

**12/11/10: Birdman Tree & Falls,  
Bankhead National Forest, AL**

There is something to be said for staying off trail. We could have taken the easy way in, using one of the horse trails to get close and then just fording Brushy Creek on a fallen tree. In fact, one could have gone right across at the Birdman Tree, split in half from another tree having fallen and taking out the upper portion. However, following such a route would have robbed us the opportunity of walking the ridgelines on either side of Birdman Falls, and the views of the hollow made up for the strenuous, briar filled, pine-tree-in-your-face conditions we were met with.

Tim, Mark and myself started off on a now pretty non-existent forest service road, following until it disappeared about a quarter mile in or so, and then meandering alongside the creek, where we found three stone mounds in an unusual location. It would not make sense for these to be graves, as they were located in a seasonal drainage, nor did they appear to be remnants of retaining wall. Not far past here we finally encountered the rock outcroppings that I enjoy so much in Bankhead, and then the Hemlock grove. The stream gave way to a rock bottom with a high bank, and another stream joined in from the north before spilling over Birdman Falls. The water was low, and we managed to get right to the edge for some dramatic shots down the canyon itself. There was no way down here, so we opted to follow the ridge on the south side to make our descent.

The briars and laurels here made the trek a bit rough at times, and took us treacherously close to a 50-60ft vertical drop at times. We alternated from following a old road bed to game trails where the road was impassable or overgrown. In the back of my mind I was certain this would end up like other places I've been and there not be an easy way down, until we spotted one on the opposite side. After bushwhacking a while longer, the steep cliffs finally gave way to a grassy knoll that led down to a beautiful bend in the river, green in the deep pools. The stream wound back and forth like a braided river would, and seemed unusual in this setting. Wanting to see the falls and attempt to find the Half Moon Tree (actually a crescent moon), we turned east up the canyon, passing a marker tree, and exploring the shallow shelters all along. There were many ferns to see, and in one place, we found an old turtle shell wedged in the rock about six feet off the ground. I pondered the significance of it, having read an article about a clan of Native Americans called the Turtle Clan associated with the area.

Using the coordinates I had for the Half Moon Tree, we searched every available Beech tree on the south side of the creek but never turned up anything. We continued on to the falls, which still had some icicles from the recent cold days. The water was crystal clear, one of the things I love about many of the streams and creeks in the forest, and there was an abundance of flat rocks to skip, though not quite enough water to do the job properly. After satisfying our appetite with photos of the falls and the unique rock formations behind it, we headed back downstream. Determined to find the arborglyph we searched for earlier, I split us up and searched a wider area of trees, again to no avail. On a hunch, I decided to search a large Beech I spotted close to the bluff on the opposite side of the creek, and there it was. It's always a delight to find these things, especially on healthy trees, considering the next one we saw wouldn't be so fortunate. We continued down to where the stream met Brushy Creek, so much narrow here, though it makes sense being the headwaters. Turning north and wandering through alternating grooves of

Hemlock and hardwoods, we passed a handful of bluff shelters nestled into the grassy covered almost rolling hills. We stopped at a shelter with a tree partially blown over, but that arched back upward and continued life above the shelter.

Here my delight turned to continued sadness and disappointment for the complete disregard some people have. That disappointment soon turned to anger and resentment, as large holes and mounds of dirt were piled everywhere, half a dozen beer bottles strewn about. A five gallon bucket with dirt still waiting to be sifted for relics still there, flint chips strewn about, and a mortar stone sitting well out of place, with the potential to be stolen provided someone could carry it out. Marc then found a wooden sifting tray hidden behind some rocks. We debated what to do with them. There were many recent footprints here. We could have hidden them elsewhere, and they would likely be found again. We could have packed them out, and risked a ranger coming upon us and questioning why they were in our possession, or we could leave them there. I wasn't content with any of these options. Having taken photos of the materials beside one another, I proceeded to smash the sifter against the rock wall, ripping the wire mesh from the center. In one of the large holes already dug I placed the bucket inside, and dropped a large rock atop it, destroying it as well. I then placed the wooden parts in the hole as well, threw more rocks on top and kicked in dig to fill the hole as best I could. The wire mesh and beer bottles I put into my pack and would carry out. If there were to be any more desecration of this shelter, they would have to now provide other means.

*I do not apologize for these outbursts (I destroy fire rings I find in sacred sites as well). Call it what you want: the Cherokee blood in me, the anger I hold against people who destroy and desecrate places for a quick buck, a combination of these things, or something else. Either way, it brings out a passion in me unlike anything else.*

After resting for a bit, we continued up along the stream, and in not a tenth of a mile, came upon the Birdman arborglyph. The top of the tree was completely shattered and lying in the creek itself and another tree wedged against the top of the tree, creating splits all down it. We took plenty of photos, because with luck, this arborglyph will soon be removed and preserved in the museum through a grassroots effort of citizens, the Oakville Museum and Wild South. I've read it's thought to be one of the older carvings in the forest, and it would be a shame to see it lost as many others have.

Opting for an alternate way out, we followed an old road bed that ran near the tree as it meandered up and around the hollow before disappearing into a seemingly endless uphill thicket of relatively new Pine trees that ripped our hair and snagged clothing. Having enough of this, we descended back toward the hollow to find ourselves not on "birdman branch", but a separate smaller hollow with it's own rock shelter at the head. The reprieve from the Pines were brief, though, and after plowing headfirst again through another section, we again descended into another hollow, and ended up fairly close to Birdman Falls. We indulged in more photos from this perspective before passing on and making our back up the feeder stream to the road and our vehicle. We topped off the hike with a visit to the Oakville Mounds and Museum. A first visit for the others, and only my second, we spent a few hours listening to stories told by the guide there and studied in amazement of the vast collection of arrowheads and other relics on display before departing for home.