

Graveyard Fields, NC 215, Whitewater Falls, and others

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I'm sure the most of you are very familiar with Rich Stevenson's fantastic website, ncwaterfall.com, and have probably read his story about how he was smitten with waterfall fever while living near Raleigh ~15 years ago. Not being able to stand only making 5 or so waterfallin' trips a year, he finally moved to the Asheville area to the ultimate good of all us waterfall lovers. His site is a great resource, but at least to me in some ways his PBase galleries that he has put together over the years, are even more inspiring, with tons of photos documenting his explorations year by year.

Oh well, enough praise for one day. There are some similarities between my situation and what Rich went through in those early days of his waterfall fever. I too live near Raleigh and likewise am limited to 5 or so waterfallin' trips a year. I guess the big difference is that I still live near Raleigh. This is where home is and we have a big family. It just wouldn't do to move that far away from them, even if I could.

Typically I satisfy my waterfallin' cravings with a couple of long weekend family trips a year and if I'm fortunate, a few more shorties - including an occasional daytrip. In years past many of those day trips were solo, but that has been less frequent since my family thinks I'm too old to be going up and doing dangerous things like hiking to waterfalls all by myself; especially since my old hiking buddy Siggy died a while back (Siggy was my dog). My wife and I have taken several overnight trips and sometimes my son or my daughter who lives near us will go up with me. I also have a friend named Glenn who lives in Rocky Mount, which if you know your NC geo is about an hour further away from the waterfalls than Raleigh. Glenn is 74 years and has arthritis pretty bad resulting in a bad knee (among other problems) which can make going up and down trails a bit challenging. He's a gamer though and we just did our 3rd day trip this past Friday (10/17/14). I know of few people who have a greater appreciation for the beauty of our NC waterfalls and it is a joy to lead him down a trail and see (and/or hear) his response to seeing a new one. Sometimes he'll stand there in amazement for a while and then let out one of his Tarzan yells - maybe even thump his chest a bit.

We decided to meet in my church's parking lot on the east side of Raleigh at 5:00 Friday morning. That meant for Glenn arising at 3:00, getting ready for the trip and then driving an hour to Raleigh to meet me. Now that's dedication to the cause! 5:00 is a great time to leave since we were well past Winston-Salem before the morning rush hour, and from that point on it was smooth sailing to Asheville.

I had hoped that we would be able to stop at Mission Hospital to visit Bernie Boyer who had heart surgery on Tuesday, but when we stopped at Marion to get some gas I called Bernie's wife Diane and she told me that she had just talked to his surgeon and he told her that he shouldn't have any visitors for 2-3 weeks because of it being flu season. She told me that other than that, he was doing extremely well. I hated not getting a chance to visit with him especially since my friend Glenn is a former Pastor and an expert on hospital visitation, but I guess that gave us a bit more time for waterfallin'. Hopefully he will make a quick recovery and as his doctor told him before the surgery, be as good as new - hiking ten miles a day (got an email from him today [10/20/14] saying he was feeling good and getting stronger).

We met up with the Blue Ridge Parkway on the west side of Asheville and scooted up to Graveyard Fields, stopping at several overlooks along the way to enjoy some spectacular views. There were places where, despite the incredibly clear sky, low hanging clouds had settled in between some of the distant ridges. They just glowed a brilliant white with the morning sun shining brilliantly down on them.



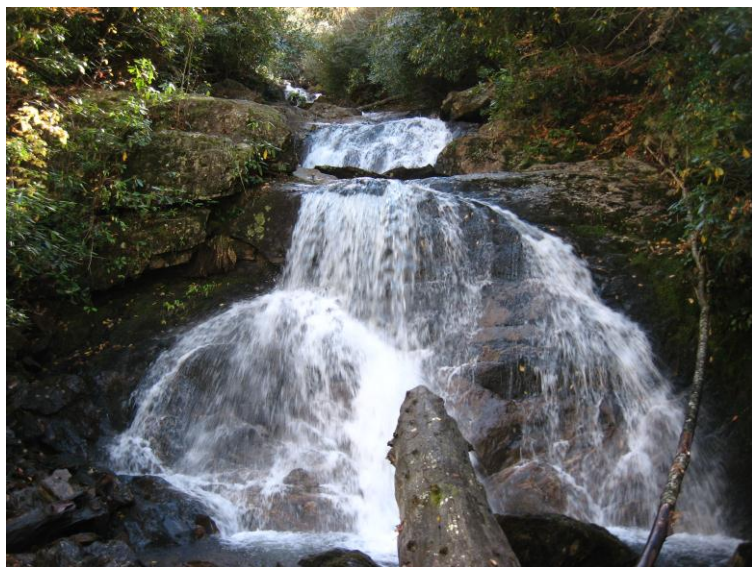
There were a good number of cars already at the Graveyard Fields parking area, but not as many as I feared there might be. I figured that Second Falls would be a good way to start the day. I guess I hadn't really thought it all the way through - when you've got a bad knee, going up or down stairways can be a challenge, and that's one thing the trail to Second Falls has plenty of. But Glenn was ready push on, using me as a brace to lean on at places as we headed down and stopping at the top of each flight for a short breather as we made our way back up. With all the cars there, I sure figured there'd be folks down at the falls when we got there. Although we passed a few who were on their way back up, there was not a soul at the bottom when we arrived. I think that's a first for me.



