

Marble Hill

Summary: A complete walking tour of this wooded area takes a little over an hour, ranging from the heights of Marble Hill to the gurgling waters of a shaded stream. Trails vary from wide and level to rocky and occasionally steep – you'll climb about 190 feet in about 0.6 miles on your way up to the summit.

Trailhead Location: A small off-street parking area with room for 2-3 cars is available on the south side of Taylor Road, about three-quarters of a mile west of Packard Road. Outside of school hours, parking is also permitted at Pompsitticut Elementary School on Rte. 117. Access to the trails is at the far end of the playing fields behind the school.

Geology: Marble Hill contains mostly upland, where a thin layer of glacial till covers bedrock hills. Bedrock outcrops are common and can be seen about midway on the yellow trail. Bedrock here, as in much of Stow, is called the Nashoba Formation, and is mostly a granite-like rock (gneiss) that has been folded and stretched so that it looks slightly layered. Marble Hill, at 457 feet above sea level, is the point of highest elevation in Stow.

Near Taylor Road, the yellow trail crosses a small drumlin, or elongated till hill; a second small drumlin on the property rises up on the west side of the yellow trail near the Pompsitticut School fields. The long dimension of these hills is oriented north-south, in the direction of ice retreat in this area. Glacial erratics, or boulders transported and dropped by the melting ice, are scattered throughout the property; a large one can be seen along the white trail near the intersection with the green trail.

History: In the 1700s Marble Hill was used to obtain marble by surface mining. The granite steps alongside Great Road at the town hall, originally the front steps of the Randall Library, are reportedly some of the stone mined from this site. In 1975 the Town of Stow purchased the Marble Hill Natural Area with state self-help funds. The 249-acre site, put together from several parcels by private initiative, includes the Headway Life Course exercise area, constructed in memory of Barbara and Jack Head's son David and his children Krishna and Jeremy.

Nature to look for: Marble Hill provides an area in which to enjoy some under-appreciated but vital ground cover species that survive in the shade created by white pine and oak canopy typical of mixed woods forests. In the winter landscape, evergreens such as partridgeberry, wintergreen, and pipsissewa provide moments of green among the leaf litter. Spring ephemerals include wildflowers such as Indian Cucumber and wild oats that send up leaves to capture the sun's energy and flower before the deciduous trees block the sunlight's path.

Abundant ferns dominate the ground cover in the shaded, moist lowland areas during the summer. If you see multiple brown spots adorning the back of the fern's leaflets you know they are making more ferns through spores; it is not a fungal problem as some people worry. In autumn, people's eyes often fall on the ground pine that is present year-round. 250 million years ago, these small plants were over 100 feet tall and dominated the land. Their slow growth and inefficient vascular system have relegated them to the forest floor. Please do not pick them for wreaths as their slow growth makes them practically impossible to replace.

Suggested Route: From the Taylor Road parking area, follow a short connector trail east, parallel to the road, then turn right on the yellow-blazed trail. At a T-junction, turn right to continue on yellow, then continue straight through a junction with the white trail.

At a wide intersection with the green-blazed trail to the left, continue straight on yellow, avoiding another trail that bears right. The yellow trail continues downhill over granite ledges, then levels through an area of granite outcrops under a mix of deciduous and evergreen. To the left, a stream runs roughly parallel to the trail. The yellow trail soon curves left to cross the stream on steppingstones.

A short distance past the stream a double yellow blaze warns of an upcoming junction with the white-blazed trail. Turn left at the T-junction onto the white trail, heading steadily uphill on a narrow trail.

At a wide trail junction marked by the ropes and rings of the Headway Life Course, bear slightly right and uphill, now on the red-blazed trail up Marble Hill. The climb is moderately strenuous, past granite outcroppings. At a Y-junction, bear right and continue uphill. The trail curves around the southeast flank of the hill, then climbs on a steady, moderate slope up and over the summit.

The trail descends and levels just before meeting the white trail; turn right. At a junction with the yellow trail, turn right, then immediately left to continue on the white trail. At a T-junction with the yellow trail, turn left to return to the Taylor Road parking area.

