

## The Camp Nature Trail—Sharing Nature With Scouts

### ***Why do we need a nature trail?***

In the Boy Scouts of America’s National Camp Accreditation Program, RP-252 (Recommended Practice 252), states, “The camp provides a self-guided nature trail, which is clearly labeled, or nature exhibit, which is clearly labeled, introducing participants to local soils, plants, and animals.” This standard is verified by the “observation of the trail or museum and signage.”

The camp nature trail and associated nature exhibits are essential components of the camp’s ecology program during both the resident summer camping season and the weekend camping season. A well-designed trail, just like a well-designed ecology program, can captivate participants and inspire them to learn more about nature. The nature trail encourages exploration of the camp’s natural areas, and it leads Scouts to a better understanding of conservation and the environment.



*Photo: Camp Oest Nature Trail at Broad Creek Memorial Scout Reservation.*

Self-guided trails allow participants to explore the trail at their own pace without the need for facilitation. If well designed, a camp’s nature trail can assist Scout leaders with the completion of certain rank advancement and merit badge requirements and promote a better understanding of outdoor ethics.

### ***Considerations for designing and maintaining your camp nature trail***

Here are some ideas for developing and maintaining a nature trail.

***Trail development:*** The principles of trail layout, construction, and maintenance apply to nature trails. Some key factors include:

- ***Accessibility:*** Make the trail accessible to everyone. Refer to ADA trail requirements. Even if the trail doesn’t meet all the standards, considering the requirements in trail development will improve accessibility. Establish a trail in an area without steep slopes, or plan to lay out and

construct the trail to decrease slope. Utilize switchbacks, and seek areas with firm, durable surfaces.

- **Layout:** Select an appropriate path to maximize learning opportunities.
  - Locate key items of interest, such as different species of trees or plants, bodies of water, marshes, rock outcroppings, or other natural features. Direct the trail near or within sight of these areas. Avoid sensitive environmental areas that have species of concern or endangered species habitats.
  - Avoid putting a trail directly next to a stream, lake, or marsh where it could create an adverse impact.
  - Where a slope exists, avoid laying out the trail directly down the slope. Cut across the slope to avoid damaging erosion of the trail surface or directing erosion into a wetland or body of water.
  - Create a winding trail rather than a straight one.
  - Other considerations:
    - Is it desirable to have the trail form a loop which brings the participant back to the starting location, or is it better to have a trail that starts and stops at different locations?
    - Can small gathering spots or clearings be incorporated along the trail where group discussions and activities can take place?
    - Can benches or wildlife blinds be installed? (These are great conservation community service projects.)
    - Can environmental impact be minimized by constructing bridges, boardwalks, and other durable surfaces?

**Maintenance:** Maintenance is critical! Consider trail maintenance needs, such as future erosion problems, trail marking, and vegetation clearing and control needs. Properly designed trails are durable and require less maintenance. A wonderful trail that receives very little or no maintenance will lose its appeal very quickly



*Photo: A trail with steps may not be the best design for all users. Use proper trail construction techniques.*

**Program area integration:** Work with other program areas to design your nature trail so it can be used for other appropriate activities, such as geocaching or orienteering. Work with the aquatics director or waterfront program area to make the nature trail accessible from the water by boat where feasible and environmentally appropriate.

Sharing nature with Scouts: The nature trail should be age-appropriate. Design it to serve all potential camp users. Consult Cub Scout, Scouts BSA, and Venturer requirements.

- Advancement opportunities: Incorporate stops on the nature trail that facilitate rank advancement. For example Tenderfoot, Second Class and First Class ranks all have nature-related requirements including:
  - Tenderfoot Requirement No. 4b: Describe common poisonous or hazardous plants; identify any that grow in your local area or campsite location. Tell how to treat for exposure to them.
  - Second Class Requirement No. 4: Identify or show evidence of at least 10 kinds of wild animals (such as birds, mammals, reptiles, fish, or mollusks) found in your local area or camping location. You may show evidence by tracks, signs or photographs you have taken.
  - First Class Requirement No. 5a: Identify or show evidence of at least 10 kinds of native plants found in local area or campsite location. You may show evidence by identifying fallen leaves or fallen fruit that you find in the field, or as part of a collection you have made, or by photographs you have taken.
  - Merit badges such as Forestry, Bird Study, Environmental Science, and others in the nature series can benefit when the nature trail is designed to accommodate their requirements.
- Nature trail interpretation: Nature-themed information can be presented several different ways. A guidebook can lead participants along the trail and describe the themes or observations at designated stops along the way. Trails can also feature permanent or temporary signage. Note: Avoid nailing signs or markers to trees as this can cause tree damage. Instead, use posts or other markers that reduce environmental impact.
  - Design stops along the trail to share nature effectively in all seasons and during the day and at night.
  - Encourage participants to use senses other than sight. They can experience nature by hearing, touching, and even smelling different items along the trail.
  - Show or discuss conservation practices that may be implemented on the camp property, and encourage discussion about the purposes and outcomes from participation in those conservation practices.
  - Discuss conservation issues and problems, such as invasive plants and soil and water conservation issues.
  - Promote opportunities for Scouts to participate in conservation projects, individually or as a unit. Show examples of completed projects, and show participants where to get information about needed camp conservation projects.
  - Incorporate outdoor ethics and the principles of Leave No Trace and *Tread Lightly!*
  - Use your imagination, and seek feedback from trail users!

**Promoting the trail:** Make sure the nature trail is on the camp map. Promote it at check in, on camp bulletin boards, and in the ecology program area. Ensure that trail guides are readily available at the camp headquarters building, nature lodge, or the camp trading post.

**Make it fun!** Most importantly, the nature trail should be informative **and fun!** Consider making the nature trail hike a part of a camp activity, a game, or a larger camp award. For example, in a Cub camp, Scouts may receive a bead for hiking the trail or answering a trail guide's questions. Create a council environmental award program to promote nature activities and the nature trail.

### ***Where can I get assistance?***

Building and maintaining the camp's nature trail are tasks that should be addressed and guided by the council conservation committee with the support of others such as the camp ranger, the ecology director, and other key staff members.

When designing the trail, refer to the BSA's *Conservation Handbook*, No. 33570. This publication is available through the Supply Group at [www.scoutstuff.org](http://www.scoutstuff.org), and it is an excellent reference for trail construction and maintenance. Additionally, the [U.S. Forest Service's Trail Construction and Maintenance Notebook](#) is another helpful publication. This publication and others can be found on the U.S. Forest Service's [Missoula Technology and Development Center](#) website.

Above all, ensure that the information presented on the trail is accurate. Technical assistance can be obtained from experts from state forestry and wildlife agencies, local nature centers, universities, and other nonprofit organizations. These groups may also be able to provide funding or other resources to support your camp's conservation education needs. Additionally, your BSA area conservation advocate or regional conservation task force is there to help.

*Photo credit: All photos, Mike Huneke, 2014*