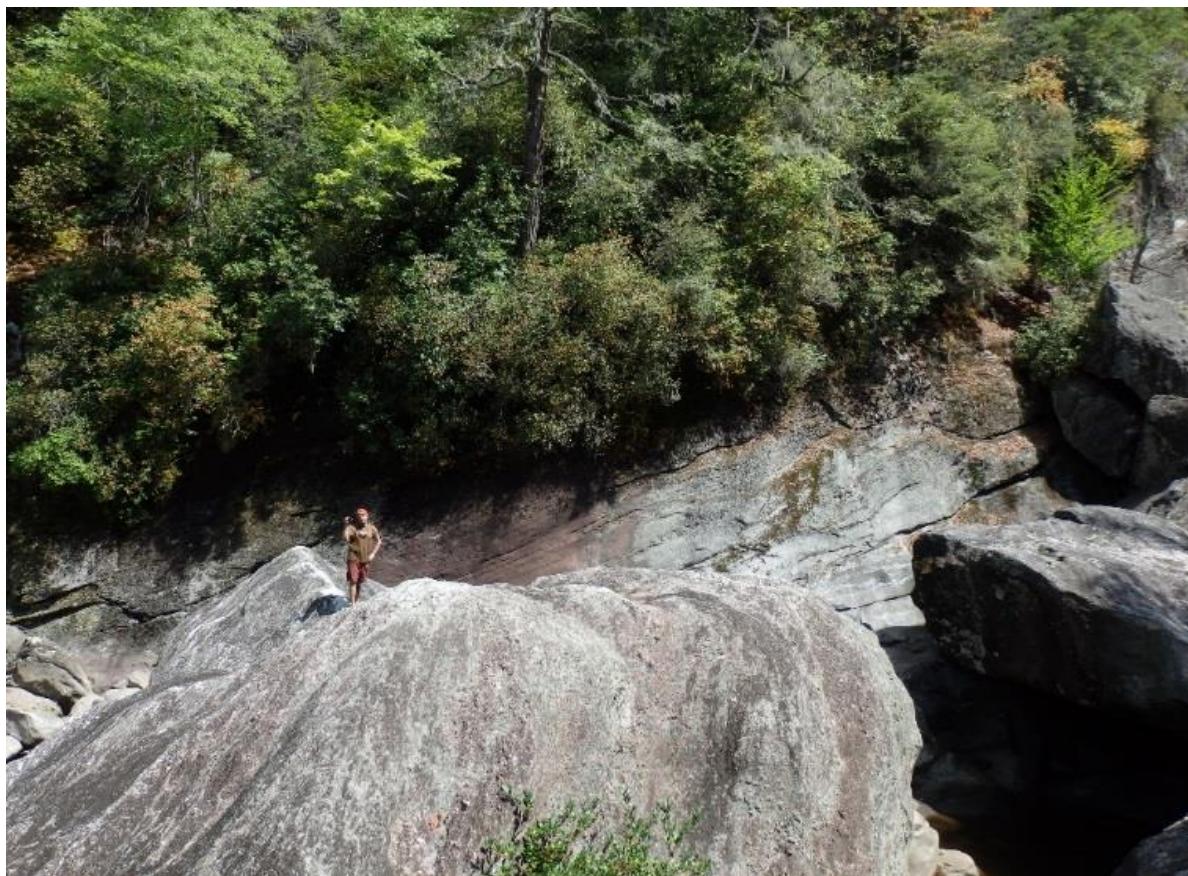


Bonas Defeat Gorge Loop - Overview

Directions to Trail Head: From Cashiers NC: Follow US 64 East for 12.7 miles to NC 281 N. Proceed approximately 13.6 miles on NC 281 N to Grays Ridge Rd. You're getting close when you cross the rock-fill dam and spillway on Wolf Creek Lake. Turn left on Grays Ridge Rd and proceed a mile or so to the end at a locked gate. Park in the small parking area.

During the nearly 50 years I've been hiking in the southern Appalachian mountains, I can't say I've had a more spectacular experience than the relatively short but very strenuous hike up the Bonas Defeat Gorge of the Tuckasegee River. It's been described in many different ways; hiking into the barrel of a shotgun, the best canyoneering in the southeast, and a world-class day hike. There is no trail – you simply make your way up the stream bed as it transitions from a deceptively typical low-grade mountain stream to a steep, very rugged canyon with building-size boulders strewn about everywhere. The highlight of the journey is passing beneath the 400 foot sheer drop off of Bonas Defeat, a huge granite dome. We made the trip with light day packs. To make a more interesting trip out of this route, more determined hikers than us could do it with full backpacks and camp in the gorge.



