

## Unakite, Blue Quartz and High Water (A Trip Report for 4-29-2023) by Dave Lines



Rich and I left La Plata a little before 6 am and arrived in Madison, Virginia at 7:45 am. The day before, it had rained a lot --- 5 to 7 inches in the mountains upstream of where our field trip was planned. Since we had 45 minutes before our group meeting time, we headed up toward Criglersville to check river conditions. In 10 minutes, we had our answer --- the river was full bank to bank and running fast. Places where the river was normally a few inches deep were 3 or 4 feet deep. The river looked dangerous --- roiling white water and many rapids. We would be limited to a much smaller area to collect specimens. Oh well. That was beyond our control. At least we had permission from our gracious hosts to park and look along this stretch of the Robinson River. Rich and I spent a few minutes removing downed limbs and old logs out of the way of where we would park --- it would be tight, but doable.

Rich and I returned to Madison to the Baptist Church parking lot where our group was to meet. The Pastor had been very accommodating when I had called him a month before to ask permission to leave some of our cars parked there. Several vehicles had already arrived when we pulled in. As I began putting on my hip boots, I explained to those present about the river being high. I also put a flat of “samples” on the truck tailgate so our folks could gain some familiarity with what to look for. I explained the limited size of our search area and mentioned that, if time allowed, we might look at a second location as well. We then assembled some donations of various specimens of rocks and minerals into a flat as a gift to our hosts.

Initially, 25 members had signed up, but due to various unforeseen events, people had cancelled, and our group now had 16 (Rich, Bernie and Vycki and their grandson Ellis, Joyce and Pam, Anita, Kate, John M., Ethan and Brittany, Tim and Lorna S., Renee and granddaughter Haven, and me). All but Rich and I had never collected here. When everyone arrived at the church lot, I reviewed our situation and held a safety brief. Basically, stay out of the river because it would sweep you away. Wisely, Ellis (age 5) would wear a life jacket. Good insurance. Nearly everyone wore a bright vest for visibility. The next thing was to consolidate our group into 5 vehicles with 4-wheel drive and high clearance simply because we only had room enough at our destination to fit 5. In a few minutes, our caravan of 4 trucks and one SUV was on the way. This part of our field trip was good because it forced members to meet and get to know one another. Good for bonding.

The earlier heavy fog had lifted, and the countryside was beautiful with farms of black angus cattle scattered over lush green pastures interspersed with woods on the rolling hills. Postcard pictures everywhere. We arrived and I began directing our vehicles to all squeeze into the short farm road beside the river. Our next event was a group picture --- truly like herding cats. (We should have done this at the church parking lot.) Instead of standing there waiting, everyone wanted to find rocks which were all around their feet on the large

gravel bar. A few people never made it to the picture because they were still changing clothes and packing everything but the proverbial kitchen sink.



By 9:15 am, people began finding rocks --- blue quartz, metabasalt (a combo of green epidote and maroon colored jasper), chalcedony (pronounced cal-sid-nee) in colors of grayish blue, tan and pinkish-orange, white quartz and a few small pieces of unakite. The unakite was difficult to see. Folks needed to calibrate their eyes to not just *look*, but to *see*. When unakite cobbles are laying among other cobbles of local rocks, they are well camouflaged and hard to recognize. Unakite is a granite composed mostly of green epidote and orangish-red feldspar with a small amount of black quartz sprinkled throughout. The key is to look for a combo of “green and orange” together. If you are not sure, chip off a corner to check what is inside. The warmer spring temperatures had caused some of the rocks to be partially coated with green algae which could be mistaken for green epidote.



This location was a great place for our folks to learn how to find unakite. Everyone enjoyed helping each other. It was fun and a bit humorous. A person would mention they could not see the unakite and, invariably, at that moment, another person standing beside them would point to a piece of unakite right in front of them. I found several pieces where everyone had already looked. The edges of the gravel bar had

lots of plant growth --- weeds, grass, bushes, et cetera --- all good places to look for hiding unakite. I found several more pieces there.

At 10:30 am, I told Rich that I was going to search downstream for a while. I ended up walking through the woods for about 200 yards because the high water in the river left no room to walk along the river edge. I finally came to a series of several narrow gravel bars that were partially covered in saplings, green vegetation, and old leaf litter. There were also small strips of bare gravel and rocks tucked in between. I looked carefully in these areas and found a good bit of nice chunky blue quartz and a few pieces of unakite. By the time I went as far as I could go, I had collected a half full 5-gallon bucket of good material. I headed over to the paved road and walked back about a half mile to rejoin our group.

