WASHINGTON COUNTY, FLORISTICALLY

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Rhododendron canescens

Magnolia ashei

Washington County is, floristically, apparently one of the lesser explored counties of the state. It is extremely diverse, having longleaf and slash pine forests, tupelo and taxodium swamps and wetlands, a turkey oak/longleaf pine sandhill region, and several different kinds of ravines.

Agriculture and other development has destroyed practically all of the unique limestone floras in the Chipley area, virtually the only limestone areas exposed in the county.

Southward, the ravine floras all occur in the sandhills. It is about this area that I wish to speak.

The ravine floras in Washington County occur for the most part as outwashes of the northern edge of an ancient, now uplifed, barrier island. Apparently these ravines developed as outwash of the essentially sand substrate which was deposited upon a relatively impervious clay marl. Water, seeping northward on the sand/clay interface, has washed out many steephead ravines from the vicinity of Wausau to New Hope, draining into either Pine Log Creek in Wausau or Holmes Creek in Vernon and New Hope.

Topographically, this results in a continuous band of ravine between Wausau and New Hope. Floristically, it results in a typically temperate hardwood forest. Laurel oak, beech, white oak, spruce pine, and *Magnolia grandiflora* are the dominants. Common understory consists of sparkleberry, dogwood, and American holly.

What makes these ravines so special is both the diversity of the conspicuous spring bloomers and the rarity of several of them. The diversity of the rarer ones varies somewhat with the soil, as would be expected.

Eastward, equidistant between Wausau, Vernon, and Greenhead, these ravines are essentially a sandy loam with little clay. *Quercus falcata* is rare. *Rhododendron canescens* is common, but *Rhododendron austrinum* is absent or patchy. These ravines are not perennially very wet, and *Illicium floridanum* is absent. *Stewartia malacodendron* is common here, as are the two cucumbers, *Magnolia pyramidata* and *Magnolia ashei.*

As we explore westward towards Vernon, the elevations decrease. We run into more perennial wetness and calyanthus appear. So does illicium along the pure, clear, freeflowing streamlets. *Rhododendron austrinum* becomes common. Traveling westward, we'll cross several miles of country that have been floristically destroyed either by farming, logging, or grazing, until we reach the heights overlooking Holmes Valley. Here we find the ravines in transition between the rolling ravines of Vernon with clay bottoms and the very wet, steep, sandy ravines of New Hope, where they are lined with *Kalmia latifolia* in their upper portions.

Here is a ravine where all the rare components of the county come together: *Hexastylis arifolia,* kalmia, stewartia, two cucumber trees, illicium, and *Rhododendron austrinum.*

Also here is a population of twenty *Rhapidophyllum hystrix* growing in illicium, all very small (apparently maladapted to the acidic conditions), but also old enough to have an old rotted trunk on one individual. This is not a population initiated by man. The only other rhapidophyllum that this explorer has discovered in Washington County is one small individual along Holmes Creek in the vicinity of Millers Ferry.

As we continue westward into New Hope, the occurrence of *Kalmia latifolia* increases. *Rhododendron austrinum* drops out in the sandy areas as does the Ashe magnolia. From New Hope the sandhills drop precipitously into Holmes Valley down to a half-mile-wide floodplain. The high bluffs overlooking this floodplain are topped by commercial slash pine forest. They bottom out in taxodium/nyssa forest with a great deal of other floodplain species: *Acer rubra,* water pecan, *Quercus lyrata, Crataegus spathulata,* and *C. marshallii.*

The bluffs between these two communities are rich masses of *Rhododendron austrinum,* vines (vitis, anisostichus), castanea (chinkapins), hamamelis, spruce pine, beech. Although out of its typical steephead environment, the Ashe and pyramid magnolias get quite large here. The soils are thin, sandy loams overlying heavy clays. *Sabal minor* is common, as it is along all rivers in north Florida.

If you're looking for a place to explore for new botanical prizes, try Washington County, on foot or by canoe.