



## Christmas in the Everglades

By Peter Henry

I organized a group trip to explore Florida Bay in Everglades National Park and the Middle Florida Keys. We were on the water for 6 days, starting in Flamingo and heading across Florida Bay and down the Keys ending at Grassy Key. We covered nearly one hundred miles and got a taste of the Everglades, Florida Bay and the Keys.

I started planning our trip in the beginning of December. I reserved camping in Flamingo and in the Keys. Unfortunately, none in the first party were able to go for various reasons. A real bonus of belonging to CPA, I was able to get five club members to sign on in the week before Christmas, leaving on the 26th. In the end Brian Blankinship, Yvonne Thayer, Frank Day and Jim Zawlocki joined me. The drive down took the better part of two days. We met in Florida City and got ourselves set up in the Flamingo campground at dark on the edge of Florida Bay.

Our first task in the morning was to get a backcountry permit for the Everglades. This can only be done in person and since it was the busiest time of the year, there were no spots available inside the Everglades proper. Adjusting our plans, we decided to do a short paddle inside the swamp for the experience, so we headed for the Hells Bay Canoe Trail which is one of the most narrow and twisting trails in the South Everglades. We spent several hours maneuvering the tight turns of the waterway as it passes through a mangrove thicket that ended in several little bays. We were surprised there to find dolphins on the hunt which we enjoyed watching. Having reached our turnaround time, we reluctantly headed back. After returning to Flamingo in the afternoon, we paddled from the campground west along Florida Bay to where it meets the Gulf of Mexico at East Cape. The wide beach there made for a great place to spend the night. There was a good breeze in the evening that kept the bugs at bay, and we ate our dinner out under the stars.

On the second day we awoke early to no wind and a hoard of no-see-ums. We had come prepared with bug spray and head nets but the group got to have a true Everglades experience, at least this morning. After a quick pack-up, we returned to Flamingo, which was 10 miles back, while making a few stops to explore old canals that penetrated the Everglade swamp. Both inside the canals and along the shore we saw many interesting birds. At our final approach to the campground we were stymied by the low tide and forced to wade through shoe-sucking muck for the last 50 yards. That was a good lesson in traveling by boat in ooze. After bathing in the dish sink in order to remove the slimy mud from our clothes and ourselves, we shuttled cars to our take-out at Grassy Key in the Middle Keys. On the way we met Frank Day who had opted out of the interior everglades experience.

The third day was in many ways the true start of our extended trip. Luckily for us, the weather was perfect. It was mostly a windless day, with clear skies which made for good paddling weather for the long open water crossing ahead of us. We headed south out of Flamingo across Florida Bay. Paddling many miles past small keys and over grassy banks that were so shallow that the grass rubbed the bottom of the kayaks, we arrived at our destination: Little Rabbit Key. The key, which is located in the middle of Florida Bay, is half way between Flamingo and the Keys. It was far from lights and cars and just a beautiful place! A flat island with trees around it's edge and a field in the middle made for secluded camping. It would be buggy in the wet season, but was bug-free now, so we lounged late into the evening around a campfire. Since it was surrounded by a trench of deep water with lots of tidal flow there were many great fish to see.



For the 4th day, we left Rabbit Key heading ever southward across Florida Bay. Paddling guided by distant islands and mostly in deeper water, we still had perfect weather with a light breeze and clear sky until we reached Lignumvitae Key. Here we stopped to admire a historic residence and the surrounding grounds. Then we went east over the beautiful blue waters to Shell Key, which has

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an interior lagoon surrounded by mangroves. We traveled the length of a mangrove tunnel that twisted and turned until we could go no more, not really knowing if we had reached the lagoon, but enjoying being in such narrow spaces. From there we paddled the last few miles, crossing over into the Atlantic Ocean and along the shore to Coconut Cove Resort, where we spent the night. After setting up camp, a group of us headed two miles out into the Atlantic to go snorkeling on a well-known reef, but rough water, an off-shore breeze and the coming darkness encouraged us to turn back before reaching our objective. The evening included going out for a New Years Eve celebration. After champagne and cookies, specially brought by Yvonne Thayer and Brian Blankship, I crashed and completely missed the midnight bell, though some said the fireworks were great.



On day five, we woke to a great sunrise and breakfast on the verandah overlooking the ocean. We headed down the Atlantic Coast, past a still-burning hotel that had caught fire the night before, and by some very nice beaches. We stopped at Indian Key to have lunch. Indian Key was a town prior to an Indian attack in the 1800's. We walked the old streets and relaxed at the lookout tower. Upon leaving we switched back to the bay side, passing through mangrove tunnels. Soon the mangroves gave way to the wide open bay. With a strong tail wind, the waves built into a mild two foot swell that we rode for many miles along the length of a long island and across a large channel. We ducked into the protective harbor of Fiesta Key and it's RV resort. After negotiations with the staff, we finally found a campsite and settled in for a relaxing soak in the hot tub and a few drinks in the bar along with some key lime pie.

Day six, we awoke late to a continuation of the strong breeze. Our initial plan was to explore the wild cost of Long Key State Park, which would of meant paddling in a cross wind and rather large waves. Being rather physically worn out at this point in our trip, we decided instead to paddle on the leeward side of Long Key, which turned out to be an easy trip with the wind at our backs. From there we crossed a wide channel of open water using the old railroad bridge as a wind break. Just before the next island, we went under the bridge through one of the many arches. The tide was rising and there was a strong current coming under the bridge making going under the arch a challenge. On the other side we were met with good sized standing waves that created the most exciting paddling of our trip. Once we cleared the waves and rounded the point, things calmed down quite a bit and we coasted along the shoreline to our final night's destination at Toms Harbor Keys. There, at a primitive camping spot, we relaxed and enjoyed the view of the multi-million dollar homes across the bay and the contrast with our peaceful location. Yvonne and Brian decided to go snorkeling. Jim took a spin around the island and the rest of the crew relaxed in camp. The next morning we started very early in an attempt to beat the outgoing tide, of which there had been a lengthy discussion the previous night. In the end it was just a short portage out to the edge of deep water. From there we went under a bridge back into Florida Bay and around to All Marine Services, where we had left our cars for the long trip home. For more photos, see Peter's full report at <http://web.mac.com/pgharchitecture/iWeb/Keys08/Everglades%20%26%20Keys%20Trip%20Report.html> and Jim Zawlocki's photos at <http://picasaweb.google.com/Jimzzz1/20081227FLPres?authkey=Gv1sRgCLaDtr7H3bvoowE&feat=email#>

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Start Date	Event	Skill Level
September 5, 2009	Patuxent River, Cedar Haven Paddle	Beginner
September 5, 2009	Adirondack Loons Paddling	All
September 11, 2009	Wye Island Car Camper	Advanced Beginner
September 12, 2009	Merrit Point Park/Days Cove Paddle	Beginner
September 12, 2009	Kent Island Practice Paddle 07 (Final)	Intermediate
September 26, 2009	Hart-Miller Island Kayak Kamper	Advanced Beginner
October 9, 2009	Susquehanna State Park Car Camper	Advanced Beginner
October 16, 2009	Tall Pines V 2009	Advanced Beginner
October 25, 2009	Cambridge/Choptank River Paddle	Advanced Beginner
November 1, 2009	CPA Annual Meeting	All
November 6, 2009	Chickahominy River Car Camper	Advanced Beginner
November 9, 2009	Veterans Day	
November 13, 2009	Wildfowl Festival EASTON MD	All