

## Gardner Hill / Town Forest

**Summary:** A moderately challenging 1.5-hour hike takes in forest and wetland, glacial ridges along the edge of the Assabet River, and a 150-foot climb to the wooded summit of Gardner Hill, 328 feet above sea level.

**Trailhead Location:** The Town Forest parking area is at the end of Bradley Lane, off the south side of Route 117, west of the Stow Shopping Center. The large parking lot also serves nearby playing fields. You may also park off Heritage Lane, where there is room for 2 cars, and follow a new green-blazed trail in from the east.

**Geology:** Gardner Hill is a glacial drumlin, standing 150 feet above the surrounding grade. The land consists mostly of glacial till with only one small area where the underlying bedrock rises to the surface. To the east lies a large area of sand with scattered depressions or collapse structures and hillocks. This is called a kame and resulted from the deposits of fine material from glacial runoff over 20,000 years ago. Karnes formed between ice masses and older landforms. As ice blocks melted, contact slopes remained as can be seen to the east along the Elizabeth Brook.

To the west of Gardner Hill lies a flat area of glacial moraine, deposits of sand, gravel and boulders left in place as glacial ice melted. Perhaps the most striking feature of this conservation land is the series of eskers lying along the Assabet. These are long narrow hills, about 20-30 feet above the surrounding land. During the last ice age, streams formed through receding ice masses. Unstratified sand and gravel was deposited in the streambeds and, after the complete melting of the ice mass, the outline of the meandering streambed remained. The eskers are in fairly good condition, although years of use by mountain bikes and dirt bikes are slowly taking their toll.

The Elizabeth Brook has also been referred to as Wheeler Brook, Fletcher Brook, Assabet Brook and Stow Brook. It can be canoed over much of its length. The interplay of fallen trees and flooding by beavers has created ever-changing wetlands, floodplains and fast water.

**History:** In the 1800's, Conant's Mill operated at the bridge from Bradley Lane over Assabet (Elizabeth) Brook, where portions of the original foundation are still visible. Charles Dix (C. D.) Fletcher bought the property back into the family from his grandfather Peter Fletcher's original holdings, and continued to run the sawmill, orchard and forestlands. Teams of men would comb the woods to eliminate hardwoods in order to maintain the pine monoculture for future marketing. Sandpits in the eastern half of the land show years of commercial excavation.

After C. D.'s death the town obtained matching self-help grants at the federal and state level, and completed this first major conservation land purchase in 1968. Fletcher asked that a memorial grove of pines be kept undisturbed in the northeast corner of the property.

**Nature to look for:** Gardner Hill encompasses over 200 acres of mature white pine forest with scattered stands of hemlock. The remnants of American chestnut can still be seen sprouting along most of the major trails. The Chestnut blight killed many mature trees in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the old stumps grow vigorous saplings that, in Gardner Hill can reach 30-40 feet in height. However, all saplings eventually succumb to the blight, which resides in the soil along with the chestnut tree root system.

There are also several small ponds, two of which are in an advanced state of natural eutricification. That is, vegetation in the ponds never fully decomposes, and builds into a tangled mass that will become peat. A ring of open water normally surrounds the vegetation in the center of these ponds. This is called a lag. The vegetative mats can occasionally tremble from release of decomposition gas and so the ponds are called "quaking bogs".

**Suggested Route:** From the Bradley Lane trailhead, enter the woods on the red-blazed trail. Cross a footbridge over Elizabeth Brook then bear right at a Y-junction to continue on the red trail. Just past a small wetland to the left, turn left onto the wide, level orange trail.

Follow the orange trail to a wide intersection, where you turn right onto the white trail. Continue straight across the AT&T right-of-way. At an angled T-junction with the Yellow trail, turn sharply left. Re-cross the AT&T path, then turn right onto a narrower, un-blazed trail winding through a pine glade toward a view of the Assabet River.

At the river's edge bear left and continue parallel to the river through a maze of interconnected paths, working your way across the hillside as the slope uphill to your left grows steeper. Climb steeply up to the top of the ridge, and bear right onto a ridge-top trail, descending again almost immediately. The trail levels and curves away from the river on a wider path. At a T-junction, turn right onto the yellow-blazed trail.

The trail soon returns to the river's edge, at King's Cove. Continue parallel to the river on a narrow path as the wider yellow-blazed trail bears away to the left (you will return here later to continue on the yellow-blazed trail). The trail soon heads uphill, beginning a series of fairly steep up- and downhill climbs along and over a series of glacial ridges. After you retrace your steps to the yellow-blazed trail, turn right.

Take the next trail to your left, a few minutes away from the river, heading uphill. Continue straight as another trail heads off to the right. At a T-junction, turn right and continue uphill on the un-blazed summit loop trail. The forested summit of Gardner Hill is a few minutes away.

To descend from the summit, take the next trail downhill to the right, and turn right onto the wider white-blazed trail. At a T-junction a few minutes ahead, turn sharply left to continue on the white-blazed trail. Bear left again when you reach the very wide blue-blazed trail. Bear right at a Y-junction, and downhill on the red trail to cross back over the Elizabeth Brook footbridge and return to the Bradley Lane trailhead.

