

12/19/09: Hubbard Creek Hike, Bankhead National Forest, AL

Last hike of the year, and what a way to end it: 3-4 miles of some of the toughest hiking I've ever done, bushwhacking one of the seemingly least explored creeks of Bankhead National Forest. Gee, I wonder why? It couldn't be the terrain, which was pretty unforgiving at times, or the briars, or that my average speed ended up being less than one mile per hour. In exchange for those challenges, though, was a slew of waterfalls I've never seen photos of before [13 excluding Kinlock falls and Kinlock Chute Falls], including the infamous unnamed side creek off of Hubbard that supposedly contained one of the most photogenic waterfalls in the area. I also learned some lessons about using trash bags as a way of crossing the creek without getting wet. Yes, you read that last part correctly.

I was taking a risk. The hour's drive down could have been greeted by an incredibly swollen creek from all the recent rains, which would have meant going back home. This section, however, dodged the inches and inches that prompted flood warnings in a lot of nearby counties, though. The air temperature this morning was in the mid 30's, and I had to make at least 2 creek crossings: one to the north side, and then back south again, to finish the loop. In preparation for that, I brought along an old remedy I hadn't used in several years: trash bags. Poor man's waders, and they work great, most of the time. Bagging each leg and sealing the tops with duct tape, this would allow walking through 2ft deep water without getting a drop of water on me! Great idea, in theory!

After photographing Kinlock Falls, I decided to test my homegrown idea of trash bags, and picked a shallow, rocky crossing to begin with. Halfway through the creek crossing, though, I slipped, and overcompensating, ended up grinding the trash bag on one foot a little too hard against rock, and it slowly began to fill. This resulted in my leaping to a fallen tree in the creek, which then snagged the other leg's trash bag, ripping it open. Stuck then on a rock in the middle of the creek, I had two choices, roll up my pants and wade the rest of the way, or use the last pair of bags and hope they didn't tear. I chose the latter option, except this time I tossed my shoes and socks to the other shore, and bagged my legs up barefoot for the crossing. This section of the crossing proved as difficult, as the water was a little swifter, and ended up detaching the duct tape that was holding the bags to my pants. A quick bound, though, and I was at the other side. I would have to find an easier route back across at the end, I knew, and set out down the creek.

The first waterfall I came across was Kinlock Chute Falls, which is easily accessed once you find your way through the mass of Mountain Laurel bushes that adorn the creek side here. The lighting today for waterfall photography was better than usual, a lot of clouds, though the veil wore thin at times. I tried hiking along the creek edge here for a bit, mainly because the view of the opposing rock face was beautiful, and the creek has slowly been eroding the bottom part of it which gave it an unusual appearance. Growing tired of this, I walked along the base of the rock face of the south side of the creek, which opened into a brief rock shelter with fire ring, water dripping here, there and everywhere along the edge. The creek then doubled in width, and I suddenly had to follow a narrow game trail along the rocky edge for a ways. Further down the creek at

the bend I could see the cliff on this side of the creek rose steeply, possibly to 100-150ft.

Passing a seasonal waterfall, I eventually made my way through a rocky area and then to the mess of logs and trees wedged against the narrow sandy bank by the huge bluff. A large sandbar was on the opposite side, where, for a change actually had some land to it instead of a sheer bluff line. Navigating through a mess of blow downs shortly after this area, I followed the base of the bluff for a little ways before taking a nasty fall on the slippery, sandy slope and deciding to walk along the creek for a while. At this point the creek was much shallower, rocky in spots and it being the only sound around, was wonderful. The scenery on the opposite side of the creek had changed to the sheer rock being undercut again, and a quiet, whisper-like waterfall fell directly into Hubbard Creek.

