

Paddling for Wildlife in Florida

On gentle waters, a marvelous world awaits discovery. Keep your eyes peeled for wildlife.

Canoeing in Florida requires some serious rubbernecking. There's so much to see—often at the same time. I once watched a bulbous manatee lazily do a barrel roll beside me in the Crystal River; a mullet-clutching osprey alight on a snag-perched nest overhead; as well as a full-spectrum, mirror-in-the-water, Gulf Coast sunset—all simultaneously. Whew!

Even facing potential gawker's whiplash injury, I rarely pass up a chance to paddle a canoe or a kayak. All over this country, I've dipped a paddle in pursuit of a peaceful day and a peek at the local wildlife. Rushing streams, dock-rimmed lakes, reedy marshes, tidal bays, and open seas—I play no favorites. Anywhere, anytime, paddling soothes my soul in a balm of floating solace, allowing a closeness to nature no other means can match.

Florida, a state barely emerged from the coastal brine

and harboring countless spring-fed ribbons and blots of inland water, teems with opportunities to navigate nature. A great blue heron once leapfrogged with me for an hour along the Peace River. Alligators hiding in duckweed and slider turtles resting on drift logs watched me as intently as I watched them on stretches of the Hillsborough River near Tampa and the Ocklawaha River near Silver Springs.

From a canoe on the sprawling Indian River Lagoon, I caught and released feisty, tubular ladyfish. On the St. Mary's River at Amelia Island, Mosquito Lagoon near Cape Canaveral, and Estero Island near Fort Myers, I nearly steered close enough to pet wild bottlenose dolphins. In the Florida Keys, I guided a sea kayak over colorful coral reefs on the ocean side and paddled within dipnetting distance of spiny lobsters, stone crabs, barracudas, and stingrays plying sandbars on the Gulf side.

I dodged houseboats on the St. Johns River in order to avoid diving snail kites, eavesdropped on chatty scrub jays in the trees over De Leon Springs, and ducked under mangrove limbs to the snappy overture of popovers and shrimp at Sanibel Island. Combed patterns formed by river grass swaying downstream from a gushing artesian spring hypnotized me. Visual vignettes—a brown pelican's headfirst plunge into the sea, a wading sandhill crane's regal stance, a kestrel's darting hunt, a raccoon's ritual paw licking, flamingos erupting into pink-hued take-off—make Florida canoeing a marvel.

Surprisingly, two splashes of mild white water mark this famously flat state. The Suwannee River, born in the Okefenokee Swamp and oozing along for most of its length, tumbles through a compact Class III rapid just upstream from White Springs. A lone drop near the mouth of the also creeping Steinatchee River, falling just a couple of feet in elevation, attracts many modest thrill seekers.

Wherever and whenever I put in for a float trip, it's always with great anticipation, curious about any unknowns ahead. What I take out at a journey's end is more than a dripping paddle. Enough memories, sensations, sightings, and stories to overflow the gunwales of any watercraft leave the riverbanks and shorelines with me.

Now, I've just got to master taking it all in—without putting a crick in my neck. JOE RADA



ILLUSTRATION: RAY E. WATKINS, JR.