The Hatter Feeling Small in the Gorge

Before you start on this hike, it's important that you understand how the small hydropower project functions that controls the flow of water in the Tuckasegee River through the gorge. About 1.4 miles up the gorge from the powerhouse, a small dam backs up the Tuckasegee River and Tanasee Creek to form Tanasee Creek Lake. Water from the lake is shunted down a large pipeline to the small powerhouse. Upon entering the powerhouse, the water spins a turbine, which generates electricity. The water then exits the powerhouse and is



Tanasee Creek Lake Directly above the Dam; a Small Pond Compared to Many Artificial Lakes in the Region

cascading down. It's not clear just how much water there would be. Maybe only enough to inundate the main channel and climbing up 10 feet above it would be enough to keep you safe. However, with so many unknowns, it's best to simply stay out of the gorge during wet periods. I have fantasies of what the gorge must be like during very wet periods like the summer of 2013 when it rained constantly for weeks and all the dams across the region were open and spilling like crazy. It must be a glorious sight to behold; over a mile of frothy whitewater thrashing violently down the steep boulder-strewn canyon!



The Lonely Powerhouse below Tanasee Creek Lake

directed back to the Tuckasegee River through a small concrete culvert. The diversion of the water through the pipeline effectively dewateres the Tuckasegee River through the gorge. We speculate that if the lake fills up when power is not being generated or if rainfall is so great that the lake fills in spite of the diversion, the gate on the dam opens automatically when the lake reaches a certain level and any poor soul caught in the gorge may be in big trouble. Because of the very steep gradient in the gorge, water would very rapidly come



Sign on the Gate around the Powerhouse. Not sure why Duke Energy calls it "Tennessee Creek Hydro" because the Dam backs up the Tuckasegee River and Tanasee Creek.

Information on Tanasee Creek Dam on Duke Energy's website is pretty sparse; only daily water levels for Tanasee Creek Lake. There's no mention at all of releases. I did find something about a test of a warning siren at the dam but it appears the siren is only there to warn of emergency situations and not to warn of impending releases of water through the dam.

The way to avoid the possibility of being swept away is to hike the canyon only during periods of very low water during late summer, fall, or winter when there is little to no possibility of a release. Ironically, the same dam that could ruin your day, also helps make it possible to make the trip because it dewateres the canyon by holding water back in Tanassee Creek Lake. When the Madhatter and I made the trip in early September 2015, there was almost no flow.

Another issue you need to carefully consider before you attempt this trip is the potential for getting seriously hurt as the result of a fall and the difficulty rescue personnel would have in getting you out. So make this trip only if you're in very good shape and comfortable climbing up boulders over the course of several hours and don't do it in rainy weather when the rocks would be slick.



All the Warning you get - there apparently is no Warning Siren Prior to the Gate Opening

