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Waterfalls call from western N.C.

By Jack Horan
For the AJC

10:40 a.m. Thursday, August 27, 2009

With 1,000-1,500 waterfalls in the mountains of Western North Carolina, falls fanciers don't have far to go to find these liquid assets.

The thunderous sounds of falling water reverberate over rocks and rills and in numerous coves, hollows and gorges in this high-rainfall region.

The Blue Ridge Escarpment, that geological dividing line between the mountains and the Piedmont, forms some of the state's highest waterfalls. There, sharp elevation drops convert murmuring streams into cascades of whitewater.

The waterfall estimate comes from the guidebook, "North Carolina Waterfalls," by Kevin Adams. Adams searched out, photographed and rated 600 of the best in his 2005 edition.

Many lie along North Carolina's waterfall corridor, U.S. 64, which skirts part of the escarpment between Hendersonville and Murphy. The above-average rainfall so far this year has made the falls more robust than in recent years. If you plan a waterfall quest this summer or fall, here are six that are easily accessible as well as three others that require some exertion to visit. The direction the waterfalls face is listed to provide a guide for best lighting for photos.

Whitewater Falls. At 411 feet, it's one of the highest falls in the East. Adams gives Whitewater a "beauty" rating of 10 [on a scale of 1-10]. Whitewater is located along N.C. 281, nine miles south of U.S. 64 in the Nantahala National Forest. Visitors pay $2 a car in a day-use parking area. To view Whitewater, follow an asphalt path that leads to an overlook. For a more spectacular view, descend 12 flights of stairs to a second overlook. Whitewater spills down tiers of rock, facing southeast into a gorge that takes the Whitewater River into Lake Jocassee in South Carolina.

Bridal Veil Falls/Dry Falls. Bridal Veil juts out from an overhanging rock face, spilling over pavement off U.S. 64 about 2.5 miles west of Highlands. Motorists can pull over and drive behind the waterfall or bypass it altogether. They can marvel at the brief tunnel of water and take obligatory souvenir photos of the 120-foot drop. About a mile farther is another tourist favorite, Dry Falls. Dry Falls, too, hangs off a rock overhang so visitors, on a paved walkway, can go behind the 75-foot sheet of water. It's about a two-minute walk from the parking area. Bridal Veil faces west; Dry Falls faces northwest.

Looking Glass Falls. Nine miles north of U.S. 64 on U.S. 276, between Brevard and Hendersonville, Looking Glass may be the most viewed falls in the state. Pull in on the parking lane next to the 60-foot-high curtain of water in the Pisgah National Forest. Stairs and a viewing platform lead to the base of the falls. Here, with the water purling around rocks in Looking Glass Creek, you can take off your shoes, wade into the stream and let your cares float away.

Triple Falls/High Falls. From U.S. 276, continue east 3.7 miles on U.S. 64 to Crab Creek Road and bear right (you'll see a brown sign for DuPont State Forest). Continue to DuPont Road, turn right, continue for 3.1 miles and park at the Hooker Falls parking lot at DuPont State Forest. Two of DuPont's six waterfalls can be seen in a (strenuous) 25-minute walk. First is Triple Falls, a 120-foot, three-part casade. Take the High Falls Trail and hike to the base of High Falls, at 150 feet the highest in the forest. Both face west. See www.dupontforest.com.

Hickory Nut Falls. Southeast of Asheville is Chimney Rock State Park, one of the oldest attractions (founded in 1902) in the mountains. It's located on U.S. 74A, between Bat Cave and Lake Lure. Admission is charged; see www.chimneyrockpark.com. Park at the secondary lot. It's a 0.75-mile walk to the 404-foot-high falls. The climatic fight scene for the 1992 movie, "The Last of the Mohicans," was filmed at the top. The falls faces north.

Linville Falls. This is a must stop for people traveling the Blue Ridge Parkway east of Asheville. Linville Falls is about 1.5 miles from Milepost 316A on the parkway. Park at the Visitors Center and take the Erwin's View Trail, a moderate 1.6-mile round trip walk to four overlooks. The 50-foot falls gets a "10" rating from Adams.

Rainbow Falls. Rainbow draws its name from rainbows that form in the billowing mist. And it's my favorite falls. Adams gives Rainbow a "10." From U.S. 64 at Sapphire, continue 0.8 miles south on N.C. 281 to Gorges State Park. Gorges is the gateway to Rainbow, which lies on adjacent Nantahala National Forest land. Plan for a strenuous, 3-mile roundtrip hike. Best time for seeing rainbows is 8-10 a.m. They appear on the east-facing waterfall during periods of high river flow. Keep hiking past Rainbow to see Turtleback Falls a few minutes upstream. My most memorable visit to Rainbow occurred in January 1986. A friend and I slipped and slid in the early morning darkness to reach Rainbow before dawn. It was cold -- 12 degrees below zero recorded at nearby Rosman. Bundled up like Michelin men, we made a fire waiting for the sun. Then the first light stole up the gorge, revealing a stunning sight. Half the 125-foot-high waterfall was frozen; a bluish cast sheathed the ice. Soon, a rosy pink illuminated the falls, creating a palette of colors on the Niagara of North Carolina.

Jack Horan of Charlotte is author of "Where Nature Reigns/The Wilderness Areas of the Southern Appalachians."

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