



## Blazing For Beginners

Bill Menke, NCTA Great Lakes Regional Trail Coordinator

Of the many different types of signs along the North Country NST, blazes are the “workhorse.” They outnumber all other types of signs and are the key sign allowing a hiker to **follow the trail**.

Gathering the Tools: Everyone has favorite tools and methods. Having observed and experimented with many of them, I always return to the following.

Assemble a blazing kit based on a small, wooden box with a handle. The Buckeye Trail Association has a good design that includes a properly sized blaze painted on the end of the box. Your RTC may have a limited supply of these boxes on hand but if not, can get you the dimensions. Within the box, carry the following:

- A screw top plastic peanut butter (or similar) jar, full of blue paint. Using the correct paint is of utmost importance. The correct paint is Nelson Boundary (Brush Type) Paint-Blue—available from NPS. Formulated for durability and adherence, it is long lasting in the outdoor environment. Being oil based, it requires a little more work to remove inevitable splatters from your skin but its’ durability and correct color outweigh any minor inconveniences. Other advantages, over latex paint, are that it can be applied in below freezing temperatures and can be applied during wet weather as long as there isn’t a steady stream of water running down the tree. Citrus solvent or mineral spirits make for easy cleanup. Carry another jar full of Nelson Boundary (Brush Type) White only when you know your work includes blazing a spur trail.
- An empty plastic receptacle to hold your brush while walking between trees. Any salvaged or cut to size container—such as the bottom of a popcorn jar or 2 liter pop bottle, or a bullion cube jar works well.
- A 1” wide paint brush. A narrower brush is OK—but never a wider one. Wider brushes spread and create a blaze that is too wide. Cheap brushes without overly, long, luxurious bristles work best.
- A wire brush with a built-in paint scraper.
- A hatchet (hand axe) that is very sharp. The advantage of a hatchet over other cutting/scraping tools is that it not only prepares the blazing spot, but it also can cut obstructing limbs and/or brush that hide the blaze. Used properly, it does a more complete job of smoothing the bark and can also be used to remove too frequent or incorrectly shaped blazes.
- A rag.



Spacing: Only one blaze should be seen at a time. From or within a few steps of passing a blaze, the next one becomes visible. Over zealousness leads to seeing several blazes at a time—tantamount to sign pollution.

Until you are experienced, the easiest way to obtain correct blaze density is to paint only one way at a time and to blaze backwards. See Blazing Backwards Ensures Quality Not Quantity – <http://www.northcountrytrail.org/spw/blazing/morgan.htm>.

NOTE: the next blaze should be visible when looking down the trail clearing—not through the adjoining timber.

Tree Selection: One well-placed blaze is better than three poorly placed blazes. A well-placed tree is one that comes into view quickly. Most often, these trees occur on the outside of curves, are close to the trail, and unblocked by other trees or shrubs. A tree that is highly visible from one direction may not be visible from the other direction.

As to what species of tree to blaze, options are limited by what's available. Young aspen are an especially poor choice. When passing through aspen, search carefully for another better species or recognize having to repaint every 1-2 years. Optionally, in young aspen stands use nail-up plastic blazes available from the NPS. Nail-up blazes are not preferred—so use them only in this limited situation. Good blaze candidates are **pin**es, **spruces**, **Balsam Fir**, **oaks**, **maples**, **bee**ch, **Hornbeam (musclewood)**, **Ironwood**, etc. See "Trail Blazing from the Renaissance through the Space Age." <http://www.northcountrytrail.org/spw/blazing/irene.htm>.

Tree Preparation: Careful preparation is critical. The blaze spot should be clean, smooth, and free of furrows or cracks. This is necessary to paint a crisp, square-cornered, properly sized blaze. Preparation allows the paint to adhere better and remain longer.

On smooth barked trees (balsam fir and younger red maple) the wire brush will remove dust, lichens, and other foreign matter that prevents paint adherence. On slightly rougher bark (young red pine, ironwood), the wire brush's paint scraper smoothes the roughness before a final dusting with the bristles.

The hatchet excels on older and rough barked trees. Seldom hack at the tree. Instead hold the end of the handle in one hand and the back of the head in the other—with the blade facing up the bole of the tree. With both hands push the blade up the tree—cutting a little deeper into the bark with each stroke. Thus, you can control the depth to not cut into the smooth inner bark layer and achieve a very smooth surface for painting. Use the hatchet as a plane. Often, blazer's do not adequately removed enough bark furrows to create an adequate painting surface. Don't be afraid to work at this. You will not "hurt" the tree because the outer bark is essentially dead cells.



The Blaze: It is very important to paint a correct blaze. Standards stipulate a **2" X 6"** crisp, vertical rectangle. This takes practice. Frequently the tendency is to make the blaze too large. A dollar bill is a little larger than 2" X 6" but as near as your pocket and gives a decent approximation of correct size. Better yet, cut small notches in your paintbrush handle at the two and six inch points and use them to measure your blaze or compare your blaze to the one painted on the end of the blaze kit box. Take the time to insure crisp corners and edges—do not allow rounded ends. Practice patience.

Urban Blazes: Within villages, cities, and other urban areas, an entirely different style of blaze is used. See hyperlink separate article being written.

The Spirit of The Woods Chapter has posted a more comprehensive guide to blazing. I recommend that you look at <http://www.northcountrytrail.org/spw/blazing/index.htm>.