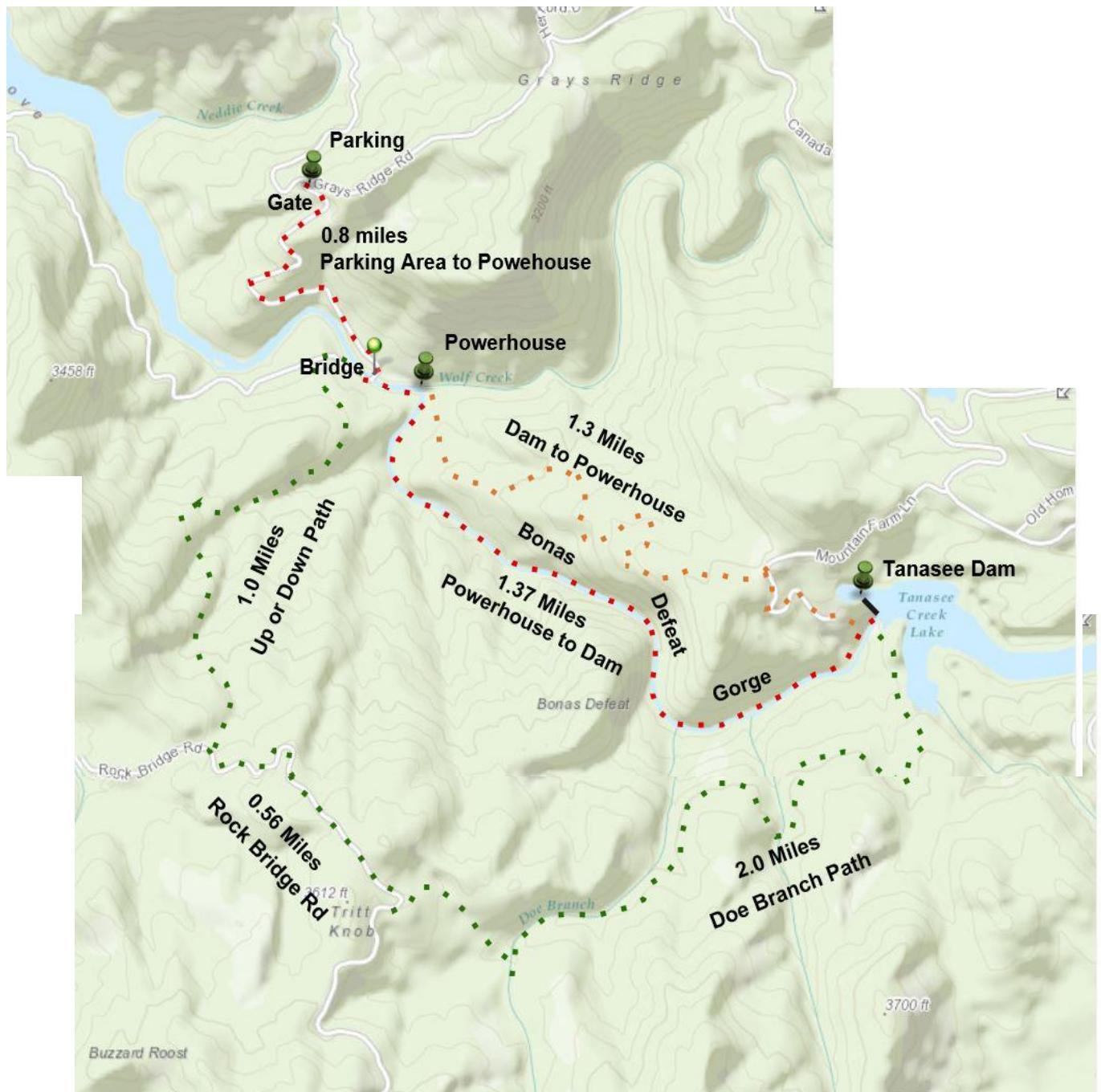
Bonas Defeat Gorge Loop - Trip Log

Saturday September 5th, 2015

Option 1 - Gray Ridge Rd to Tanasee Dam and Return via Powerhouse Rd. 4.3 Miles

Option 2 – Gray Ridge Rd to Tanasee Dam, Doe Branch Path to Rock Bridge Rd, to Up or Down Path to Gray Ridge Rd. 6.5 Miles

Trail Map - Bonas Defeat Gorge Loop



Within just a few minutes of starting down the trail from the Gray Ridge Road parking area, Doc and the Hatter passed a polite little sign that seemed to imply that it was ok to trespass as long as you didn't mind having your picture taken.

After a half mile, they crossed a substantial bridge over the tranquil Tuckasegee River. They turned left and hiked along the river about 0.3 miles until it made a 90 degree turn in front of them.

Across the river they saw Duke Energy's mini powerhouse for the hydropower project. A well-maintained gravel road that led up from the powerhouse can be taken back to the powerhouse once the hike up the gorge is completed. However, if you take this route, Duke Energy makes it

very clear you are trespassing and it's likely they will make things unpleasant for you if you get caught. The powerhouse didn't seem to be operating because no water was coming out of it.



The Spillway Out of the Powerhouse

During the previous winter, Doc had scouted all of the trails they would use to make the loop, but he had held off making the trek up the gorge, thinking it unwise to tackle it alone. He figured that although the youthful Hatter would balk at carrying his 210 pound injured body out of the gorge, his legendary trail speed could bring rescue in short order.

There was no trail up the gorge so Doc and the Hatter followed the riverbed. As they rock hopped up the channel, Doc was disappointed at what he was seeing. He had read on the internet that this was a very difficult hike up a spectacular canyon. So far, this was just a typical creek with a pretty flat gradient.



