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Schuffert's Strides

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**Davis Creek in Bankhead National Forest,
Northwest Alabama**



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Davis Creek

Follow along with Robert Schuffert on
his recent photographic expeditions



A quaint waterfall along a Davis Creek tributary. This one drops 12 feet into a small pool.

Another great hike through a small portion of Alabama's immense Bankhead National Forest following Davis Creek and several of its smaller tributaries.

Bankhead contains over 181,000 acres of forestlands and canyons. My first venture into this section of the forest, I was surprised to find at least four large waterfalls and numerous cascades, which I previously believed would be dry creek beds. Davis Creek is located not far from two major roadways and just across one of the roads from the Sipsey Wilderness Area, so access is rather easy. Only the more daring hiker explores this area of Bankhead, since there are no trails along most of the journey. On this type of hike, a handheld GPS is almost mandatory. Anyone can easily become lost in these deep canyons and dense forests.

Preparing a journey with topographic maps prior to departing, the route appeared to be about four miles roundtrip. With the cutbacks required to descend bluffs, then return upstream to the falls, and with the frequent zigzagging of creeks through the valley floor, the hike totaled a little over six miles. But the scenery was worth every step!

The weather was absolutely perfect for hiking and photographing, partly cloudy with a high of 58 degrees. Although at some points the high contrast between bright sunlight and deep shadows made framing scenes extremely difficult, at a few locations the lighting could not have been more stunning. Partly cloudy days are great for photography; if the scene has too much contrast, just wait a few moments for clouds to cover the sun and disperse the light.



The creek winds it's way through the valley floor below the falls.



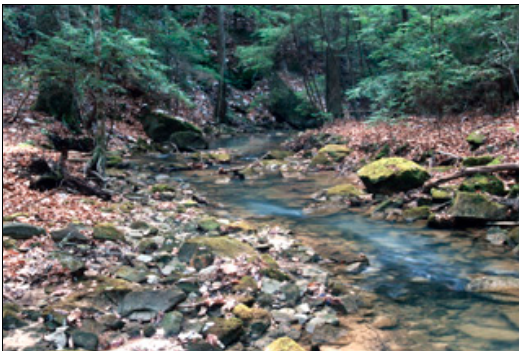
High waters during recent floods carried this fallen tree over the falls.



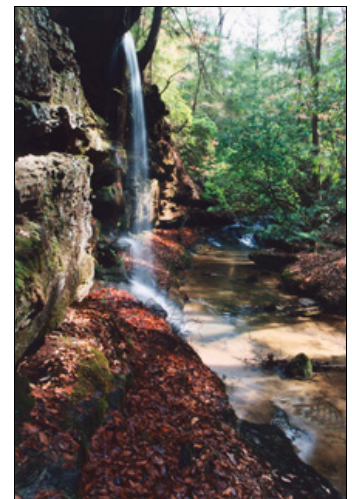
Resembling a shark, this tree trunk shows evidence of a hard life.



A small side stream flows into the canyon as the main stream cascades under trees in the background.



This peaceful stream provided a great place to stop and rest before venturing on to the next waterfall.





Water gently cascades around this large boulder along the stream.



Back tracking several hundred yards up this small box canyon, this 30-foot waterfall beckoned. The copperhead was found lying just to the left of this turquoise pool.



Sunlight beaming down from above highlights the upper portions of this image.



This copperhead almost completely disappears into it's surroundings.



Aptly named the "Field Goal Tree", the diagonal branch from the nearest birch tree actually merged with it's neighbor and continued growing with it.

Unusual for this cooler time of year, a copperhead was found lying on one rock across the pool below a large waterfall. It hardly moved, and almost ignored us as several walked by within feet. So well camouflaged, it was very difficult to spot among the fallen leaves, even when starring directly at it. Although poisonous, copperheads aren't aggressive unless provoked and are not deadly, but would make walking out very uncomfortable. Other than birds, snakes and insects, wildlife is not often spotted in Bankhead due to years of harvesting and replanting of a single type tree, the Lob Lolly Pine. Although there are deer, wild pigs and bobcats throughout the forests, most prefer areas with a wider variety of foliage. Much progress has been made over the last few years to limit timber harvesting, helping to restore the forest to its natural state. Since the canyons were mostly untouched during the harvesting years, these unbelievably beautiful places still retain their natural splendor. Hemlock and mountain laurel flourish in the canyons, protected from high winds by the surrounding rock cliffs. The only way to witness this beauty is by foot, or horseback in the northern sections of the forest.



This stream has channeled its route through large boulders filling the streambed.



Looking back over the 65-foot waterfall, sunlight glistens from the water and through the foliage.



Water plummets about 65 feet at the head of this box canyon.

Entering the forest following a dry creek bed allows a gentle descent to the canyon floor where the forest's beauty remains hidden. As the journey continues, more and more water collects in the creek from the surrounding hillsides and builds its strength. Eventually, the creek winds its way downhill, where it has eroded earth away to solid rock. As the canyon gets deeper, and the water more powerful, cascades begin to form. Suddenly, the terrain drops into a deep gorge, forming a magnificent waterfall. In many areas, following larger creeks upstream leads to box canyons where the water plunges over the rock ledges high above. The hiker's only way out of these box canyons is by retracing their path. Usually, a break in the cliff face will provide a steep exit route to the top of the waterfall. Bankhead National Forest has over 400 miles of these canyons; there's no wonder why it's called "*The land of 1,000 waterfalls*"!

Robert Schuffert