

Florida Keys Backcountry

by Greg Welker

This trip took shape after reading several articles in the *Atlantic Coastal Kayaker* by a Key West resident about the area. After several phone calls, the idea of water and air temps in the 70's sounded great and I was on my way. Unfortunately, El Niño had other plans. The following illustrates just how bad weather can take a turn for the worse.

1/30 Friday night--Met with Joe to discuss the trip I had in mind about a week of exploring, camping, and loafing in a new and interesting place. Most of the islands in the back-country are tangles of mangrove trees, only a few offer good campsites. Made notes on chart.

1/31 Saturday--Joe took a few hours off from work and we headed up the keys to the put in. It took a bit of time to load up the Feathercraft K-1 Expedition. I had to carry my normal camping gear, food, and about 90 pounds of water since there is no fresh water in the back-country. We paddled out to an island and had lunch. Joe headed back in and I was on my way. Blue-green water, blue skies, and barracuda darting through the shallows. Nice. Made camp on a nearby island.

2/1 Sunday--Wind picked up but still sunny, it's such a nice little key I decide to stay another day. Planned next day's route, about 8.5 NM on chart by candlelight. Also enter way points into GPS to be safe.

2/2 Monday--Woke about 5:30 a.m. to a strange sound. My food bag hanging in a nearby tree had a large hole chewed in it, most likely the work of a raccoon. Caught it before much damage was done. The wind seems to be a bit much for kayaking, but wanting to get on with the trip I decide to break camp and at least check it out. Not long on the open water, I soon realize there is nowhere I need to be that can't wait, and returned to the island. The water was rougher than it looked from the island and the wind seemed to be picking up. It would just be silly to set out today.

Monday afternoon--Still sunny, but the wind was building out of the NE, now about 35-40 knots. Set up tent on a small raised area with a few windbreaks. About 2 p.m. the weather radio started talking about possible storms.

4 p.m.--Wind now up to about 45 knots with gusts higher, still out of NE. Rain starting. Tied kayak down out of wind. Glad I had a heavy-duty North Face tent along.

5:30 p.m.--Driving rain, thunder, lightning, and gale force winds for about ½ hour now

NOAA Weather warning--Doppler radar had picked up three tornadoes/severe thunderstorms south of Key West and they were moving up the keys. With my front row seat, it wouldn't be a boring night!

The winds had now shifted and were coming out of the SW and still building. The next 3 hours are hard to describe. It was the most intense weather I have ever seen. The lightning was constant, more like

strobe lights. There was nonstop rolling thunder and on top of this the wind was moaning. After about 9 p.m., things started to let up and I fell asleep.

2/3 Tuesday--Woke to rain. The weather radio said three tornadoes had moved up the keys doing heavy damage to the keys, Broward and Dade counties. I made a few calls on my cell phone, alive and well, no need to worry.

2:45 p.m.--Radio said the threat of serious weather very much diminished. Wind about 30 knots. An intense squall came out of nowhere. It didn't last long, but almost flattened the tent. On open water, it wouldn't be too hard for one of these to knock you out of your boat and blow it to parts unknown.

2/4 Wednesday--Sunny, but still too windy to paddle, about 30 knots. Having accepted the fact that the trip as planned just wasn't going to happen, I just kicked back and enjoyed my small island. Radio said weather would improve tomorrow.

2/5 Thursday--Got up to watch the sunrise. Sunny, wind 10-15 knots. I packed up and took the long way back to the put in. The weather radio said today would be okay, but more heavy weather--maybe tornados--would be moving in Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

2/6 Friday--Woke to heavy rain, thunder, and lightning in Key West. Even though the trip didn't go as planned, except for the tornados, I guess there are a lot worse places to spend a week than a small key on the Gulf of Mexico.

The weather radio got a real workout on this trip. If you don't already have one its \$25 well spent. Also, it was nice to have the cell phone along. Many more people have these than marine radios, and if they will work in the area you are paddling in, why not take it along? Just bag it first. I would really like to see more of this area under better conditions. Maybe a trip to the Everglades next winter!

2005-03-30