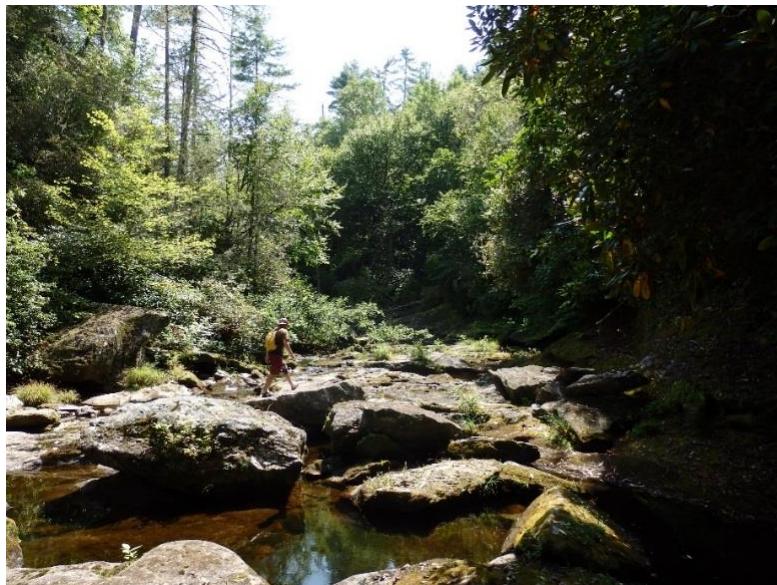
Whatever happened to the Good Ole "Trespassers Will Be Shot" Sign?

They soon came to a wide pool with impassible steep sides covered with very dense tangles of Rhododendron. Since there was no going around it, they waded, gasping through the belly-button high ice water.

Beyond the pool, things rapidly started to get more interesting. Instead of individual boulders, they were walking up a continuous rock pavement, and after rounding a bend, they came to a sign informing them of the danger of automatic releases from the dam. Having seen Tanasee Creek Lake on the drive in, they knew it was too low to discharge through the dam, so they passed by unconcerned.



The Deceptively Tame and Largely Dewatered Tuckasegee River Channel at the Base of the Gorge



The Hatter Walks up the "Pavement"

After the sign, things began to get big fast and the gradient steepened rapidly. According to the American Whitewater Association, in one particularly steep section, the channel drops 240 feet in 0.4 miles. That's a gradient of 600 feet per mile, which is all but unheard of for a large stream unless it's plunging over a waterfall.

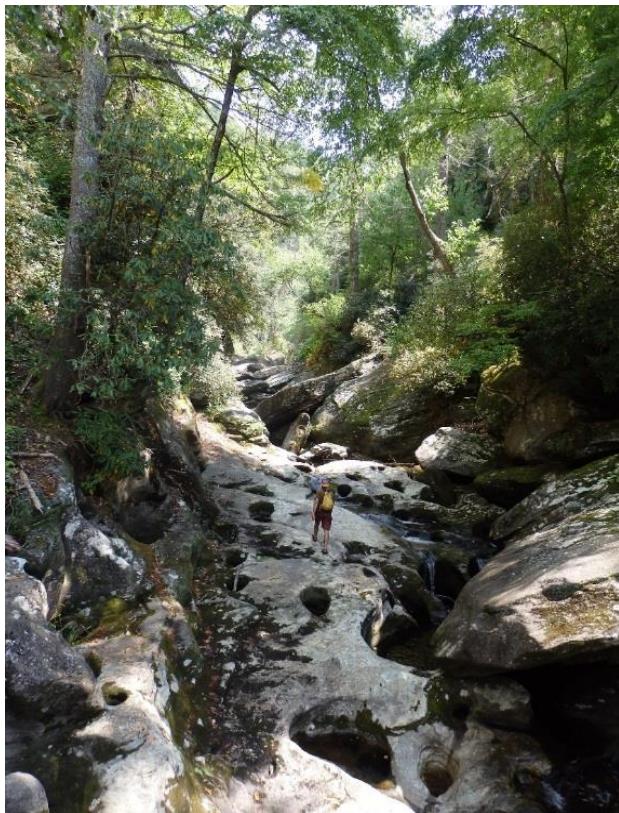
The rocks became house sized, and the stream pavement became pocked with very large potholes. It was beginning to be

clear that when things got wet up here, the water, shoved along by the steep gradient, became an awesomely powerful rock sculpting machine that over millions of years had eroded the mountain down to its bare bones. It's likely that infrequent catastrophic flooding events occurring on the order of every 100 to 500 years had eroded the huge boulders down from the walls of the gorge then pushed them into the crazy jumble they were seeing.

