

From the CPA Coordinator

Winter paddling in Florida's Silver River

Happy New Year!

Now that the holidays are over, it is just winter. Some of you will drag out all your winter paddling gear, load the boat and brave the cool weather on the water somewhere.



Bill Smith

Winter paddling is satisfying but also a lot of work and time consuming because you then must stow all the extra gear after drying. It can also be very exhausting, and the recovery is much different than a summertime leisure paddle.

Another option if you have the time and resources is to travel south where you can leave the extra winter gear behind. I paddled in South Carolina a few years ago, it was an improvement over the DC area but still required neoprene since the water temps were a little too low to consider paddling without protection.

Winter paddling in Florida

I spent four years living in Florida where I really took up sea kayaking and found winter paddling in Florida to be excellent, especially in springs where the water spews out of the ground at a constant 72 degrees.

My favorite Florida paddle is the Silver River in the [Ocala National Forest](#). I always launch from [Ray's Wayside Park](#) located along route 40 east of Ocala, Florida. Another option is from [Silver Springs State Park](#) if you want a shorter paddle but longer carry.

Once you launch from Ray's Park you paddle about ¼ mile down a canal that leads into the Silver River and just above the junction of the Ocklawaha River. Once you reach the river you turn right or west. The Silver River is a beautiful gin-clear waterway which is teeming with wildlife.

The river is also home to wild Rhesus (Rhesus Macaques) and Spider monkeys. I have paddled this river maybe 20 times and have always encountered packs of Rhesus

monkeys, I have yet to see any spider monkeys. It is not unusual to see groups of 30-40 monkeys. If you do encounter the monkeys, it is wise to keep your distance since they can be very dangerous.

I have observed people trying to feed them from their hand; not such a great idea considering they carry the AIDS virus and would likely rip your face off if they had the chance.

The females and babies do not seem aggressive, but the males can be scary as hell. The males are also the ones that will approach humans for a handout while the females and young will avoid contact. I always keep at least a boat's distance of water from the shore. The monkeys are rumored to be escapees from the old Tarzan movies and number somewhere around 300-800 or so depending what source you read.

I also read that the tourist attraction placed some on an island thinking they could not swim but they were gone from the island in a few short hours. I often wondered how they could be on both sides of the river but the mystery was solved when a few paddling companions

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*The Silver River is home to a wild population of Rhesus monkeys, but beware they harbor several diseases.
(Photo: Bill Smith)*

[Silver River, from page two](#)



Rescue practice, anyone? Alligators are a common sight in the area. (Photo: Bill Smith)

were paddling the river. They watched several monkeys climb near the top of a tree and launch themselves as far out in the river as possible and then swim the remainder to the opposite shore.

Besides the monkeys there are also other fascinating wildlife including an abundant population of alligators. I frequently spot night herons and an occasional black bear. The Ocala National Forest seems to have a very large bear population.

Once you reach the head spring, the water is about forty feet deep which is also at the Silver Springs tourist attraction and just upstream of the Silver River State Park. There is a resident alligator that is about 14 feet long that hangs out at the spring.

That may sound scary but an alligator that big is too old and slow to bother you. I paddled up to it once when it was sunning itself on the shore and was amazed at how wide an alligator that big really is considering if you laid on top of it, your arms would barely reach the sides.

Just downstream of the head spring is the remains of an old houseboat sunk in about 15 feet of water that was sunk during the filming of the movie "Sharkey's Machine" starring Burt Reynolds. It seems like the spring was

popular with movie production. There are a few places to stop and rest along the way, but the best is the small sand ramp at the state park which has an observation deck and bathrooms a short jaunt up the path. If you are looking for a close place to stay, camping at the state park is excellent. The National Forest also has plenty of camping sites throughout with some rustic and some improved.



No drysuit needed, winter paddling in Florida is a welcome getaway. (Photo: Bill Smith)