

**05/29/10: Upper Gillespie Creek,
Bankhead National Forest, AL**

Some days can go so terribly, terribly wrong, and today was one of them. I can't believe how badly I underestimated this hike, and the toll it would take on my wife. She's new to the "sport", not totally sold on the great outdoors to begin with and definitely not in the shape to have done what we did with the Wild South group today, and for that, I apologize to her and the other hikers whom we held back. It should not take anyone nearly six hours to hike two miles. I have a new rule: I will never again take her or any other person on a hike of this nature unless I have explored the place myself beforehand.

With the threat of severe weather, and downpours already occurring, this hike was shortened from three miles to two, and further delayed by a road closing that added a good 20-30 minutes before we got to where we needed to go. Our goal, explore Upper Gillespie Creek, its rock formations, waterfalls and the cultural history of the area. It had originally been intended that we would hike High House Hill as well to see the former homestead, interesting plants left behind, and the plantation areas. There were lots of blackberry and muscadine vines all along the old road that was the former driveway essentially to the homes atop the hill.

We began the hike on this old roadbed, hiking about half a mile to three-quarters of a mile up it, passing what looked like a member of the larkspur family and other assorted wildflowers. From here it became an utter and complete bushwhack down the side of the hill to the stream that forms the headwaters of Gillespie Creek. Slippery rocks abound, I tried in vain to get Laurel to use my hiking staff to which she refused and fell repeatedly. In the middle of a downpour, we finally reached a rock shelter to wait out the weather a bit, though everyone was sticky, wet and uncomfortable. Continuing down the drainage and up another draw we found a much larger rock shelter that we sat and ate snacks in for a little while. Just outside of it, someone had carved his or her name into a Beech tree along with a date from 1936.

From there, however, the trip got progressively worse for a while. Twisting her ankle a bit along with other problems, Laurel fought in vain to keep pace with the group leader and other hikers, who seemed on a mission to get the trip done and off before the severe storms that were supposed to strike later in the afternoon. At times we felt left behind, and I became irritated and uninterested in much of anything going on around me and only took photos when the others realized we were out of sight and with my hearing loss out of earshot and waited for us to catch up.

Crossing other small streams, I noted several interesting carvings on the trees, though I'm not certain of whether they are true arborglyphs or not. Further investigation should help determine it, though. We stopped for lunch at another rock shelter that featured the rare Bosch Filmy Fern. Several salamanders were also collected in this area, and we observed a bumblebee nest where the bees were busy drying their wings from all the rain, paying no mind to us at all. We passed on to another drainage with an intermittent waterfall along with Solomon's Seal and a blooming grouping of maidenhair ferns. Several mosses were also in bloom in the area. Just beyond there were many more tree carvings, some obviously native american, others obviously not, and those degraded to the point where it was no longer able to read what was written. Not far from this area

up another drainage was a shelter with a mortar stone. Like many others places in Bankhead, this small section is rich in history.

Keeping to the ridgeline, we came into the next to last leg of the hike, a double waterfall, and a tree with a date from the 1880's. We pondered how we were getting up to the top here, but ended up going around one more bend, and after some trouble with the GPS, made for a rough and tumble scramble up the hillside to the top of the bluff. Coming to the stream atop, the group leader and myself ventured down to see the view from atop the waterfall, which was wonderful, of course. I'm the only from the group today to have a photo of the waterfall there and the view down. Making our way back to the rest of the group, we then set out on for the road, where we'd dropped off some vehicles at Old Beulah Church (spelled Bulah on the sign). Outside of having to circumvent a yellow jacket nest we came out of the last section relatively unscathed, and several hikers applauded Laurel's efforts and sticking with it until the end, with one man noting, "like a hair in a biscuit". There's nothing like a great quote and a bottle of Gatorade to end a hike. Nothing like it at all.