

**05/23/09: Natural Bridge Recreation Area and the trail to Sougahoagdee Falls,
Bankhead National Forest, AL**

I set out a bit later than planned, around 9:30am. Taking CR 63 south to Grayson, I missed the church, which is the New Hope Baptist Church, for future reference. After about 6 miles I came upon a place called the Natural Bridge Recreation/Picnic Area. Met some nice folks there, and the father was happy to get the chance to use his car's GPS unit he got for Christmas. He was able to give me directions back to the intersection of CR 63 and CR 3159/FR 255/Hickory Grove Rd.

Instead of heading out, I scouted out the paved walkway, which is about .75 miles in length, a loop trail. Several wildflowers were in bloom, as Oakleaf and Annabelle Hydrangeas, Spiderwort, as well as Heuchera and wild Phlox. Heading downhill, the trail splits. The trail on the left leads you to the top with an overlook that's probably nice in winter, but with the foliage up you can't see much of the bridge itself. The trail on the right leads you another hundred yards or so to the bridge. I'm sure a seasonal waterfall exists behind the bridge, as there was enough drip coming off the back rock face. My camera couldn't quite pick it up, though.

There's a photogenic tree inbetween the bridge and the rock face, but every shot I took turned out blurry unfortunately. I loved the curves in the trunk. There's also a variety of mosses and ferns growing underneath, but the lighting was tricky, and I didn't manage to shoot what I wanted. Leaving the natural bridge, the loop takes you back uphill, a rock face on your left [with another seasonal waterfall], and a view down into the forest on the right. I found an interesting design in the rocks along the way. The trail then switches you back and you walk along the ridgeline where benches have been installed here and there along the way. It'd be a great place to get away for a secluded picnic lunch. Outside of the small spring that was bubbling from beneath the natural bridge, there is no water available here. There are two open pit toilets, though, and I'll assume they didn't have running water faucets inside.

Taking 63 back north 5.8 miles, I found the New Hope Baptist Church and turned right down CR 3159/FR 255/Hickory Grove Rd. Whatever cable Champion Paper had up is no longer there, and the road was smooth easy trail [for an Alabama dirt road anyway]. Just before the bridge there's a pulloff that I parked in; the bridge itself has some definite erosion issues, but I didn't plan on taking the car across it.

Brushy Creek was flowing pretty good, and that kept hopes high for additional waterfalls along the trail to Sougahoagdee. Before taking to the trail, I stopped to photographed the cascades by the creek along with a plant who's blooms remind me of Astillbe, but I'm not sure that's what it was. About 15ft up the 'trail', an old roadbed, I turned right and found the real trail hidden at first in underbrush. I should have guessed I would have seen this old road bed again, and it pops up several times, once in a particularly good way...

The trail started off very level, right alongside Brushy Creek, and is wide and seems very much used or either very well maintained. There was plenty of evidence of hogs digging around quite a bit here and along other portions of the trail. Half a mile in or so, I found dwarf crested Iris growing, but not yet in bloom. I also began the trek through rock garden', though there are no rocks to step over on the trail itself. There are several sizable boulders here, the area is quite pretty, with plenty of Hemlocks for canopy

and a wide trail at this point. The trail started to gain elevation, and not long after, I came across Waterfall #1, a good 40ft fall if I had to guess.

After a rocky stream crossing, the trail turns uphill again, and while the sound of some rapids in Brushy Creek made me curious for a photo, there was no real safe way to the edge at this point. The trail splits here, though it's easier to follow to the left, which puts you back out on the old road bed that I assume was the same one I saw when I started. After a blowdown that you have to completely go around, the trail then ventures off to the right across a stream. However, stay the course on the old road bed and follow it to Waterfall # 2, a slender 15-20ft drop through a crevice in the rock before reaching a shallow pool below. Taking the road back, and across the stream I found the where the split meets up. Briefly turn back to the right, and you'll find a slippery-to-get-down-to 8ft waterfall, Waterfall #3. The trail opens to some views of Brushy Creek with it's rocky bottom here, before turning uphill again, and again you're on the old road bed, complete with ferns and a few blowdowns, but nothing impassable.

After about 15 minutes of walking the old roadbed, I headed downhill. The amount of land between the high rock face and Brushy Creek diminishes quite a bit, and it gets buggy, with the first mosquitoes I'd seen the entire trip, and a horsefly that didn't make much effort to bother me. The views of the rock face here is awesome, with yellows and reds coming into play with the coloration. A high rock shelter is sandwiched in the middle, but it would have involved some climbing that I wasn't interested in at the moment. What seemed like 5 minutes later, I came across some pink ribbon leading off to the left....not Sougahoagdee, but this nice stair step style waterfall, Waterfall #4. The pink ribbons lead up and over a hill with no discernable trail until it dumps you on an old road bed again, and then the ribbons disappear. I wandered for good half hour before giving up, and going back the way I came. In retrospect, if I'd followed that road bed I have a feeling now it would have led me to the top of Sougahoagdee.

It's not 100 yards to the next waterfall, which you can see from the trail by waterfall #4. Waterfall #5, however, is one I would put in the 60-70ft range. It's a narrow waterfall, with a very small pool at the base, and a rock that seems almost placed perfectly where the splatter hits it from above. Another 5 minute walk, another waterfall, this one in the same height category, maybe a little higher. Waterfall #6 is possibly my favorite of the unnamed falls along the trail, and I would love to see it with more water coming off of it. From here, though, I could here the roar of something else...

Taking the fallen tree across the stream, I came the only fire ring I'd seen along the entire trail. Through the dense foliage, you could see Sougahoagdee from here. This was worth the trip! Of the waterfalls I've seen in Bankhead/Sipsey, this one is my favorite so far. The serenity, the fact that I heard nothing other than birds out here, no cars, no people. I wish the previous campers here had been more thoughtful and taken their trash back with them, but I cleaned up after them at least.

The large bluff off to the left was quite a view, and I would have loved to have [carefully] explored the ferns behind the waterfall. A good deal of the ferns along a 'path' closer to the base of the waterfall have been trampled to bits, albeit by people or other animals. As for not exploring, I know the snakes are out, and I was remote enough to have been in trouble if I'd gotten swiped by something. I came across a gray rat snake on the way back to the car.

