

By GEORGE ROBERTSON, M.D.

The early morning sunlight filtered through the new leaf growth on the trees at the top of the Cumberland Plateau. We were beginning a hike to Virgin Falls, a State natural area, a wilderness pocket located just south of DeRosset, Tenn. It was cool in the early morning amidst the shadows of the trees and the Mount Laurel bushes that grew high above our heads at the top of the trail.

We wound back and forth on a well-marked and maintained trail beside a small creek that descended to the first rock limestone outcrop and fell 20 feet into the clear deep pool below it, Big Branch Falls. There was an outcrop there with a smooth floor beneath, a place where the Native Americans used to be sheltered from the elements. A place also used by our guide, John McFadden, of the Tennessee Environmental Council. He went to school at Tennessee Tech and had used these woods as his playground for most of his 50 years.

The trail began to drop steeply and the steps carved out in the terrain were much appreciated as we dropped down into Laurel Creek Valley, a watershed the flow of which would soon make its way into the clear blue waters of the Caney Fork River 500 feet below. But before doing so it would drop over Big Laurel Falls for an estimated 50 feet into a pit and disappear into the ground with so many caves and cracks in its rocky subterranean world that it would be hard to trace the river's exact route as it was compelled downward by gravity, the same force that pulled us deeper into the valley.

Wildflowers began to pop out on the hillsides as the Mount Laurel shrubbery gave away to the mature hardwood forest. Almost all of the favorite flowers were seen along the trail with the exception of the Columbine which I looked for but never could identify.

Then we began to hear a few bird calls and caught a glimpse of the first migrant, a Black Throated Green Warbler that would be passing through on its way north for the summer. It was singing in the trees above Big Laurel Falls. I wondered why it would want to go anywhere else in the world because the surrounding flowers here were so beautiful.

Hiking Virgin Falls

Monday, April 2, 2012

Another bird song we heard at first was a mystery until Linda finally remembered identifying it on a field trip in the Chestnut Mound area. The Louisiana Water Thrush was singing, its sounds filtering through the trees just above the roar of the fast-moving waters of the Caney Fork River.

We were now 4 miles from the trailhead and at least 500 feet below it. John had a feast for us that he had put in his backpack, and I rested with my tired feet in the cold Caney Fork River as I consumed delicious cheese, summer sausage, trail mix and large juicy grapes.

With renewed energy and numb feet we started the flat part of the hike to the Virgin Falls, a spot both beautiful and ignomatic where the river exits a spring, runs for 100 feet overland and then plummets an estimated 75 feet in a cascading waterfall and then disappears immediately into the ground beneath it. The mist coming from the falls and the air circulating around it gives a natural air conditioning which at this time in the noonday sun was relished by the hot hikers.

After enjoying the spectacle of the waterfall and the surrounding wildflowers, we hiked upward to Sheep Falls for a similar geographic anomaly. From there it was almost a steady climb back up the trail reconnecting with the little creek on our way back to the car.

The hike is a moderately strenuous one which takes the better part of a day and should not be taken lightly or without adequate preparations.

Editor's Note: George Robertson is a physician with Family Medical Associates, PC, in Lebanon.