

Milo Appley Conservation Showcase Wildlife Habitat Letterboxes

Welcome to the Milo Appley Conservation Showcase (MACS), located behind the Windham County Extension Center at 139 Wolf Den Road in Brooklyn, Connecticut. MACS was acquired by the (then) Windham County Soil & Water Conservation District (now the Eastern Connecticut Conservation District) in 1960 from Windham County for \$1. It was named for Milo A. Appley, a Canterbury resident and director for the Windham County Soil & Water Conservation District, who also served as president of the Brooklyn Agricultural Society from 1961 to 1967 and as a state representative from Canterbury from 1937 to 1940.

The 76-acre conservation showcase property is used by the Eastern Connecticut Conservation District (ECCD) to demonstrate conservation practices and conduct environmental education, from agriculture and forestry practices to habitat management and water quality protection. The rolling land transitions across multiple habitats including white pine and larch stands, hardwood forests, meadows, stream corridors, beaver ponds, and vernal pools.

This letterbox series celebrates the varied habitats at MACS and the animals that utilize each. In addition to directions to each letterbox, we have provided the coordinates of each letterbox for those who prefer to geocache. We hope that as you traverse the letterbox course, you enjoy MACS as much as we do!

Pollinator Habitat Letterbox (N41.79023, W71.960814) – ECCD has a land management plan to guide how we care for MACS. Part of that plan is to maintain the fields for wildlife and establish pollinator habitat in order to support important pollinators like bees, butterflies and hummingbirds. In this field we have planted red clover and pollinator plants including milkweed and bee balm to provide pollen and nectar for pollinating animals like insects and birds.

To find the Pollinator letterbox, begin at the trailhead (gate) at the rear of the Windham County Extension Center parking lot and follow Tanner Brook Trail (the cart path) to the first field. Turn left along the tree line and walk about 55 steps to an animal trail between two black walnut trees. Follow the trail into the trees and to the left. Look for a large boulder (glacial erratic). The letterbox is tucked in a nook on the west (left) side of the boulder.

Stream Corridor/Beaver Pond Habitat Letterbox (N41.786909, W71.960977) – Stream corridors are very active wildlife areas. All creatures need water to live and so many will visit the stream daily to drink. A beaver has modified the habitat of Tanner Brook by building a dam, creating a small pond that is used by a variety of wildlife. Watch for redwing blackbirds and great blue herons, and look for animal tracks in the soft mud on the edge of the stream.

To find the Beaver Pond letterbox, from the Pollinator letterbox go back to the field and continue along Tanner Brook Trail through a second field and into a third field. Once you enter the third field, walk down to your left to the first corner of field. Walk along the edge of the field. Not far from the corner of the field you will see an animal trail that leads to Tanner Brook (you'll notice some brush that has been cut to widen this opening). Follow the animal trail to Tanner Brook and the beaver dam. To the right of the trail at the top of the stream bank, you will see a many-stemmed honeysuckle bush. The letterbox is tucked under the right side of the shrub under some leaves and branches. Because this is a somewhat exposed location, please be sure to cover it back it up thoroughly before you move on to the next letterbox.

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Bonus! After you find the Beaver Pond letterbox and walk back to the field, if you continue walking along the edge of the field to the southeast corner, you will find additional signs that the beavers have been busy altering their environment.

Blackwell Brook Stream Habitat Letterbox (N41.786958, W71.964393) – Blackwell Brook flows through the west part of the MACS property. Several sections of Blackwell Brook are cold-water habitat, which means the stream stays cold enough (65° F or less) in the hot summer months to support native brook trout. The stream features pool-riffle habitat, which is ideal for trout and other fish. Deep, shady pools stay cool and provide refuge for fish as the water temperature heats up in the summer, while riffles, which are shallow, cobbly areas that alternate with the pools, oxygenate the water and provide habitat for many of the insect larvae that trout and other fish eat. If you stop and stay quiet for a few minutes, you'll notice that Blackwell Brook is also a popular site for many birds. You may also spot frogs and a turtle or two basking on a log.

To find the Blackwell Brook letterbox, from the Beaver Pond letterbox walk back along the short animal trail to the third field. Continue along the Tanner Brook Trail across the field to an opening in the southwest corner that leads into the hardwood forest. If you stopped to look at the beaver activity in the southeast corner of the field, just continue along the edge of the field to the next (southwest) corner and look for the opening in the tree line. Once you enter the hardwood forest, you'll see Blackwell Brook to your left. The stream makes a sharp meander bend that contains a deep pool. As you continue along the trail, watch for a side trail that leads down the steep bank to the stream (don't go down this trail!). About fifty steps past that side trail, look for a pile of logs on the left side of the trail. The Blackwell Brook letterbox is tucked under the backside of the logs and covered with some leaves.