I don't think that Glenn ever meet a hiker he didn't like. He would greet everyone we passed and after we had climbed back up the long flight of steps near the bottom, every time a group approached us he would flag 'em down and say: "Can I have your attention? You know that if you go down, you have to come back up. Have nice day!"

A couple of miles further down the Parkway we turned north on Hwy. 215, stopping to look at the roadside view of the Cascades on Bubbling Springs Branch. The way the sun was glaring down, there were definitely no good photo ops here. We continued on down to the pull off for the trail to the falls on Sam Branch and the tributary in Wash Hollow. We walked on over to the beginning of the trail, which is a ~20' section that is almost straight up, and Glenn wasn't really sure that he was up to tackling the climb. About that time a car pulled off the road and parked in front of my RAV4. The driver jumped and jogged over to where we were and wanted to know if we knew where the trail to Sam Branch was. He was ranting about the poor directions in that Adams book that he had with him, but I quickly corrected him, telling him that the directions in the Adams book could not be the problem. I *will* give him a break in that the little trail is not as obvious as might be desired and there is no marker, but it is still pretty clear once you set your eyes on it.

Well Glenn decided to give it a try and we struggled a bit to get him up to the old logging road, but we made it okay and then carefully headed toward the falls. I knew that there was probably no way that he would be able to get over Sam Branch to get a good view of the falls in Wash Hollow, so maybe we should have skipped this one. I think that he did enjoy the beautiful walk along the trail and what he could see of the falls on Sam Branch. It was also possible to make out part of the falls in Wash Hollow through the forest. Shortly after we arrived at Sam Branch the young fellow we'd talked to earlier showed up with his wife and their six year daughter who they said was hooked on hiking. He had a good list of waterfalls on their agenda that they were planning to check out the remainder of the day. Since he had Kevin's book with him, I'm sure he had a very successful day.



The first couple of times there I had crossed Sam Branch where the trail leads midway up the falls, but since then I've pretty much decided that the best way to get across (at least for me) is to back track down the trail a bit and take a steep little path down to the creek below where the tributary joins in with Sam Branch and then rock hop back upstream and over to the opposite side of the branch. I told Glenn that I was going to make a quick trip over to the other falls and he looked at me and said: "Are you coming back?" I assured him that I was and that it wouldn't take too long. He decided to head back to the car. I figured he would wait for help when he got back to where the trail drops down to the road, but when I got there he had already worked his way down and only had a little extra mud on the back of his pants.

We road on down and crossed over the West Fork at Sunburst Falls, but all the "parking spaces" were full so we just turned around and headed back towards the Parkway, stopping briefly on the bridge for Glenn to take a pic.

The colors were beautiful down around this area, but became sparser as we headed up the road, although there were still brilliant splotches of orange and red dotting the otherwise leafless slopes closer to the Parkway. It has always been interesting to see the difference in when the leaves change at relatively the same elevation depending on what side of a ridge you may be. As we crossed under the Parkway and headed south, there was a drastic change: on the north side the trees were mostly bare, but on the south side below Devil's Courthouse, the trees were full of colorful leaves. We stopped at the first pull off heading down the mountain and marveled at the colors and the glorious vista of ridge after ridge stretching off into the distance.

A short distance further down 215 we turned onto FR 4663 and started on what was a real adventure for Glenn. We had driven down some FR roads on our last trip, but there was something about this one that made him feel like we were going on and on and getting farther and farther away from civilization (which I guess we really were). Once at the parking area we headed carefully down the trail enjoying the incredibly beautiful day and I pointed over to the right as we reached a spot where the top of the falls could be seen through the trees. Glenn nodded his head but was more intent on watching his steps as he headed down the trail, however once we reached Tanasee Creek and he looked up to a clear view of Dill Falls he was just blown away. Don't remember exactly what he said, but it was words of wonder at the beauty of this dramatic waterfall. It wasn't long before he let forth with his famous (at least to me) Tarzan yell (but no thumping of his chest this time).

