

Going Solo on Lake Powell

in Search of Rainbow Bridge

BY HARV MASTALIR



The local reservoir stayed frozen a frustratingly long time this year, and it had just been open for a week or two when I got an opportunity to take a week off from work. Without much hesitation I decided to head for the warmer waters of Lake Powell where I have always enjoyed poking around the narrow side canyons. This time, however, I decided to head down the main channel 50 miles to Rainbow Bridge, which I had never seen. Since I was in horrible shape from a paddleless winter, I figured this would give me a chance to exercise for a week and firm up a bit for the coming season.

Lake Powell is about 500 miles from here, so plan on a full day of driving to get there. I put in at Stanton Creek, which is the unimproved camping area at Bullfrog. The middle of March is early in the season, so not all the facilities are open at Bullfrog, but the restaurant at the lodge was open so I had a good dinner and a glass of wine before heading to my campsite.

The next morning found me loading my kayak with the usual assortment of drybags and paraphernalia. Paddling solo, I found I had a lot of 'extra' gear. Between the 'boombox' (which is required on Lake Powell), my extra large tent and all the cooking gear which is usually divided with others, my kayak was full. Fortunately, over the winter I purchased one of club founder, Mark Eckhart's (Long Haul Products) rear deck bags. Like all of Mark's products, this is a well made and extremely well thought out design that proved very useful. Remember, with all deck bags, to keep the profile low, and to put only light weight items in it. Once all packed up, which always seems to take

longer at the put-in, I shoved off into a bright and clear morning. The winds were calm, and the conditions were perfect for paddling.

There was practically no boat traffic, which seemed unusual, although it was mid-week in the middle of March. Once I

got away from Bullfrog I saw about three boats per day until I got to Rainbow Bridge, where the traffic increased (to perhaps 6 boats), with most of it coming from Wahweap. It was as close to wilderness as I have ever seen Lake Powell.

I have paddled the stretch from Bullfrog to Escalante Canyon on three occasions, but I was still mesmerized by the walls of red rock meeting the water, with of course, the ever present white bathtub ring that rose from the water about 40 feet. All was well with the world until about one o'clock when the wind started to pick up. It quickly turned into a fierce headwind that was strong enough to make it hard to hold on to the paddle. As I passed the mouths of small side canyons, the wind would come roaring out from my right side so the waves would be coming at me from two directions. Finally, just passed the Rincon, I found a small semi-protected bay to rest in, and upon closer inspection, discovered that there was a place to pitch a tent. What the Heck! It was only 3 o'clock, but I'd had enough of the wind and I had paddled 18 miles already and it was the first day of real paddling this season..... I had found a protected campsite in a stretch that always before I had considered to be devoid of campsites.

I sat in front of my tent and watched the waves roar by until it got dark. Listening to the weather radio, it said that the winds were from 25 to 35 miles per hour, with gusts to 55. When I got back to Bullfrog, I talked to a waitress at the lodge who was out that day fishing with her husband on Bullfrog Bay. She said that the waves were 8 to 10 feet at the end of the

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bay, and that their fishing boat almost cap-sized end for end!

Fortunately the wind died down overnight. I once spent three days stuck in Moki Canyon by winds that wouldn't let up, but that's another story. This day was glorious, and I got to paddle through territory I hadn't seen before. More big walls of red rock, with the canyon gradually opening wider past Escalante Canyon. About 2 o'clock I reached my anticipated campsite. It was early, but according to the map, it looked like it could be several miles to find another protected spot like this, and besides, here there was a beautiful sandy beach with protection from winds blowing both up and down the canyon. It was another 18 miles today and tomorrow I should get to Rainbow Bridge.

The morning dawned clear, with the weather report forecasting a storm coming through later in the day or evening. I got a move on it as I still had 13 miles to paddle to get to the bridge and I knew I wouldn't be able to camp there so I would have to paddle at least part way back. I paddled past the mouth of the San Juan River Arm and thought of another trip for another day.

A few miles out the wind started to blow in my face. As I came around a point of land it increased considerably. I was now having to work harder, and the wind was still increasing. The final 1/2 to 3/4 of a mile to the mouth of Forbidding Canyon turned left along a headwall that was now catching the wind full force straight on with a fetch of several miles. Not only were the waves blowing into the wall, but they were rebounding as well. It was confused but manageable. I was definitely paying attention to what was happening around me! Once I entered the mouth of the canyon, things calmed down. It was still about 4 miles up the narrow canyon to Rainbow Bridge.

