

Manatee Madness

by Ernie Frank

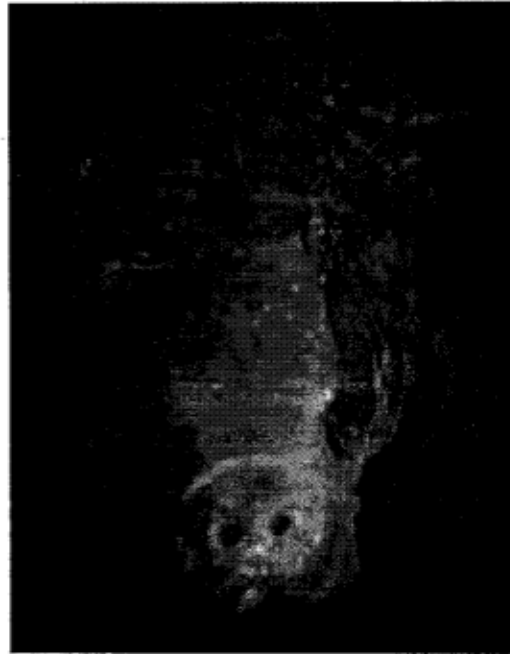


The last week of February an environmental sculptor friend from Colorado stopped by on her way to Ringling Museum in Sarasota. She had been asked to give some input into their remodeling and thought manatees might be a fitting subject. So she was anxious to actually see some manatees.

The night had been cold so they would most likely be bunched near the springs in Kings Bay near Crystal River on Florida's Gulf Coast. We got a canoe from the Plantation Inn and were off, with Lynne in the rear steering us from one side of the channel to the other until we got to open water.

A tour boat was returning to the dock as we headed toward Banana Island and the sanctuary. We arrived amidst a general boiling of the water around the one and only boat remaining. There was a tremendous amount of activity as three or four huge adults surfaced, rolled, and dove on their sides shoving each other about. We paddled over to Bill Herzog the Watcher on patrol and he told us it looked like we were in the middle of manatee courtship.

There were only two snorkelers in the water and one woman on the small whaler anchored 30 yards outside the buoy markers. As we watched from a distance a huge manatee heeled the boat from side to side as the woman grabbed the gunwale. One diver came up, close by, handing her his Nikonos + flash camera outfit and



clambered aboard the boat. I hailed them and asked permission to come alongside to add some stability to our tippy canoe for I had no desire to get wet, let alone be flipped in the midst of the frisky bull challenges.

The boat was from the University of Florida and they were studying scrub jays, but had taken a break to cavort with the manatees today and what a day. We had them all to ourselves. And were they rambunctious! Some had paired off and they would rise together belly to belly, flukes, on their sides, slicing the water

like some circular dorsal fin and then there was a group of three to six huge manatees raising up out of the murky roiled water, pushing against each other or trying to mount the harassed female floating belly up on the surface to gain a moments respite from their ardor. They were all about us and under us. One cleaning the anchor rope of the whaler of its accumulated algae while another grasped the bow of the canoe with her flippers and rubbed her belly against the keel.

One surfaced right alongside and Lynne remarked about the surface pattern of bristly hair on their back, it reminded me of ostrich skin, with its distinctive pattern of quill marks. It was fantastic. Lynne held on and kept saying, "Cool". I had never seen so many, so active. They were far from the placid animals usually encountered on my weekly paddles. If you were in the water you might find yourself between two of these rampaging bulls and while they are a good amount of blubber, it could be more like being between a rock and a hard place. After two hours of holding to the whaler and paddling cautiously among the more placid ones we headed back to the Inn for a break.

Ernie Frank is spending the winter in Florida. He welcomes RMSKC paddlers to join him this winter.

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