Blazes

**blaze**^2^ (blz)

*n.*

1. A white or light-colored spot on the face of an animal, such as a horse.

2. A mark cut or painted on a tree to indicate a trail.

**v. tr.** blazed, blaz·ing, blaz·es.

1. To mark (a tree) with or as if with blazes.

2. To indicate (a trail) by marking trees with blazes.

The attractive East Coast Greenway graphic that was unveiled in South Portland at the 1999 Annual meeting of the ECGA was referred to as the ECG “blaze”. This is a misnomer. The displayed graphic is in the form of a trail “marker”, “sign”, “medallion” or “emblem” but it is not a “blaze”. The continued use of the term “blaze” at ECGA meetings and in ECGA publications will ingrain the mistaken use of this word into the ECGA lexicon and cause confusion to newcomers and the public since the term “blaze” is commonly understood as defined above.

First, some background about blazes used on long distance recreational trails. The first long distance trail in the US, Vermont’s Long Trail as well as the Appalachian Trail initially utilized the traditional trail blazing technique of marking a tree with a hatchet cut. Tree cuts tend to heal over quickly and lose their distinguishing appearance, which limits their usefulness as a blaze. Also, when the Appalachian Trail first opened more than 50% was on private land and roads. A less destructive, distinguishing yet unobtrusive trail indicator was needed. The now familiar 2” by 6” white paint mark was the agreed blaze. The Appalachian Trail blaze shape and blazing convention has been adopted by many hiking and equestrian trails (e.g. the Highlands horse trail in Virginia). Painted blazes come in different colors and shapes in areas that are dense with crossing trails so that a given trail can be distinguished. Blazes do not incorporate words; they are simple geometric shapes that can be easily replicated.
The first border-to-border trail in America, the Pacific Crest trail (the PCT is a hiking &
equestrian trail from Mexico to Canada) was marked with stone cairns which were considered
“more natural” than paint for a wilderness trail (much of the trail traverses treeless areas as
well). In recent years, the stone cairns have been completely dismantled to enhance the
wilderness experience. The PCT is easy to distinguish, however, due to the footpath being
pulverized by the many hooves and only heavy snow or whiteout conditions make following the
trail difficult. At trail junctions and road crossings, there are
directional signs and PCT markers (similar in size to the ECG
marker). The first coast-to-coast bicycle trail, BikeCentennial’s
(now called Adventure Cycling) Trans America trail followed low-
traffic secondary roads between Oregon and Virginia. The route
was marked with bicycle-sized signs (10” by 12”) but after 25
years little of these trail markers still exist (more on this risk of
loss later). My appreciation to those of you experienced in trail markings for allowing me this
background discourse on blazes & markers.

Why does this matter? So what if we call our markers “blazes”?

Besides the misuse of the word, which may bother purists, it matters because the ECG may
need both “blazes” and “markers” (call them emblems, medallions, signs or whatever is
decided). Let me draw on the experience of the Appalachian Trail Conference (the following
does not represent any official position by the ATC)

1.) Trail markers are expensive to make and to mount – The proper positioning, mounting
and anchoring of trail markers is beyond the abilities of most volunteers. This is a professional
job that requires oversight by the ATC or NPS.
2.) Trail markers will be vandalized – the old diamond-
shaped logo is rarely seen on the trail. Even the newer
National Scenic Trail versions are disappearing with just the
mount board often remaining. This vandalism in the woods is
not the work of errant teenagers but of memento seeking trail
users.
3.) Trail markers may conflict with existing trail
designations or signage regulations – there are many jurisdictions where trail markers are
not observed and conforming signage is utilized instead, i.e. in National Parks (even though the
A.T. is a NPS unit).

4.) Trail blazes are easy to produce and install – after a little practice, anyone can paint
blazes. That is not to say that anyone can determine the trail route. There is an established
procedure for trail route relocations. Once the route has been determined, it is relatively easy to
apply and maintain the blazing.
5.) Trail blazes have little value to potential souvenir seekers – painting blazes can be slow
and sloppy work. One maintaining club, in the spirit of technological progress, produced white
2X6 inch plastic “blazes” and nailed these up along the trail. However, they soon discovered
that even these were being removed as souvenirs. They went back to traditional paint blazes.
6.) Trail blazes can be used when trail marker conflicts exist – In the Northeast where older trail clubs predate the A.T., there is resistance to using a common trail marker in lieu of traditional signage. In fact, it is relatively recently that these clubs have adopted the A.T. blaze allowing a common marking system to entire route.

7.) Trail blazes will be convenient for sections and road sections – The blazes are found on trees but a number are also found on telephone guardrails, bridge abutments and even pavement. (The above photograph of both the A.T. trail marker and trail blaze on a standing telephone pole was taken by a hiker who just collapsed at the trailhead.) When the trail route is changed the white blazes are simply painted over with brown or neutral colored paint.

8.) Trail blazes will conflict less with highway signage regulations than trail markers on road sections – Mounting a marker or sign on a telephone pole or a bridge usually requires the approval of an organization other than the trail manager. The small white blaze is understated and hardly noticed. One woman knew that the A.T. went through her town but wasn’t sure where until I pointed to the white blaze on a telephone pole in her front yard. “I have looked at that pole for over 20 years and never noticed the trail blaze”, she said. Once your eyes are trained to pick up white blazes they are easy to spot amidst the cacophony of signs in the typical suburban or city landscape.

Recommendations for the Trail Committee

1.) Use a term other than “blaze” to describe the ECG trail marker.

2.) Adopt the A.T. blazing convention for temporary use if route directions are needed for trail under construction, during relocation or until the permanent signage is erected; A.T. blazing convention is mature (no need to reinvent the wheel), is familiar to many East coast recreation users and is consistent with the ECG being the “Urban Equivalent of the Appalachian Trail”.