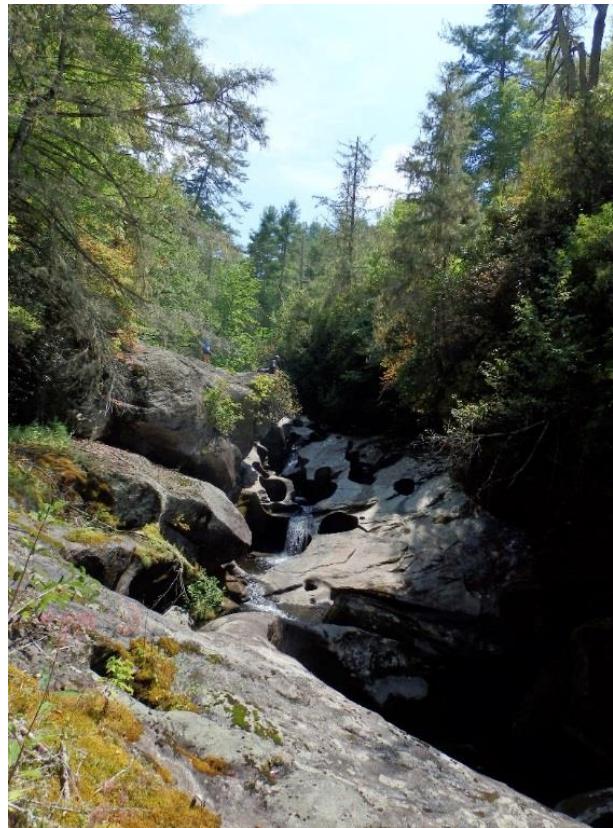
An explanation of potholes found in many geology text books explains that they're caused by vortices in streams that rotate and vibrate grinding stones over long ages of time, gradually wearing down a deep, cylindrical hole into the rock.

Soon the walking became very steep and they found themselves climbing over boulders more and more frequently. The river channel became a maze of rocks with no clear way through. Several times they would take a route up one side of the channel, only to have to backtrack and try the other side when a way through couldn't be found.

As Doc was climbing down from a boulder to the streambed, he put all his weight onto his right foot. Unfortunately, the rock he stepped on was very slick and he went down as his right leg folded beneath him. As the result of



Working Our Way up the Gorge



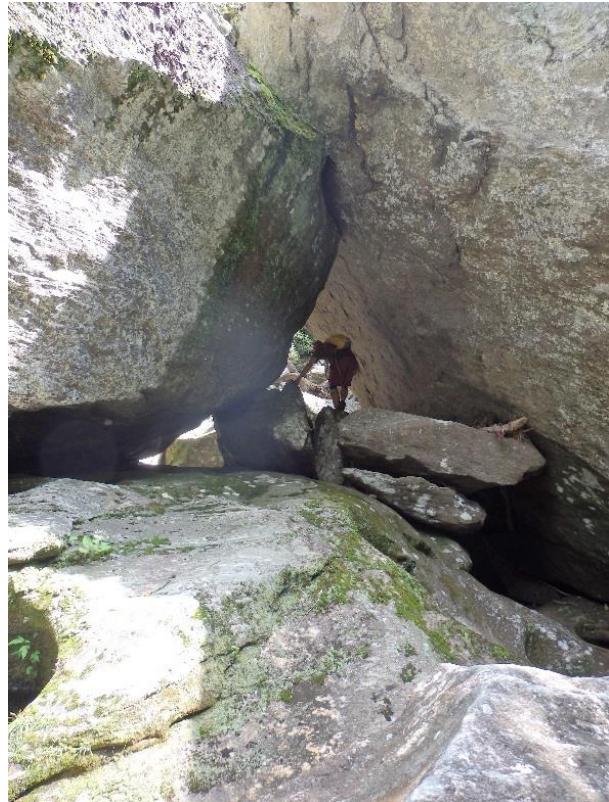
Giant Potholes in the Riverbed

surgery seven years earlier, Doc's right knee had been partially locked in place so that he couldn't pull his right heel within about 6 inches of his butt. Now his fall had forced his heel and butt into a very unhappy reunion. The resulting pain was like a hot knife being shoved under his kneecap and he yelled in pain as the Hatter came bounding over to see what was the matter.

