

PINE HILL ESKER TRAIL

PARKING AND TRAIL LOCATION

The trailhead for the *Pine Hill Esker Trail* is on Beaman Road, close to the *Rocky Brook Conservation Area* sign. It is about ¼ miles West of the junction with Wilder Rd and about 0.5 mi from Rt. 140. There is limited parking on the shoulder of the road. Additional parking is available at The Eight Point Sportsmen's Club.

UNIQUE FEATURES

The trail starts at the site of a 19th century chair factory and joins a dirt road with stone walls in a

mature forest, crosses a meadow and goes back into forested terrain. Unique for this trail are its eskers and kettle ponds and the views of a wetland pond where Rocky Brook flows into the Stillwater River. The trail is located on DCR watershed protection land, so dogs are not allowed.

LENGTH AND DIFFICULTY

For clarity, the trail is divided into three sections: A, B and C, with one-way lengths of 0.65 mi., 0.45 mi. and 0.45 mi., respectively. The full hike, as described below, includes all three sections. The side loop on Sect. B is included on the return. The A+B+C trail length is 3.1 mi., while the two shorter versions, A+B or A+C, are both 2.2 mi. in length. The elevation varies between 428 ft and 540 ft, with several short steep hills. The difficulty is rated *moderate*.

TRAIL DESCRIPTION

Trail begins at the crossing of Rocky Brook on remnant of an asphalt bridge. Then a slight right turn at the stone wall leads to a shortcut to the main trail. Watch your steps carefully.

0.05 miles: Shortcut merges into the main trail, which is a wide dirt road with stone walls on both sides.

0.15 miles: Gap in stonewall provides opportunity to explore the forest and the Rocky Brook.

0.23 miles: Trail enters a meadow area.

0.58 miles: Pass a small side trail on the left side. Note the young white pine trees on both sides of the trail.

0.65 miles: Trail junction of Sections A, B and C. The trail description continues with Sect. B.

0.74 miles: Grove of large pine trees, followed by a short uphill.

0.86 miles: Trail joins remnant of a circular track, possibly remnant of the sand and gravel extraction.

0.90 miles: Clearing with gravelly soil, as evidence of an esker, laid bare by the sand and gravel excavation. The trail continues downhill at the left side.

0.97 miles: Clearing, with same telltale sign of the esker. Closer examination of surrounding terrain gives evidence of sand and gravel extraction.

0.99 miles: Trail goes over large culvert.

1.04 miles: Trail turn-around, at the location of wetland and a permanent stream.

1.19 miles: Optional (but recommended) side loop on the left side, shortly after remnants of the circular track.

1.23 miles: Trail loops gently to the right. Deep down to the left is a small pond (a kettle pond).

1.32 miles: Side trail rejoins the return trail.

1.55 miles: Trail junction of Sections A, B and C. The trail description continues with Sect. C outbound.

1.58 miles: Wet area most of the times of the year.

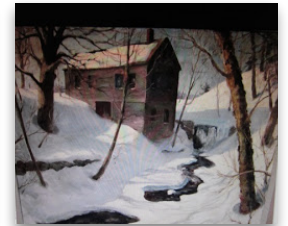
1.78 miles: View to wetland pond where the Stillwater River meets Rocky Brook. The distant structure is part of the Sterling water system.

2.00 miles: Trail turn around point at the edge of the Rocky Brook.

2.45 miles: Trail junction of Sections A, B and C. Turn left to return to start. Watch for shortcut near trail end.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Rocky Brook Conservation Area is owned by the Sterling Conservation Commission and is the site of a 19th century water-powered chair factory started by Mr. Newton Burpee and depicted in the painting below.



GEOLOGICAL INFORMATION

Esker (from Gaelic *eiscir*, 'ridge of gravel') is a ridge, often serpentine, composed of stratified sand and gravel from a melting glacier and often containing large quantities of pure water.

Some 13,000 years ago, towards the end of the last ice age, glaciers were melting and receding, resulting in torrential streams of glacier water. The path of a given stream would follow existing crevasses in the glacier and, being confined by the

glacier ice walls, would carve a tunnel through the bottom part of the glacier and a V-shaped channel or valley into the terrain. As the flow diminished, the glacier tunnel and V-channel filled up with glacial outwash in the form of sand and gravel. After the glacier ice had completely melted, these outwash-filled tunnels remained and became the ridges, or eskers that are visible today in the landscape. Esker heights may range from 16 to 160 ft and widths from 160 to 1,600 ft; the lengths can vary from a few hundred feet to tens of miles. There are several named eskers in eastern Massachusetts and on Cape Cod.

Because most eskers contain large quantities of pure water, protection is important. The soil overlying an esker is often porous, and contamination from farm or industrial operations could easily seep down and contaminate the water-carrying layers. Thus, it is prudent to maintain forest cover on top of an aquifer-containing esker.

Eskers are also valued by sand and gravel companies as a ready source for large quantities of material. The esker encountered on this trail was at one point in time pasture land but was in the 1960s sold to two local sand and gravel companies. Use the trail description to find where the contours from the excavations of millions of cubic yards of sand and gravel remain in the landscape. After exhausting much of the material, a large subdivision was proposed to the Sterling Planning Board in the mid-1980s. MDC then acted to protect this invaluable water source by land acquisition, finalized in 1989. (Note MDC was the name of the state agency which is now named the DCR Watershed Protection).

Kettle ponds are another very visible example of glaciers shaping the landscape; a kettle pond is formed when a large block of ice breaks loose from the retreating glacier and becomes partly buried in glacial outwash. When this ice chunk finally has melted, a deep lake or pond has been formed. The side loop on Sect. B brings you to a lovely small kettle pond. Several other kettle ponds can be found in this area.

FLORA AND FAUNA

Notice the transition from a closed oak pine canopy to a small open meadow on the first part of the trail. In summer, this area is alive with butterflies and dragonflies. Sparrows and warblers may be seen flitting back and forth. The calls of blue jays, chickadees and nuthatches can be heard in both the field and forests year-round.

Milkweed and other flowers provide food for monarch butterflies and other pollinators such as beetles, bees and hummingbirds. The plants provide a place for monarch caterpillars to feed and form a chrysalis before emerging as an adult.

In the esker area, the drier land is covered with more grasses, lichen and moss. The exposed soils are attractive nesting sites for turtles to dig holes and lay their eggs. You may see the remains of eggs that have been dug up and eaten by raccoons, foxes, skunks or coyotes. In late summer, the forested wetland is perfumed with the scent of the white floral shrub meadowsweet. Skunk cabbage is prominent in spring.

Be quiet here as you might spy ducks or a fishing heron near the wetland formed near the mouth of Rocky Brook and the Stillwater River. Spring woodland flowers such as Lady Slippers and the state flower, trailing arbutus (Mayflower) can be found along the edge of the trails. The evergreen wintergreen carpets much of the forest floor, with a white bell-shaped flower in spring, red berries in fall and winter.



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Open Space Implementation Committee (OSIC) Sterling's OSIC was established in 2003 as a permanent town committee, to broaden awareness and enhance access to significant open space, cultural and recreational resources.