

The Phantom of Yellow Branch Falls

The ghost had haunted my mind for an entire year. Had I seen it? Was it really there? Or was my mind playing tricks on me? It would not have been the first time. The van glided to a stop in the secluded parking area of Yellow Branch Falls on a muggy day in July. Heat had never deterred the Crazy Plant Hunter before. What's a few degrees of heat, give or take 10? After 90 it's just hot.

Flower hunting at the end of July. Crazy? Probably. Will I find something interesting? Always. The trail to Yellow Branch Falls never fails to show me something new every time my boots hit the path. Blurry images of my prey cluttered my mind as I put boots to trail and ambled toward the inviting entrance to the path. I could almost hear the words of a voice whispering in my ear, welcoming me back to chase the phantom, as a breeze gently rustled through the leaves far above my head.

After a few minutes I rounded a bend in the path, and my internal radar signaled my feet to slam on the brakes. Bells and whistles shrieked, echoing in the wide open spaces of my mind. What? Where? As I wobbled momentarily to regain my balance from the abrupt stop, I scanned the area for what my subconscious had flagged as important. Seeing lots of dried leaves and sticks, I closed my eyes and listened closely. I heard the stream cheerfully gurgling 10 feet away and could feel the tension of the week draining down and out through my toes. Slowly soaking in the sounds of my surroundings that were painting a mental picture, I opened my eyes and saw the woodland with totally different eyes.

Drifts of Galax covered a large area in front of me, with some of the leaves showcasing beautiful silver veins that stood out against the dark green of the large rounded leaves. Through the lake of dark green ran veins of a smaller leafy critter sprinkled with little red berries. This delicate fellow was Partridgeberry, its cheerful little berries adding a scattering of happiness wherever the evergreen ground cover crawled. Sprouting from the depths of this green lake, the twisting, contorted trunks of rhododendrons and mountain laurels stretched out while grasping for the sunlight filtering through the towering hardwoods. Around edges of the leafy expanse were little clumps of spotted wintergreen, their thinner variegated pointed leaves standing out against the larger Galax leaves. The scene reminded me of hikers enjoying the edge of a secluded pond. I stared for one last moment at the scene, burning the image into my memory as my feet began to move down the trail.

The drifts of Galax gave way to larger swathes of Partridgeberry until the industrious small-leaved critter covered an equally large area to the right side of the trail. From this sea of rolling green sprouted blue-green long strap-like leaves and lighter green long thin ribbed leaves. Sprigs of small Blueberry bushes also sprung up, holding their limbs and leaves above the ocean of green like delicate blue-green floating clouds.

The gears of the internal processor began to spin, squeaking in protest while trying to process this oddity. The blue-green was a type of Iris. But the other I had never seen

before. Mentally, I informed the research department to flag that for later examination. I also sent off a note to mark this area for future visits with the hope of sneaking up on a flower. Hopefully, the long-term memory department had shown up for work today.

The memory department chimed in as if on cue, reminding the feet that while this was interesting, we were not getting any closer to the area the phantom had prowled last year. Reluctantly, my boots began shuffling down the trail again.

The faint animal trail twisting off to the right almost escaped the notice of the often-distracted observation department. When the feet stopped their forward progress and began a slow reverse shuffle, I took notice of my surroundings. I used the term trail only in the most general sense. The path dropped off to the right at a very steep angle. The spidery fingers of tree roots snaked across the faint path with alarming frequency, forming a virtual tangle of an obstacle course. The knees and ankles began aching, just considering the possibility of a “safe” descent.

Really? Truly? The phantom is “That Way!!!” The little fellow from the memory department is yelling, jumping up and down again and pointing down the main trail. No. Memory, your track record is not that stellar. It was this way, the research department calmly countered. Getting bored, the feet cut everyone off by slowly taking the first step down the steep slope.

The slightly hazardous descent involved everyone working together to traverse the terrain safely, so the argument was put on hold temporarily. When my feet finally landed on flat ground after an uneventful few minutes, I found myself in a hidden paradise. Memory annoyingly chimed in that we had definitely never been here before and was greeted with utter silence. The panoramic scene before my eyes was beautiful and tranquil almost beyond description.

A perfectly positioned and sized stone created a fine seat as my knees gave way before the perfection of my surroundings and I sat down; closing my eyes, I absorbed the scene into my soul.

The trunks of rhododendrons and mountain laurels reached up above my head, arching over the area and creating the ceiling of this outdoor room. Their contorted, twisting branches clawed for the light filtering down through the surrounding trees. The first impression was that they were in pain, with their contorted stems bearing the weight of the world. But how could anything bad touch this paradise? I believe the strength of their twisted limbs held the monsters of humanity at bay, creating a safe haven for those who sought the hidden stronghold of peace and tranquility.

