

The Chesapeake Paddler



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Florida sojourn offers challenges and surprises

It's all bikinis, margaritas, and sunshine, right? Um, no. Dear paddler, read on.

By Lois Wyatt

In the dead of winter, do you dream of paddling in balmy Florida under a hot sun and swaying palms in your bikini instead of a drysuit? Eleven CPAers headed to Florida in March to satisfy that desire. Last June we signed up for a Paddle Florida trip, and March 10 we converged at Otto Hill Campground <https://www.sunrisereservations.com/campground/Otto+Hill> on the Perdido River, which marks a section of the border between Alabama and Florida. We did no



Jenny Plummer-Welker portages through a cypress swamp. Photo/Greg Welker

actual paddling on Day One, just a day of depositing upriver more than 60 kayaks and the accompanying gear for the five-day trip, driving vehicles to the take out point under the bridge at Alabama Point on Perdido Key, and bussing paddlers back to set up tents for the night. Lots of downtime meant opportunities to chat with our new companions for the week. There were lots of Floridians and "snowbird" Floridians, of course, along with folks from Georgia and Alabama, our CPA contingent, and also paddlers from Pennsylvania, northern Michigan, and Wyoming.

Paddle Florida <http://www.paddleflorida.org/> offers six supported trips annually around the state October through March. While some are perennial favorites, they want to offer new options as well. This trip on the Perdido River was the inaugural one. Paddle Florida trips have more in common with car camping than kayak camping. We broke camp each morning and deposited our gear in a large rental truck. Three meals were provided. No need to stuff gear into kayak hatches daily, carry our own food, or cook.

The Perdido River was flowing high and fast our first day out. Good steering skills were most helpful. There were sweepers and deadfalls to maneuver around and two passages that required exiting boats. The first was a generic portage, but the second demanded far more creativity. While the many waited, mostly patiently, leaders had the challenge of finding a viable way to continue. Though the wait was long and some grew impatient, we commended the leaders on their elegant solution, floating boats on a precise course through a flooded cypress swamp

while a crew of strategically placed leaders and fellow paddlers coached each of us pedestrians on exactly where to step next to find firm footing. One by one 60 times, the lengthy process brought us back to navigable river.

Campsite Two had us pitching tents on grassy areas around a roadside day launch, off a highway - not legitimate overnight accommodations for independent travelers. Other than the intense spotlights on through the night, it was a good campsite. While kayakers were setting up camp, a reporter from the *Pensacola News Journal* took photographs and interviewed participants and trip sponsors. The reporter's video and photographs are posted online: <https://www.pnj.com/videos/news/2019/03/12/proposed-perdido-river-kayak-trail-would-span-entire-river/3145050002/> and

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https://www.pnj.com/picture-gallery/news/2019/03/12/paddle-florida-group-journeys-down-perdido-river/3136279002/.](https://www.pnj.com/picture-gallery/news/2019/03/12/paddle-florida-group-journeys-down-perdido-river/3136279002/)

The second paddling morning the river became wider and more marshy until we emerged, along with the sun and a headwind, into the upper reaches of Perdido Bay estuary.

After a welcome break on a sandy point, we continued past several islands and points of land until we arrived at a Blue Angel Recreational Area, a U S Navy Morale, Welfare, and Recreation facility <https://www.militarycampgrounds.us/florida/blue-angel-naval-recreation-area>, once a base in World War II for seaplane training as we could see from the five widely spaced concrete ramps. Again we occupied a location not available without prior special arrangements for our group. Lots of flat space for tents under spreading live oak trees, Spanish moss, a sandy beach, real showers, and quiet - we were happy campers that night!

Our destination for the next night was a church retreat facility on the Alabama shore. Optimistically, we launched from our sheltered bay the next morning, but as soon as we reached the exposed water at the first point and leaders saw the whitecaps ahead, we were directed to turn around and return to the launch beach. What followed was a second day of waiting through the unscheduled challenges of moving all boats and paddlers over land with one kayak trailer and a large U-Haul box truck. Those who caught a ride in the last truck run were relieved when the truck came to a stop, the large door rolled up and in rushed fresh air and light. When we arrived at Camp Dixie and saw the waves charging the seawall and felt the cold spray 10 feet up, many of us were grateful that we had not tried to navigate those waters or to land with such aggressive following seas. How the wind did continue to blow, all day and night! We appreciated being able to set tents in the wind shadow of the camp buildings and to eat in the camp's dining hall.

The following morning conditions were not much changed, so we had another day of land shuttles. This time we relished the luxury of a rock-star bus instead of the hard floor of a U-Haul. It did not feel like a second lost day, however, because many of us chose to launch in the afternoon to explore the more sheltered areas of Big Lagoon State Park [https://www.floridastateparks.org/parks-and-](https://www.floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/big-lagoon-state-park)



Blue Angel Recreation Area. Photo/Jenny Plummer-Welker

[trails/big-lagoon-state-park](https://www.floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/big-lagoon-state-park) and the waters behind the barrier island between us and the Gulf of Mexico. It was also a day to exercise our lower extremities as our boats were located almost a mile from our tents, including (but not limited to) one round trip for the afternoon launch and another to the pavilion for the evening's musical entertainment of the blues, blue grass, and other traditional American music

with a duo on a fiddle and a guitar.

Prior to the musical program of the last evening, we had informational programs every evening with speakers representing the Northwest Florida Water Management District on preserving water quality, the Nature Conservancy on plans to protect more of the river shoreline and extend the Perdido River Water Trail with additional campsites, the Blue Angel Recreational Area on the history of the base and the role of MWRs at bases around the world, and University of Florida's



Photo/Marla Aron

Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension Services. Funds from the BP'S Deepwater Horizon payments are going toward the Florida portion of the water trail.

The last morning we paddled eight miles down the water "highway" of Old River between the rows of waterfront houses and businesses, many a couple feet above sea level; I shuddered at the audacity in the face of rising sea levels. The manmade scenery was so different from our first day and a half. As for escaping to balmy Florida, though we didn't need drysuits, we were grateful for our wetsuits as temperatures remained in the low 50s and the sun made only brief appearances. The nights were mostly in the low 40s.

Most CPAers stayed on for four more nights of camping before heading north. One day we skipped paddling to visit the National Naval Aviation Museum <https://www.navalaviationmuseum.org/>, which offers a fascinating collection spanning the history of human flight. I think all of us would recommend the museum, should you ever find yourself with free time in Pensacola. If you would like to hear more about this trip or Paddle Florida, you can reach out to Dave Isbell, Greg Welker, Jenny Plummer-Welker, Ralph Heimlich, Sue or Rich Stevens, Suzanne Farace, John Garon, Marla Aron, Carolyn Sanford, or Lois Wyatt. ♠



Florida pelicans near Big Lagoon State Park. Photo/Marla Aron