

Wildcat Falls and the Legend of the Burning Stones

A Trail Snack

By Gregory Bruner

The orange jewel flamed to life in the sunlight filtering through the leaves of the hardwood trees surrounding the falls. I swung myself out over the stream with one arm around a small oak tree and squinted into the sun while trying to get a better look at my prey. It had eluded me the week before, but I would not be denied again.

What was it? It was orange and seemed to be clinging to the rocks of the waterfall a hundred feet or so up the stream. The week before I had hazarded the climb but had been unable to traverse the slippery rocks. The setting sun and slick stones had been my downfall (figuratively, not literally). Today it was mid-morning, so I had plenty of time. The prey was in my sights. I would have my prize.

Glancing quickly down the slope and bidding farewell to the defeat of last week, I began the ascent. Was it my imagination or was the trail (if you could call it that) steeper this week? Vertical climb was a more fitting term.

The prize glittered just out of reach. Three times I tried. Three times I failed. Each time my approach was blocked by the stream and its defense of slippery stones. The stream was a very effective barrier, protecting this treasure from every approach. 60 feet... 40 feet... By this time it was only 30 feet away but still apparently unreachable. Now I had a clear picture of my elusive prey, a plant that was 12-18" tall with dark green leaves.

When I saw that the tuft of leaves at the end of each branch looked as if they had been dipped in orange paint, a little bell dinged in the back of my head. Mentally I put a flag on that as the rusty gears of my internal processor began to turn. I looked for a fourth and very probably final approach to the plant. Daylight was abundant, but energy was failing fast. Plant hunting can be an exhausting business.

Tips dipped in paint? Like a paintbrush? Indian Paintbrush?! It is a jewel seen in books, but I had never seen in the wild. Although this plant actually considers most of the east coast home, it is found in only two locations in the state of South Carolina, where I am currently adventuring. I knew that this plant generally enjoys growing in wet meadows or open woodlands, so an outcropping on a waterfall in the woods fit that perfectly.

Up, up I go as more memories percolate to the surface of my consciousness. I passed little treasures along the way—Pussytoes, Columbine, Asters, Solomon's Seal, Dwarf Crested Iris—but none of them could distract me from my goal.

A rock beside the stream made a fine seat as I rubbed my hand absently through a patch of mountain mint, inhaling the wonderful fragrance. Mentally I was refereeing a discussion between mind and body. The mind just couldn't understand why all of the muscles were so tired. One more push was all we needed, the mind pleaded!

Thinking it was still 20 years old, my mind steadfastly refused to believe that the 40+-year-old muscles and joints were actually reaching a point of exhaustion. Logical? No. Smart? Probably not. However, the aching muscles and joints gave in one more time.

With that argument settled I could now return to the chase and the climb that again loomed ahead of me. I distracted my rebellious muscles by recalling that the "flowers" of the Indian Paintbrush are actually leaves, just like the colored bracts of a poinsettia. The true flowers are very small and greenish yellow, only of interest to the surrounding insect life or the occasional hummingbird but certainly not plant hunters.

The climb to the top of the waterfall was uneventful other than mentally cataloging another dozen or so wonderful leafy denizens for later inspection. Now I was 50 feet above the Indian Paintbrush. However, because going down slippery rocks at a steep angle is even less advisable than climbing up them, once again it appeared I was at the edge of defeat. The top of

the waterfall was flat and should be much safer to ford. It was possible that I would find a better approach from the other side.

My muscles realized what was happening too late to abort the jump as I leaped to a large rock in the center of the stream. Both knees registered their protest as I impacted the 3-foot flat landing zone in the center of the stream and it tilted to one side! Three-foot rocks are not supposed to move! Glancing to my right and noting the considerable drop down the waterfall, adrenaline kicked in. Calculating on the fly, I was airborne and heading toward the opposite shore before I totally realized what was happening.

Adrenaline might be good for survival, but generally it is poor when it comes to exact details, such as where I was going to land. Crashing through the brush on the other side, I saw lots of white as branches hit me in the face. As my left foot found solid ground, I caught a glimpse of orange where my right foot was going to land. My left knee yelped in pain as I twisted to avoid what I subconsciously registered as a near disaster.

I stood up in the middle of a number of short Granddaddy Graybeard trees, which would account for the white that had blinded me in my hasty, ungraceful approach of the far side of the stream. I admired the wispy tufts of bright white flowers and rejoiced in the concept of dry and solid ground.

I quickly recalled the point of my current adventure. Glancing down toward my right foot, I realized the glimpse of orange I had seen was actually a small patch of Indian Paintbrush. Unknowingly, I had almost landed in the middle of it. I was so enthralled with my incredible luck that my knees did not argue too much as I knelt down beside the glowing jewel of my desire.

I recalled the native American legend of the Indian Paintbrush as I gently touched the orange tips of the leaves, which seemed to glow in the sunlight. Closing my eyes I could almost see the native American artist who had a passion for painting exquisite sunsets standing in the distance. The last glow of an incredible sunset fades behind him. As he bends over to put his tools and brushes away, one brush accidentally slips from his grasp and falls to the ground. The final rays of the setting sun touch the brush as it lies there in the grass. The next day flowers will spring from the ground. The sun had given a beautiful gift to the plant, painting the tips of its leaves shades of brilliant orange like a beautiful sunset.

Meanwhile, the stream rushed by scant feet away. The noise of the rushing water combined with the singing birds and breezes rustling through the leaves of the trees to create a natural symphony. Slowly I opened my eyes, begrudgingly returning to reality.

The arguments of mind and body began again as everyone realized that what goes up must come down, and it was a long way down to the bottom of the falls. After savoring my surroundings for a few more moments, I snapped a few pictures and began to choose a nice slow path for descent.

Wildcat Falls in upstate South Carolina is definitely a well-kept secret and deserves to be visited on many occasions during the year. The plentiful species that inhabit the surrounding woods make for an interesting adventure every time. I never know what will be found hiding in the shade under the mature tree canopy, by the twisting stream that feeds the multi-tiered falls.