The corner of the “room” was formed by a two-sided waterfall. Water flowed around the corner and down its two flat walls, creating a unique area. The water trickling down the stones of the two walls seemed to enhance the soothing qualities of this hidden treasure. Although possibly not the most beautiful waterfall, or the biggest, this was definitely one of the most comforting ones I had encountered in my adventures.

The sun was moving higher in the sky above the canopy of hardwoods, and I was getting no closer to catching my elusive phantom. So with only minor protests, I engaged four-limb drive and began the short steep climb back to the comfort of the flat main trail.

I rounded the corner of the trail and stopped, absently running my hand over the roughly textured bark of a towering tulip poplar with a monstrous three-foot-thick trunk. This ancient sentinel must have watched the phantoms roam the woodland for over 100 years. What stories it could tell if it could only talk! Unfortunately the only voices I heard today were from the committee in my own mind.

The fellow from the often-forgotten long-term-memory division was jumping up and down in the back of my mind, trying to get my attention. The bank steeply dropped off to my right. Yes, this was getting familiar. I could almost catch glimpses of the phantom out of the corner of my eye. The gentle breeze was a taunting whisper in my ear.

The research department, sensing the closeness of its prey, released the hounds. They charged off in every direction. My feet slowed to a shuffle as I took in my surroundings, marking and cataloging every plant I saw. Trying to hold back the mounting excitement, I knelt by a burl-covered sugar maple, enjoying the texture and moss that covered the trunk. There were little ferns growing in the moss on the tree trunk! While very interesting, this was still not the quarry I was hunting today.

I absently ran my hand through some foliage at the base of the stately tree, and the aroma that wafted up sent off bells of recognition. I picked a few leaves, crushed them, and brought them close to my nose. This was it! The smell was right. I glanced down at the leafy critter at my feet and recognized what I thought was *Monarda*. OK. The leaf was right, the stem was right, but the aroma was not quite right. Besides, since when did *Monarda* grow in the middle of the woods? Oh well. This was it! It had to be! I searched the area for an actual flower.

Monarda was a leafy family member I knew well. The species *didyma* and *fistulosa* have always been gardeners' favorites for bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. So this must be a cousin of a very familiar leafy critter indeed, making me want to find it even more. My boots slowly shuffled along the trail, with the research department calling a stop every few steps. All thoughts of my favorite waterfall at the end of the trail flew from my mind as I tried to absorb every inch of scenery.

The end of the trail was almost in sight. Even at my greatly slowed pace, I had almost traversed the entire length of the trail and my journey was about to end in failure. I had managed to find many leafy specimens, but as of yet not a single flower. The scorching heat of the summer had taken its toll on the local vegetation.

The thunder of the approaching waterfall distracted me momentarily as I rounded a corner on the trail. I have learned to listen to my subconscious. When my feet stop for no apparent reason, there is typically a reason. I had stopped on the trail again, so I observed the cooked vegetation before me. The colors down the trail did not jump out at me

because there were none to leap out. It was the absence of color. Then down the trail I spotted sporadic stems of white flowers. In defiance of the brutal July environment, the Monarda was flowering. The phantom of last year's hike now drifted within reach of my grasp at the edge of the trail. I knelt down next to the delicate flower, reaching out to touch it, almost expecting it to disappear before my eyes. It was real. The flower shape was tubular like a typical monarda, but the flower was white with tiny purple spots!

The research department was in an uproar, worse than a herd of mice being corralled by cats. Pictures and passages from books flashed across my mind as I processed this botanical treasure. A brave mouse stood up to the cats and brought control to the chaos of my mind. I had never had the pleasure of seeing *Monarda clinopodia* in person, only as pictures in books.

Also known as White Bergamot, it actually prefers a woodland setting to grow, although it does generally appreciate strong filtered light or an open area of the woodland. As with its cousins, it normally likes an average to moist growing site, which would explain its sporadic flowering considering the dry summer we had endured. It would definitely be a wonderful surprise for any butterflies or hummingbirds that lucked upon it.

The sun had begun its descent for the day when I awoke from my haze of thought. The July heat could not extinguish the excitement of the hunt. The phantom had been real. As was the norm, my feet began to move of their own accord down the trail toward Yellow Branch Falls. The voices in my head told me it would be dark before I returned to civilization tonight if I continued on to the falls, but that was OK. The Phantom of Yellow Branch Falls would guide my steps and protect this Crazy Old Plant Hunter.