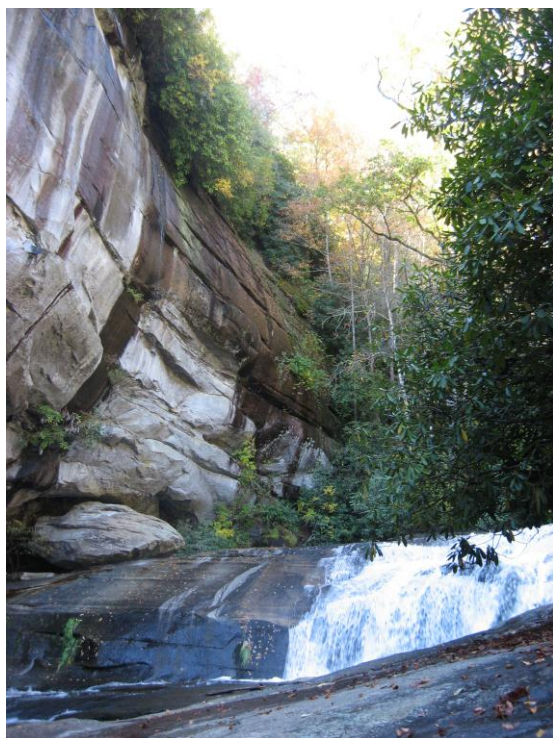


I don't think Glenn wanted to leave this spot, but after enjoying it for a few minutes he capitulated to my suggestions that we head back to the car and we starting working our way back up the trail. Enjoying once again the beautiful drive through the forest, we made our way back toward 215 and then descended down toward Living Waters Ministries and the waterfalls on their properties. Glenn was beginning to get a bit tired but I figured the short little walk over to Mill Shoals and French Broad Falls would not be a problem. I wasn't sure however, whether he was up to the little hike downstream to Cathedral Falls. I wanted to be careful not to push him too hard, but I really felt like he could manage this one and although we had to take our time and be very careful working our way down to the base of the falls, he was once again dazzled by the falls and particularly the massive overhanging cliff above it. He also tremendously enjoyed the trail as

it followed along beside the river and felt that the couple of significant drops along the way between the “major” falls were perhaps even worthy of having their own singular designation.

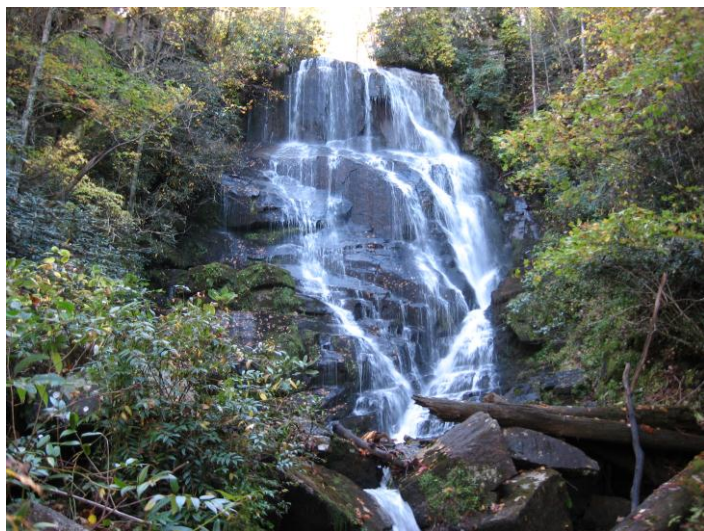


We passed a number of groups as we headed away from Cathedral Falls and back to the car. One couple from down near Atlanta was carrying their copy of Kevin’s book so I was confident that they were in good hands as they continued on along with their adventure.



Once back to the car, Glenn was beginning to think that he might have had enough. I had mentioned to him earlier the possibility of checking out Whitewater Falls since he had never seen it and I knew for sure that everyone should see it before they die. The male member of the couple that we had talked to on the last portion of our return trip from Cathedral Falls tried to tell us that it was a 1 mile hike to the upper overlook. As Kevin mentions in his book, there *is* a sign at the beginning of the trail that says 0.5 mile, but there ain’t no way. Kevin lists it at 0.22 mile. The guy also said he had counted them himself and that there were 154 steps down to the lower viewing deck - I’ll take his word for that one.

Aside from being bushed, Glenn was a little concerned about the time as well. I told him to ponder things a bit and let me know what he wanted to do – we could go right when we got to US 64 and head towards Whitewater Falls or we could turn left back towards Brevard and take a short detour to Eastatoe Falls. Obviously the second option would get us home sooner, but I was going to leave it up to him – make a decision before we get to 64. Unfortunately he hadn't been able to make up his mind when we got to the stop sign and I had to take matters into my own hands. I turned left and as the RAV4 headed for Brevard, Glenn starts pitching a hissy fit saying: "I want to go to Whitewater Falls!!! I want to go to Whitewater Falls!!!!" We both had a good chuckle as we turned down Hwy 178 toward Eastatoe Falls, and shortly thereafter we took our final short hike of the day. This is one waterfall that I had taken him to before and I've lost count of how many times I've seen it, but we both marveled once again at its splendor and soaked in the sights and sounds of our last falling water feature of this most enjoyable trip.



After picking up a fine gourmet lunch (or early supper) from Wendy's in Brevard, we began our long drive home. There was one final unexpected highlight of the day as we passed through Statesville. The *Carolina BalloonFest Hot Air Balloon Festival* was held there over the weekend and we cruised through town on I-40 as a multitude of brightly colored balloons drifted northward above the Interstate. I suppose they were headed for the Statesville Regional Airport to end their day's journey.

As we approached the end of our trip, Glenn informed me that this might be his last trip because he seemed to be having some equilibrium problems and found himself stumbling occasionally. I told him that I thought he handled things pretty well and as long as he had someone to lean on from time to time, maybe he would be okay. He would love to Whitewater Falls and we decided that we would revisit the situation next spring and see how he was doing.

It was a mighty fine day!