

11/14/09: Collier Creek Hike plus Coal Mine Branch/Holmes Chapel Falls, Bankhead National Forest, AL

It's always good to find a group of people as enthusiastic about exploring the wilds as you are, and that's what happened today. For the first time in a while it wasn't me leading the pack, it was a crew of hikers from the AlaTrails group, Jay, Justin, his dad and uncle, and Josh. This adventure took us down Collier Creek, ending at Collier Creek Falls, but we traveled on to other waterfalls that day as well.

We met at the North Alabama Birding Trail kiosk at the beginning of Walston Ridge Road, a great place to watch for several Warbler species or the Acadian Flycatcher. We, however, were in search of waterfalls this day, and we weren't disappointed. After getting the group together, we drove a little further down the road, stopped at a small pull off that was minutes away from a greenfield, a route we took coming back. Here we set off through the woods, a scrubby area with small deciduous trees growing everywhere and briars thick at times. We topped a hill, crossed an old roadbed and continued down to the next drainage, which was barely trickling. It connected to another small stream, where we began to see the first Hemlock trees. Not far from here we came across our first waterfall, the first of several unnamed, which had a drop of about 6ft. There were interested pieces of metal left beneath the rock overhang to the side, but too degraded to determine what they were used for in the past.

Continuing downstream, we had two options, take the low road alongside the stream, or the high road and deal with Mountain Laurels and brush. Opting for the low road, I scuttled alongside the banks to avoid the slippery rocks. It seemed like only minutes had passed when came across a huge drop off, which turned out to be the 50ft or so Shangri-La Falls. After taking my signature teetering on the edge of the bluff waterfall shot, I made quick work of the 3 or 4ft drop down the rock face using what exposed there were to help along the way. The terrain was incredibly steep here, but the visit was well worth it. While the sun angle was terrible for a decent shot, it did provide opportunity for some rainbow photography within the waterfall itself. I slipped and slid down the steep embankment and made my way behind the falls, which featured a narrow and short rock shelter.

Making my way back to the group standing by the edge of Collier Creek, there's no denying off trail adventures in this wilderness are so much better than any of the maintained trails. You are truly on your own out here. After snapping a quick photo of the views downstream, we turned our attention upstream, starting with two seasonal waterfalls, one of which seemed to whisper from the ledge and nearly disappear when it reached the stream itself. Crossing to the right side of the creek a huge rock shelter opens up, greeted with a sheer rock face on the other side in the 60-70ft range. A tree here, more in the 80ft range had fallen over, and two members of the group who stayed back to photograph the rocks witnessed a bobcat make it's way down the tree and into what we believe was a den hidden behind some large rocks under the bluff shelter. We did not investigate. Not far upstream we crossed a tree in front of some picturesque cascades with a large plunge pool. The canyon here narrows to where you either walked through the water itself, or tried to stay as dry as you could along the incredibly steep all rock banks on either side. We climbed a small 4ft waterfall and continued our trek toward Collier Falls.

Waterfall after waterfall slipped from the ledges throughout this part of the canyon. I took photos of at least three significant ones alone, but the king of them all began as merely a white blob of water in the distance through the trees. After walking behind yet another seasonal waterfall, Collier Creek Falls and the towering stone supports of its former grist mill came into view. It doesn't have the height of Shangri-La, but the amount of water tumbling over top made it at least as impressive, and the deep rock shelter beside it made a great place to sit for a while and eat lunch. After scouting out the location for the alternate route in, we went out the way we came, and as luck would have it, the sun managed to get low enough in the sky, and the lighting was spectacular for a second go at photographing Shangri-La. I found part of the grill of a Chevy truck in the plunge pool, but it didn't take away from the place. How in the world did that get here, though? Climbing back out was easier said than done, with those old tree roots pulling loose a bit and the rock slippery. Another group of hikers who were wandering along Collier Creek as well that day greeted us.

The day was not yet done, though. While the group split up, some going home, Jay, Josh and myself made our way over to a wonderful little box canyon off of Brushy Creek and caught a glimpse of Coal Mine Branch Falls. Parking near a greenfield yet again, we set off down an old logging road and dropped down into the drainage on the left side of the greenfield. A very hard stream to follow, with blowdowns and slippery rocks and shin deep leaves in spots, we eventually made it to Coal Mine Branch Creek, and by then we could hear the falls not a football field's length off to our right. A pretty waterfall with a "C" shaped amphitheater of a rock shelter, the falls seemed to shimmer in the dimming light of the day. Interesting to note, water seeped out from behind the falls as well in a sort of mini cascade. We followed the pink ribbons back out of the canyon, which we didn't see until about midway through this hike, and it led us back to the very end of the greenfield itself. To cap off the day, Jay and I headed on to Holmes Chapel Falls, which sits a 5 minute walk off of the road from a muddy parking area. A note of caution here: as we were taking photos, someone above was hurtling some rather large rocks over our heads toward the plunge pool. One of the taller waterfalls I've experienced in Bankhead, it didn't disappoint, but then again, I don't think any of them ever have.