BREAKING OUT

Rainbow Falls forest undergoes rebirth

By Joey Holleman
McCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

The new Rainbow Falls Trail in Greenville County opened in the spring of 2008 and immediately ranked as one of the most spectacular short hikes in the state.

Then 350 acres of the surrounding forest burned in a wildfire in February 2009, and the Rainbow Falls hike grew even better.

The charred tree trunks and the erosion-control fences might detract from the view, but the fire damage gives hikers a chance to experience the rebirth of a forest.

Blackberries and milksick sprouted last spring, pocking the blackened forest floor with green. Rhododendron sprouts emerged from the stumps and roots of burned trees. Wildflowers flourish in the increased sunlight. And many of the large trees survived the flames, with their first post-flames growth of leaves turning color this month.

In fact, the fire even improved fall's leaf-peeping potential on one of the top fall foliage trails in the state. Hugging a steep bluff, the trail already provided multiple clear views of adjacent Little Pinnacle Mountain. Now hikers also can see plenty of color when deep in the forest because the understory brush and small trees have burned away.

Even though the annual leaf show is long gone, now is the optimal time for a hike on the Rainbow Falls Trail since the leaves are down and previously blocked mountain vistas are now open. But be warned, it's a strenuous climb of 1,000 feet in the 1.6 miles of trail from the Middle Saluda River to Rainbow Falls. It's not for young children or overweight adults.

Starting with the more gradual climb from the Jones Gap State Park parking lot, the round-trip hike is about 5.2 miles, that is, if you don't miss the cutoff for the Rainbow Falls Trail. There's no sign for the trail, and my hiking buddy and I walked past it on the Jones Gap Trail. Park officials say three signs put out since the trail was built have all mysteriously disappeared.

We realized we had messed up when we got to Jones Gap Falls, a cataract that's less impressive but still worth visiting. We missed the Rainbow Falls turn again on the way back. We finally were set straight by a grandmotherly woman wearing a sweater with sparkly appliques and sporting a hairdo that looked like she came straight from the beauty parlor. She didn't look like a hiker, but she knew the trails better than we did.

With her guidance, we easily spotted the red blazes on a tree at the fork to the right off Jones Gap Trail. It's about three-quarters of a mile from the parking lot. From there, the trail was easy to follow but a challenge for the legs.

We crossed a substantial bridge over the Saluda, then two smaller bridges over Cox Camp Creek in a relatively flat section. The second bridge emptied into a skinny gap between two boulders, signaling the fun was about to begin.

The new trail winds from rock formation to rock formation. The trail builder cut major stones to build steps and in some cases scooped steps out of boulders.

The fire damage begins to show about halfway up, and the views of Little Pinnacle reach the awesome stage about two-thirds of the way up. When you reach a massive stone wall, you're almost there. The wall is part of the Cleveland Cliffs, which soar 200 feet at their highest points.

You might wonder as you see the beauty along the way if the waterfall can measure up. It does. The 100-foot Rainbow Falls is one of the most striking in the state, especially after a rainfall when it catapults a strong flow of water over a shelf.

Most waterfalls in the state flow down a rock slope. The water at Rainbow Falls free-falls through open sky most of the way, creating a rainbow-refracting mist.

There are a half-dozen great spots for a picnic lunch at the base of the falls. You'll want to give your leg muscles a rest before using a bunch of different muscles for the trip back down.

If you linger at the top, the hike up and back takes around three hours. Or four hours if you don't read trail maps carefully and miss the first turn.

IF YOU GO

- From Greenville, take U.S. Highway 25 north to S.C. Highway 11. Head west on S.C. 11 to River Falls Road and then follow the signs to Jones Gap State Park.
- Trail details: Round trip from the parking lot to Rainbow Falls is about 5.2 miles. Rainbow Falls Trail forks off Jones Gap Trail about three-quarters of a mile from parking lot. Rainbow Falls trail climbs nearly 1,000 feet in 1.6 miles.
- Difficulty: Strenuous.
- For more info and a map, visit www.sctrails.net