After straightening his leg, he sat for a few minutes, messaging his knee as the pain ebbed away. He took a handful of ibuprofen, struggled to his feet, and slowly allowed his knee to take his weight. To his great relief, he realized he might be able to walk, but climbing still didn't seem possible. After additional message and time to let the pills kick in, Doc started limping up the gorge.

Fortunately, the worst of the technical bouldering seemed to be over and the channel began to widen out as they approached Bonas Defeat dome.

The local lore behind the odd name is that a hound named Bonas was trained to chase deer, bear, wild hog, goat, Sasquatch, or some such varmint, depending on who you hear the story from, over the edge of the cliff so his owners could easily obtain an ample supply of meat. On one of these occasions, the dog got a little too into his work and sailed into the abyss along with his prey, to his "defeat." Doc actually found one account that said on full-moon nights you can still hear Bonas' haunting bays echo through the canyon as he mourns his fatal mistake. Next time we trek the canyon we'll spend the night in there to hear the ghost



In some Places, Crawling under the Boulders was the Only Way through dog for ourselves.



A Small "Piece of the Rock" - Note the Tiny Little Hatter Standing on the Pointed Rock in Lower Center.

Beneath Bonas Defeat, the size of everything seemed to shoot off the scale. They were like the Lilliputians in Gulliver's travels; tiny beings in a giant's realm. It's often said that Panthertown Valley, a few miles to the south, is the "Yosemite of the east." Anyone who's spent time in Yosemite, which is practically nothing but huge exposed granite domes (think Half Dome, El Capitan, etc.), knows that's like saying the flea is as big as the dog. But at this spot, maybe even a native of the Sierra Nevada's might forgive an easterner for making such a statement.

They spent a little time exploring the area but Doc was worried that his ability to keep hobbling along might not last long so they reluctantly moved on. Beyond Bonas Defeat,

the gorge seemed to start to relax a bit. The gradient lessened, boulders shrank from building size to house size, to car size, and they were back to relatively easy walking rather than constant climbing.

Doc took his sweat-soaked shirt off and tied it around his knee to serve as a brace then in a moment of inattention, walked into a sharp branch from a fallen tree that cut a gash across his chest, causing blood to drip down his stomach. Just then, they came upon a group of people who had meandered down the gorge a few hundred yards from the lake where they'd been canoeing. Although Doc was relieved to learn they were so close to the end of the gorge, he couldn't understand why a small boy was hiding behind his father and pointing at him. The hatter clued him in that his pronounced limp, improvised knee brace, and bloody chest were enough to shock an ER doc, let alone a small boy.

They chatted with the canoeists for a while and Doc and the Hatter related the wonders they

had just experienced. Doc told them that if the distance hadn't been relatively short, it would have been one of the most challenging hikes he'd experienced in the east. One of the men, obviously influenced by Doc's sorry state, said he guessed that people from Florida who weren't used to "our" mountains maybe shouldn't be in a place like this. Doc took a bit of offense to this comment since he'd been hiking in "their" mountains



The Steep 150 Foot Climb up to the Dam at the End of the Gorge



The Dam and Little Tanasee Creek Lake behind it

long before this guy's mama held him up by his hands to practice his first steps. As much as he was tempted to point this out, Doc simply asked him how many times he'd been through the gorge and when his sheepish reply was that he hadn't yet but was planning to, Doc decided nothing else needed to be said.

The gorge had one last major surprise in store. Just when it seemed that the stream channel had leveled out, it suddenly took a 90

degree turn up a steep rock face which had to be climbed 150 feet to reach the bottom of the dam. As they climbed it, they marveled again about high-water times when this would be a violent churning cascade of whitewater.