When I came around the last bend I wasn't prepared for what I saw. There was a huge floating dock with walkways and sunshades and bathrooms. I could imagine it full of boats with hundreds of tourists flocking up the walkways and trail to the bridge. I was glad I was experiencing it alone. As I was getting out of my kayak the first gust of wind hit. It had been absolutely calm paddling in the canyon but now it was picking up. I quickly grabbed my water bottle and camera and headed up the trail to the bridge. Knowing that conditions were deteriorating outside took some of the fun out of reaching my destination. I ate a quick lunch and headed back to my kayak. As I was putting on my drysuit (the water temperature was 46 degrees) a small boat motored in. We had a short conversation and I asked them how

it was out in the main channel. "Not too bad, but my boats' a little bigger than yours." As they headed up the trail I realized that they were the first people I had talked to in 3 days.

Heading out Forbidding Canyon the wind continued to pick up. I stopped at the mouth of the canyon to take a drink of water and then paddled out to take it full force. The waves were about three feet and coming from my left. Of course they were rebounding off the headwall and coming from the right as well. Occasionally a wave would break across my boat and I would be up to my armpit in water. It was exciting but I never felt threatened-I just kept up a steady pace throwing in an occasional brace on the larger waves. Once I reached the end of the headwall I was able to turn and head downwind. The waves were just as large but they were no longer rebounding. I knew I would only have to run with them for a little over a mile, because at the end of the wall on my right there was a bay that I knew I could turn into and camp.

I am always amazed at how quickly conditions can change. To turn the corner I had to paddle through some extra large waves and then suddenly, within just a few feet, everything calmed down, and yet 2 boat lengths away the maelstrom continued. I paddled into the bay and found a nice sandy beach to camp on. Of course to get to that beach, I had to drag my kayak 20 yards up the beach through ankle deep mud beneath the sand. Never mind the mud! I had made it to Rainbow Bridge and I was quite happy to be here. Now I could relax.

The campsite was well protected from the wind, with an expansive view across the bay. There were a couple of islands in the bay which would mostly disappear at high water. Looking southeast, Navajo Mountain, the upper reaches of which were covered with snow, dominated the view. I spent the afternoon lounging around, mixed with intervals of doing camp chores. It was when I was down at the lake pumping drinking water that I watched in awe as a wall of wind came screaming down the canyon from the opposite direction. In one big gust I watched 3 foot waves get flattened and then turn and run in the opposite direction, and it was heading my way! I quickly ran up to my camp and gathered all the clothes that were lying around drying, throwing them into the tent. Then I turned and watched it sweep across the bay. This was the storm front that had been predicted earlier in the morning. Later that evening, as it started to get dark, the clouds moved in, completely obliterating Navajo Mountain. It rained and the wind contin-

ued well into the night, but I hardly noticed, I slept so soundly.

The clouds burned off quickly the next morning, exposing Navajo Mountain, covered with fresh snow. Down at the lake level, I don't think the temperature dropped below 40. All was calm as I paddled out into the main channel heading back to Bullfrog. My intention was to camp in a small bay just beyond the Escalante Arm, a paddle of 18 miles. I arrived at my campsite at noon having already stopped for lunch, and found that the bay was more mud than sand. The next bay was no different so I paddled on. I remembered a great campsite with a sandy beach and an easterly orientation to catch the morning sun. Checking the map, I found that it was still 14 miles away, but I decided to go for it. If I got tired or if the wind kicked up, I would just pull over and camp someplace else.

The miles seemed to go quickly, with a breeze in my face; not enough to cause any suffering, but enough to keep me cool. This was my 6th time through this stretch, so the landmarks were familiar. The last hour and a half the headwind picked up but I still managed to reach the campsite a little after 3 o'clock, a 32 mile day.

I camped on a sandy bench on the west side of the channel, with vertical red walls behind me as well as across on the other side of the lake. I would get good early morning sun. I spent the evening watching the walls change colors as the sun set.

Morning brought a warm, bright sun that promised a perfect day. I only had 13 miles to paddle to my truck, so it should be an easy day. I love this section of the lake because it is miles and miles of vertical red rock meeting the water. There is a point at which you make a last turn, the channel suddenly widens, and you look straight across the mouth of Bullfrog Bay 4 miles or so to where the car is parked. At this point it is a lot like horses heading back to the barn.....it's hard not to speed up.

As I paddled through the first 1/2 mile of this stretch, a houseboat which had been ever so slowly catching up to me finally passed. I quickly paddled behind it and crossed to its other side and caught its wake. I was able to surf that wake for the next 1/2 mile, with only an occasional stroke to keep me on the wave. What a great finish to a fabulous trip! I paddled up to my truck a little before 11 o'clock. No brass bands, no one there for even a pat on the back, just a deep down good feeling that I had been there, and back again.