

## **10/30/10: Sipsey Wilderness Area Day Hike, Bankhead National Forest, AL**

On a much needed break, a friend of mine, Dan, and I embarked on a roughly 11.5 mile day hike through the Sipsey Wilderness. Accustomed to longer hikes, and this being his first trip to the Sipsey Wilderness Area, I decided to show what it had to offer. Starting on the Randolph Trail, we ventured to the Big Tree, then to Ship Rock, crossing on the Sipsey rapids, before heading back close to dusk.

Even with the heavy rain we'd recently had, the forest retained enough leaves to create a myriad of reds and oranges still that contrasted well against the stark blue sky above. Beginning at the Randolph trailhead, we opted for the trail walk instead of the road walk initially in so he could instantly take in some of the sweeping draws and expanse of forest floor here. We made it to the Randolph/Rippey trails intersection soon enough, and continued on the Randolph Trail to the Johnson Cemeteries, stopping to photograph some of the headstones that dated to the early 1900's. I shared a story or two that I'd picked up from books on some of the people buried there. Past the cemeteries, we stopped at the large fern covered tree with the old rusted vehicle beside it as I always do coming this route and browsed the area for a bit.

Heading downhill, Dan marveled at the canopy of Hemlocks and the rising rock bluffs. We came across an arboglyph I'd never seen before, and thankfully I finally remembered to bring the chalk, which brought out the image some. It appeared to be a set of initials and some other kind of carving beneath though we could not make out what it was. We stopped for a second at "Randolph Falls", really an unnamed seasonal waterfall that's impressive when running.

By now the sun was higher in the sky, and the beams breaking through the forest really made the colors come alive. We dropped to the Sipsey River, which was very low from the extended drought that the rains didn't break, and crossed the river on a fallen tree instead of rock hopping and getting our feet wet on a cold morning in the lower 30's. We turned north, passed an arboglyph with the name Riddle and a few others on it, and stopped at a bend in the river to gaze at the layer of leaves gathered atop it. We hopped an unnamed tributary, with water so clear you could see to the bottom, even though it was nearly stagnant. One of the largest Sycamore trees I've ever seen was at the next water crossing, looking at least 100ft tall. After sniffing around some other Beech trees, we found another with the words Family Riddle carved into it, with the rest degraded to the point we could make it out.

It was near here where the only downside to the trip occurred. About half a mile past that tree I became aware I'd left my walking staff behind. We'd passed a group of about 8 hikers a ways back and were certain they had found it after checking two areas we'd explored. We hustled back, but when we reached them, they were empty handed as well. A little down about it, we kept making our way back the way we came when the staff came into view. I'd propped it against a smaller tree when we stopped to remove a layer of clothing, and it simply looked like a fallen limb. I was amazed that 10 people walked right past it and never knew it was there.

Passing the turn off to Buck Rough and realizing at this point that this would be a longer day than originally planned, but Sipsey rarely disappoints, and the extra time spent here is well spent. At the junction of Bee Branch and the river, we sat on a rock and ate a

late lunch, the river low enough to mimic the sounds of a babbling brook. After a deserving break, we turned upstream, passed a tree that read “ I love Adelia”, and began the up and down trek over the many fallen trees that plague the bee branch area. I like to think of them as a safeguard of sorts for the area. After Dan spotted a large “X” on a Yellow Poplar that was obviously marking a bee tree from years ago, I unfortunately discovered and destroyed a fire ring someone had built under the unique rock shelter that’s minutes away from the big tree itself. I do not believe some people will ever learn this area is almost sacred to those who hike I often and truly appreciate it.

We stood for a time in East Bee Branch, staring up until our necks hurt toward the top of the Big Tree, explored beneath the waterfalls to see the rare fern that lives there and seems to be making a recovery, and headed out on the northern side of the stream to get up close to the tall bluffs that engulf the canyon. We made our way down and hopped the creek at the junction of east and west Bee Branch, and crossed the stream further down on a log that at one time was a daring obstacle, but it now become well worn and easier to maneuver. The sun was now high in the sky, and with just about 3hrs of daylight left we set out breakneck pace for the Eye of the Needle, bypassing the apparently washed away sign of 209 where it crosses the river. I showed him Ship Rock and Eye of the Needle along we discussed the history of the area here, the earthquake that formed it, the old grist mill that sat nearby, and the mortar stone along the bluff. I also discovered a second, much smaller mortar stone that I’d never seen before.

Rock hopping across the river here, we stopped for a photo downstream before debating on which route to take on the other side. I voted for heading south, finding the hookup to 209 and making our way to the Rippey Trail. The “pink ribbon fairy” was nice enough to mark the way of 209, greatly unused here, but this is a terrible place to ford in higher water anyway. We went off trail a bit to see the Rippey Cabin, sign the log, and I took down several ribbons marking the way to the cabin. Again, this is the only cabin in the wilderness area I know of that existed, and it’s not something I would want everybody to find so easily. Some wins must be earned here. We left the cabin a little neater than we found it, packing out some trash, and fought briar down to the trail before finishing the climb back to the Rippey Trail. My knees hurt badly at this stage, and the last hour hike out took almost twice that time. It did give us time to enjoy the last bit of foliage fading in the dying light, though. One final gift from the forest to two weary travelers.