Had Doc not injured his knee, when they reached the dam, they would have ascended the Doe Branch Path for 2 miles to Rock Bridge Rd. After walking on Rock Bridge Rd for 0.56 miles they would have reached the Up or Down Path and would have descended it for 1 mile to the bridge over the Tuckasegee River. After crossing the bridge they would have ascended about a half

mile back to the parking area on Gray Ridge Road to complete the loop; a total distance of about 6.4 miles. If you decide to take this route, it's important to know that the trails are completely unmarked and unmaintained and there are numerous other unmarked paths that weave in and out from the main trail. If you don't have Kornegay's map and a compass, and if you don't regularly use them when you come to the frequent unmarked trail



The Road Back to the Powerhouse is paralleled by the Pipeline that Supplies Water for Generating Electricity



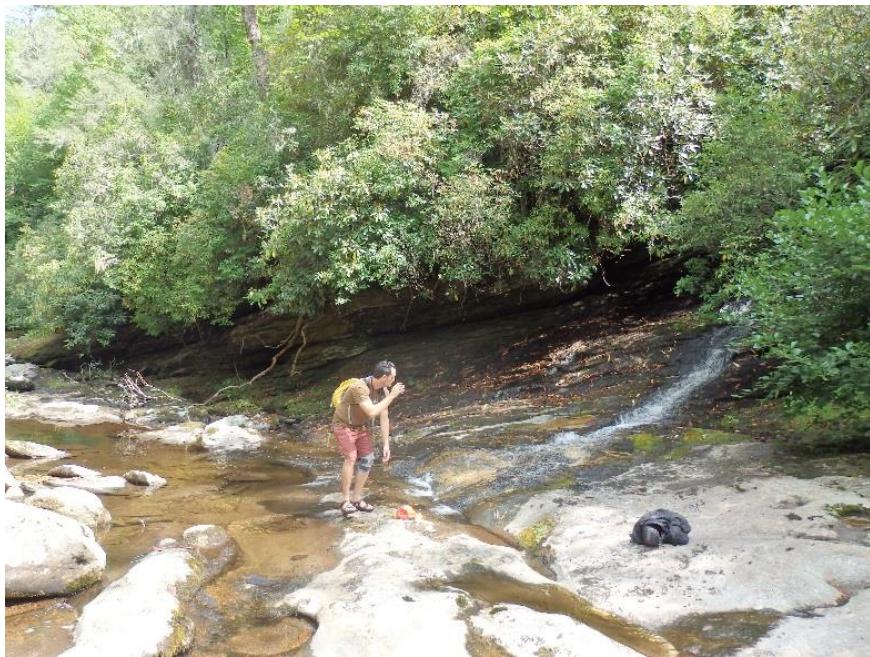
A Sign Making it Clear that Duke Energy doesn't want you to incorporate the Powerhouse Road into your Hike

intersections, you'll become one seriously lost soul. Once you get to Rock Bridge Road via the Doe Branch Path, it's also tricky to figure out where to turn to take the Up or Down Path because there's no sign and there are several trails that branch off from the road.

Because of Doc's damaged knee, they decided to take the Powerhouse access road. From the dam they followed a gravel road that they hoped would eventually take them to the powerhouse road. Unfortunately, between the dam and the Powerhouse Road, other roads intersected that are not shown on Kornegay's map. With a little trial and error and some educated guessing, they navigated to the powerhouse road without making any wrong turns.

The Powerhouse road is a wide, well-maintained gravel road, approximately one mile in length that starts out heading uphill but then descends moderately for most of the way to the powerhouse. Partway down the road the pipeline that conveys water from the reservoir to the powerhouse is encountered and parallels the road for the rest of the way. Duke Energy's very serious "No Trespassing" sign is reached after a half mile or so and it makes it abundantly clear that you're not supposed to go any further. Because the pain from his knee was causing him to grit his teeth with each step, Doc thought that arrest and incarceration might not be such a bad thing since it was likely they would drive him to jail rather than force him to keep walking. Fortunately, it wasn't too much longer till they reached the powerhouse. The two lawbreakers rested for a while and Doc took more ibuprofen to prepare for the moderately steep 0.8 mile climb back to the parking area on Grey Ridge Road.

When Doc finally limped into the parking area, the Hatter, who was already on his second beer, immediately resuscitated Doc by handing him a beer of his own. As they recounted the day's events, they agreed that it had been a spectacular trip. Although they were disappointed that



The Hatter Drinks from a Tributary near the Dam

Doc's accident had prevented them from completing the longer loop, they were content in knowing that they had experienced something very unique in this corner of the Appalachians. Panthertown had once again worked its magic and as they drove back to their campsite, they began planning a return trip with backpacks so they could take a couple of days to thoroughly explore the gorge.