I checked in with everyone and showed them what I had found and vice versa. At 11:45 am, I took our group's donated flat of specimens, then Anita and I walked up the road to give them to our hosts. I admit --- I had tried to time this to be a *short* visit --- thinking that they would be getting ready to eat lunch and we could pay our respects and return in ten minutes. Wrong. Our hosts were glad to see us and invited us to sit down on their patio and chat. We presented our gifts and explained each specimen --- which they all loved. It turned out that Anita had visited them many years before and had been given permission to look for unakite. Anita had even polished some which she later gave to them. Amazingly, our hostess remembered Anita and still had the polished rocks which she showed to Anita. Small world. We talked about farming, the weather, mutual local friends, their 170-year-old home, trips they had taken. They showed us some rocks which they had collected on their trips to Alaska and Canada. Most of all we enjoyed talking with them and they invited us to come back whenever we could. 45 minutes later we returned to our group at the gravel bar. ☺



At 12:30 pm, we packed up the three remaining vehicles (two had decided to leave) and agreed to try another location upriver. Enroute, we stopped at a little store in Syria to allow our group to use the restroom. Of course, some of us bought food, drinks, and items from the grill. By 1 pm, we were on the road again headed to an off the beaten track farm along the edge of the Rose River that I had visited back in 1996 and 1997. We parked on the side of the paved road, and I looked around until I found the almost hidden dirt road leading to the farmhouse. This road was a piece of work ---- with lots of big mud holes from the rain. After a half mile walk, I came to farmhouse and carefully opened the yard gate (thinking I might be greeted by a big dog) while calling out several times "hello to the house". When I knocked on the door, a

cheerful voice inside said: "Come on in!". I said I was muddy and would stand in the doorway. An older gentleman was sitting in a recliner watching TV and said: "What can I do for you?". I greeted him and explained that we had a group of folks who would like permission to look for unakite rocks on his farm. He replied: "Yes, help yourself. You are welcome to look wherever you want." Wow. What great hospitality. I introduced myself and he told me his name and said I looked familiar --- yes ---- he was the very same gentleman who had given me permission over 20 years before. I asked where his property boundaries were, thanked him profusely and headed back to get our group.

When I arrived, I explained to our group that we would drive in and park and look along the river. To get everyone excited, I showed them a piece of beautiful unakite that I had found on the dirt road. As soon as we drove in and parked, everyone immediately got out of the vehicles and started finding unakite in the road. I pried a nice quality piece the size of a loaf of bread out of the dirt beside the road. We then walked through the fairly open woods toward the river. Rocks were sticking up everywhere. Near the edge of the

river, we came to a barbed wire fence and found a place where a fallen tree limb had broken the top wire strand so we could cross the fence easily. After assisting the ladies down a rather steep embankment covered with large, rounded rocks, we were in a shallow stream about 4 feet wide. The stream water was calm and very clear, and we started finding unakite immediately. The unakite was high quality and more plentiful than the first location. Between the stream and the river there was a large gravel bar covered with trees, old leaves, and vegetation. Despite the heavy ground cover, we found some great pieces of unakite.



I gave away most of what I found. People were literally squealing with delight. Big grins everywhere. By this time, everyone knew what to look for and they were finding plenty. We found more unakite in thirty minutes than everyone had found previously in three hours.

I wish I had taken some pictures. The glee on Renee's face holding up both hands full of unakite she had just picked up was priceless. No one wanted to leave, but it was getting late, and we had to go. We left a large boulder of unakite that was too big to dig out and carry – probably well over 300 pounds. The above ground portion of this rock was 30 inches long and six inches wide. It will still be there until next time when we can bring the proper tools to dig it out and reduce the size to more manageable pieces.

After making sure everyone was out of that area, I crossed back over the fence, removed the downed limb, and tightened and reconnected the broken wire as best as I could. When we all returned to our vehicles, folks started finding more unakite in the dirt road again. We made sure everyone filled in their holes, where they had removed unakite, with other rocks so that the dirt road was left undamaged. We all left about 2:30 pm and headed back to the church parking lot so everyone could unload their stuff into their own vehicles. Along the way, we stopped briefly to retrieve one of Rich's buckets which had been left at the first location. The weather, which had warmed to 70 degrees, had been perfect. Everyone was happy with the trip. All had stayed safe. A super day all around.