Vernal Pool Habitat Letterbox (N41.78961, W71.965453) – Vernal pools are very special habitats. Although they are wetlands, they are not always wet. Vernal pools are seasonal wetlands; they fill with water in the late summer and early fall, and will stay filled until the late spring or early summer. Because they don't stay wet year-round, they do not develop resident populations of fish, frogs or turtles. This makes them ideal breeding habitats for amphibians like wood frogs and salamanders. These animals are known as vernal pool obligate species because they will only breed in vernal pools, and will return to the same pool year after year to breed. Visit a vernal pool in the spring and you may see the jelly-like egg masses of these amphibians. If you are fortunate, you may also see fairy shrimp and fingernail clams, two types of invertebrates that live in vernal pools.

To find the Vernal Pool letterbox, from the Blackwell Brook letterbox continue on the Tanner Brook Trail to the intersection with the Blackwell Brook Trail. Turn left onto the Blackwell Brook Trail. As you continue along the Blackwell Brook Trail, you will come to the vernal pool on the left of the trail. Continue along the vernal pool until you are near the end of it. Look for, and go through, a gap in the stonewall on the left side of the trail by a large oak tree with one live and one dead trunk. The letterbox is tucked in a nook along the backside (vernal pool side) of the stonewall a few feet to the left of the gap and oak tree.

Pine Woods Habitat Letterbox (N41.790619, W71.962998) – The pine woods habitat occupies the highest elevation at MACS. This white pine and Japanese larch stand is one of our forestry demonstration sites. The part of the stand located south of Blackwell Brook Trail has not been thinned, resulting in poorer tree growth and lots of understory growth. The part of the stand north of Blackwell

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Brook Trail and along the Stonehouse Trail has been thinned, resulting in better growth and larger tree crown size. White pines provide food and habitat for a number of forest animals. Songbirds and small mammals will eat white pine seeds, and white-tailed deer and cottontails will browse the foliage. Look for piles of pinecone scales at the base of some trees where mammals (especially squirrels) have been eating the seeds. Owls will often take shelter in pine trees. Look for owl pellets at the base of the trees. Owl pellets are the regurgitated bits of animals that owls have eaten that they cannot digest, like fur, bones and insect shells. If you find an owl pellet, check it out but please be kind and leave it for the next letter-boxer to find.

To find the Pine Woods letterbox, from the Vernal Pool letterbox continue on the Blackwell Brook Trail to a 4-way intersection. Take the left trail, the Stonehouse Trail, up the hill. Note that you have entered the thinned pine stand, which has a very different, more open appearance than the un-thinned stand behind you. Follow the Stonehouse Trail to nearly the top of the hill. You will come to a large boulder (another glacial erratic) right at the left edge of the trail. If you look past that boulder into the woods, you will see a stone pile covered in pine needles (about 19 steps off the trail). Walk around to the back of that stone pile. You will find the letterbox buried in the pine needles under a large log that is resting against the stone pile (watch for poison ivy – “leaves of three, leave them be.”).

Hardwood Forest Habitat Letterbox (N41.788836, W 71.963514) – Hardwood forests comprise most of the forest at MACS. Trees include oak, hickory, birch, maple, ash and beech. The hardwood forests provide habitat for a wide variety of mammals such as white-tailed deer, eastern cottontail rabbits, bats, foxes, coyotes, raccoons, opossums, squirrels, and chipmunks. Forest birds, including wood thrush, flickers, woodpeckers, warblers, chickadees, hawks, and owls have been spotted at MACS. Reptiles and amphibians that might use the hardwood forest habitat at MACS include snakes, grey tree frogs, American toads, salamanders and newts, and terrestrial turtles like wood turtles and box turtles. As you traverse the hardwood forest trails, watch for animal sign (such as paw/hoof prints and droppings) to learn who lives in the MACS forests.

To find the Hardwood Forest letterbox, from the Pine Woods Habitat letterbox continue along the Stonehouse Trail to the White Pine Loop Trail. Take a right on the White Pine Loop Trail and follow it back to the 4-way intersection. At the intersection, take a left to stay on the White Pine Loop Trail. As the trail loops around and heads east, watch the left side of the trail for a stonewall that runs into the woods at a 90-degree angle from the trail (**HINT:** you will pass a stonewall that heads off at about 45-degrees before you get to the 90-degree angle stonewall). About 8 feet along the west side of that stonewall, you will find the Hardwood Forest letterbox tucked into a nook in the wall.

To return to the trailhead and parking lot, continue along the White Pine Loop Trail to the intersection with the Blackwell Brook Trail. Take a left onto the Blackwell Brook Trail. Follow Blackwell Brook Trail to the Tanner Brook Trail, near the entrance to the first field. Take a left and follow the Tanner Brook Trail up the cart path to the trail head and parking lot.

Thank you for visiting the ECCD MACS letterbox course! We hope you had a nice time exploring MACS.

The Board and staff of ECCD

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