disguise the trail corridor. such

conditions would provide motivation for a second visible blaze that would otherwise be redundant. An exception to the principle is a paved or well-worn lane that would be visible under all weather conditions. If the blazing density is allowed to decrease, as in the above example, it becomes especially important to mark clearly any departure from the well established path.

CRITERIA FOR MARKING A TURN

Along the FLT System, the criteria for marking a turn now vary widely. To improve uniformity across the state, we suggest the following. For sections that curve gradually, the blazer needs to apply the blazing density outlined above, using more blazes around the curve to maintain the desired visibility of blazes.

Sharp turns should be marked with a double blaze (described below) if:

1. The turn exceeds 45 deg.
2. The turn is less than 45 deg, but from a vantage point 20' before the turn, no blazes are visible around the turn.
3. At an intersection with a well defined alternative route, such as a paved road, railroad, logging road, ATV trail, another marked trail, or even a well-worn game path. In deciding how well defined an alternative is, a blazer needs to consider visibility under worst-case conditions of vegetation, snow cover, and other weather conditions. In addition, the direction of travel at such intersections is a consideration. When the trail joins a well defined alternative route at a shallow angle, the turn need not be marked if another blaze is visible from the point of the turn. However, this same turn **MUST** be marked in the opposite direction to inform hikers that the trail leaves the well-defined path upon which they have been hiking.

The sharp turn at a switchback, used to limit the trail's grade on a steep hill, presents a special case. Although the turn itself may not need marking, within the next 20' or so the exit direction should be clearly marked with a single blaze. If possible, this blaze should be placed so it is not easily seen from adjacent traversing trail to minimize hikers' temptation to take shortcuts up or down the hill. Such shortcuts off the trail promote erosion from flowing water, and defeat the goal of limiting the maximum grade of the trail to 10% or less, as promoted in guidelines or standards of major trails, including the North Country National Scenic Trail.

HOW TO MARK A TURN

As with the conditions that require marking a turn, the configuration of double blazes and the means of indicating the direction now vary widely across the FLT. After considering ideas from many sources both inside and outside the conference, we are strongly promoting a single system that is now used by all of the National scenic Trails, and by many other trail systems. The configuration is a 2 x 6" vertical blaze near the center of the tree plus a second identical blaze placed above the first, but offset horizontally in the outgoing direction of the turn. The vertical spacing between blazes is nominally 1-2" and the offset nominally 2". For narrow trees or posts, offsets as small as 1" are easily discernable. In any case, the next blaze down the trail after the turn should be within 20' or so of the turn, and be plainly visible to a hiker standing at the turn. This will reassure hikers that they are still on the trail. It also provides a backup indication in cases where the double blaze is partially or completely hidden by snow or foliage.

This configuration has the advantage of requiring only two identical sub-shapes. This saves time and supplies over using a third symbol, whose use is now common along the FLT. We believe that it is also important to use blazing that is consistent with trails that connect or coincide with the FLT. TO reach this goal, we urge trail blazers to shift gradually from the current status toward the recommended system as blazes are being maintained. AS a painted blaze widens with growth of a tree, one can paint-out the sides of the blaze that extend in the wrong direction, as well as any additional symbols that were used, and then re-paint only the side in the correct offset direction.

REROUTES

When trail has to be moved, there is a temptation for the blazer to black out or remove only a few blazes near the divergence and reentry points of the reroute. But many hikers complain that they have missed the beginning of a reroute and followed the old blazes. Therefore, we recommend removing all markings from the abandoned trail.

COMPLICATED TROUBLE SPOTS

Occasionally, we need to provide hikers with information needed to navigate a newly logged area, or to traverse a large open field. In addition, information may be needed about a conditional alternate path, such as during hunting season or under high-water conditions. We considered a number of possibilities, including some new blaze designs suggested by thoughtful conference members. Rather than introducing new symbols that hikers would have to learn, however, we are suggesting that in extreme cases, information can be spelled out in text. An 8.5 x 11" sheet can be laminated and mounted on a board, or a marking pen can be used to write instructions on a blank 11 x 11" FLT sign. In either case, in the weather, the painted plywood backboard will last longer if split garden hose is nailed around the top and sides of the sign to protect the edge of the wood from moisture. To avoid rust staining the sign, use aluminum nails. We expect that the above expanded suggestions for marking turns will clarify the less severe trouble spots.

If hikers encounter navigation difficulties of any kind, they should contact Howard Beye at the FLTC Trail operations office. To report any trail problems, contact him at fltc@frontiernet.net or 585-288-7191.