Then here, two-thirds of a mile into the hike, the fun times end on the southern side of the creek. A large rock face juts out into the water, and there are two choices: wade the creek, of unknown depth here, or find a way up and over this thing. Choosing the first option, I hiked up, slipping, sliding, grasping for something to hold onto, but there wasn't much. I followed one game trail into a face full of briars. Eyeing what appeared to be another, I slid down a bit and found myself teetering on the edge of a 40ft drop to the water below. I carefully followed the ledge around until it disappeared, with a waterfall beside it. Backtracking, I somehow made it back up that slope, and fought my way up to the top, where I wedged myself between a fallen tree and a groove cut into the rock so it formed a sort of circle, and hoisted myself up between the two and onto the top of the ridgeline. Here, I faced a wild mix of briar and Mountain Laurel before stumbling upon another game trail that led across the top of that waterfall, and a more gentle sloping down. Hearing a roar across the creek, I saw a 50-60ft two tiered waterfall on the opposite side of the creek, and using that, checked my current position on the map. This is the first worth-mentioning intermittent drainage on the south side of Hubbard Creek. I was still a ways away from that side creek, and gave up any hope of making it to the intersection of Quillan and Hubbard, let alone Parker and Hubbard. I sat here and downed a quick sandwich and half a bottle of Gatorade before starting east down the trail again.

Hubbard Creek was very pretty here, with large boulders in the creek itself and cascades scattered about. One interesting feature was an island sort of in the middle of it all with a single tall tree and a few rocks anchored around it. The terrain undulated here, from walks along the creek edge to hugging the sheer bluffs as needed to bypass fallen trees. Not far along is where the waterfalls became plenty. The second possibly seasonal waterfall I passed in this stretch appeared to have a cave behind it, and standing outside, I could see water falling inside the cave a little ways back. I did not venture in, of course, these caves are closed for now, and I was short on time as it was. Another interesting feature of this waterfall is that it goes underground a piece down the streambed and emerging just before entering Hubbard Creek. The blow downs begin again here soon, and the sandy edges of the banks here have given way to quite a bit of landslide activity. This came in handy, though, as a massive logjam against a 2.5ft wide tree solved my dilemma of getting across the creek.

Determined to make it to that infamous side creek, I kept on bumbling through the fallen trees and alternating groves of young trees that have sprung up in the absence of canopy coverage. These areas would make a trip here during the summer almost

unbearable. Another two tenths of a mile or so, and suddenly the land changes. The bluff on the northern side of the creek pulls left, and a significant outlet of water joins Hubbard. I could already hear the rush of water from the waterfall upstream, and that put a smile on my face. Those who have found this creek before and those who will discover it in the future are in for more than one treat, though. There are three waterfalls here! An obvious box canyon, the waterfalls form a triangle. It is possible to see all three waterfalls at the same time. A smaller, narrow stream of water flows off the high rock face on your left, and the accompanied channel meanders to meet the main waterway. On your right, another heavier, wider band slips off, hits a rock ledge, and splashes its way down to the valley floor below. Moss and ferns are abundant here, and there's a definite chill to the air, undoubtedly from all the extra moisture.

At the head of the canyon, though, is the real treat. From a distance you can see above the main chute of falls the two streams cascading down and becoming one before tumbling down a short distance onto a mass of boulders and shimmering its way down, undercutting the bluff and forming another smaller cascade. While not as tall as many of the other waterfalls I have seen in Bankhead, this one has grandiosity all its own. There are no obvious spots to camp here, and there was no garbage to be seen either. A small group of birds nearby happily chirped along and didn't seem to mind my being here. I wish I could have stayed the night here, somewhere. After finishing off one bottle of drink and enjoying the scenery, I turned toward home.

Crossing Hubbard on the fallen tree mentioned earlier, I arrived into such a thicket of blow downs and briars it was impossible to discern a path. Your choices here were to cross the creek and go back the way I came in, or close my eyes and plow through it all. The latter option would prove the better one, as once I got through this mess, the forest opened up, I passed one waterfall after another on this route. There is a fire ring so long abandoned one half it was missing now, along with a strange stash of dry wood under one of the rock shelters here. I made incredible time back to the area of the roaring two tiered waterfall that sat opposite the bluff I had so much trouble with early on, and sat for a while here and enjoyed the beauty of it all.

I decided, though, that my journey of Hubbard would end here. I slowly hiked the sloped bank just past the waterfall, took a few photographs of the top tier of it, and followed a game trail, passing another long abandoned fire ring. I could hear cars moving along the road above, and I walked west in the general direction of Kinlock on the same game trail until I decided my knees had rested enough for me to make a go at getting to the road. Here, the story comes to a close, finding the road about a tenth of a mile from where my car sat parked at Kinlock Falls, the beginning and end to another great, albeit sore, stiff kneed hike in a spectacular forest.