

Cumberland Island

By Terry Smith

I've heard it is wise to seek information from local experts when paddling in a new area. Well, paddling in Georgia is certainly new to Barb and me. We stop in to purchase a tide chart at Up the Creek, the kayak shop in Saint Marys. We ask for information about paddling to Cumberland Island. "Well, I wish my son was here, he knows a lot more about that than I do. Make sure you time it right though, those currents can be 5 knots!" This is our first overnight kayak trip and also our first "ocean" trip. We ponder these facts as we cross the street to pick up our required backcountry camping permit for Cumberland Island. The ranger casually mentions that a large alligator has recently been spotted near our planned camp spot.

Cumberland Island is a 17.5-mile long barrier island off the coast of southern Georgia. Most of the island and surrounding area was designated a National Seashore in 1972 and is now administered by the National Parks Service. It is accessible only by boat. Most visitors take a ferry from Saint Marys and explore the ruins and old mansions on the south end. Most of the northern 2/3 of the island is now a designated wilderness area.

The island has a colorful past. Archeological evidence shows that Native Americans inhabited the island over 4,000 years ago. Spanish forts were constructed there in the 1500s - 1700s. Some of South's most productive plantations were located on Cumberland in the late 18th Century. In 1880 Thomas Carnegie bought most of Cumberland and built the largest mansion ever to be located on the island. The 59 room Scottish castle was complete with turrets, a pool house, 40 outbuildings,

golf course, acres of manicured gardens and a squash court. The mansion was used as a retreat through 1959 when it burned to the ground. The island was saved from ravaging development in 1972 when the Carnegie family and Mellon Foundation purchased most of the land and donated it to the National Park Service. Much of the island has reverted to a wild state.

Barb and I stay in a nice secluded campground at Crooked River State Park, our launch point. We spend the afternoon sorting and bagging our gear. The next day dawns clear, but windy. The tide chart says slack will begin at about 2:00 PM. We eagerly stare out at the Crooked River and watch the fishing boats go by as the sun moves west. Finally 2:00 arrives and we set out, hoping to have the ebb tide help us along.

The paddle to the campsite at Brickhill Bluff is nearly 11 miles. We quickly find that a 3-knot current is little help against a 15-knot headwind—ugh. The wind also makes the water quite choppy. The coast here is rimmed with countless salt marshes that make it hard to tell where solid ground begins. The myriad of bends and estuaries hide even the actual course of the river. We watch the map closely to avoid a wrong turn in the maze.

We choose to hug the northern shore of Crooked River, since the huge King's Bay Naval Submarine base on the southern shore is a restricted area. After a few miles we finally reach the Intracoastal Waterway,



which separates Cumberland Island from the mainland. Our pace picks up as we scan for ship traffic. Once safely across the shipping lane, we enter the Brickhill River. I'm not sure how there can be a river surrounding an island but, hey, I'm a landlubber. Once again, we are surrounded by salt marshes. The island looms closer. Georgia is the most forested state in the union and we marvel at the variety of trees as we approach the dock at Plum Orchard. Plum Orchard is beautiful restored mansion, one of two on the island that was once owned by Carnegie. Our legs are aching and we land to stretch our stiff bodies. It is after 5:30 PM and we are the only ones here.

All too soon we're back in the boats. Although we've reached the island, we have come only a little more than halfway to our campsite. The route north along the Brickhill River takes us back away from the island as it weaves crazily through the salt marshes. There are a variety of shore birds along the "river" and several times we spot dolphins playing nearby. It is getting late and we are getting nervous about reaching the campsite



A marsh on west side of island

Photo: Ed Jackson

before dark. Finally, the river turns back toward land and we near the shore. A lone raccoon is the only apparent inhabitant. The sun is touching the western horizon as we finally reach where I calculate the campsite to be. The forest is so thick that the camp area is very difficult to pick out. I finally spot an old-fashioned water pump handle back in the trees. I remember the guidebook mentioning the pump. We made it!

The live oaks that line the shore at the high tide mark are awesome. Their long thin branches look eerie in the dim dusk light. We set foot on shore and have our next wildlife encounter—bugs! Millions of them, biting every inch of unprotected skin. We can't get our tent set up fast enough. By now it is dark. Stars begin popping out of the clear sky.

We are the only people at this beautiful, if buggy spot. Despite our best efforts to keep the netting on the tent zipped, hundreds of the tiny monsters get inside. Our plans for a cold supper turn out to be wise since

either my glasses or a flashlight as I feel my way towards the pump. Suddenly there are loud crashing noises coming from the tangle of trees ahead of me. Apparently we are not alone. "Barb, hand me my glasses, there's something BIG out here!" I grab a flashlight and point it in the direction of the ruckus. Three wild horses are staring back at me. I'm pretty sure horses aren't carnivorous, so I continue to the pump to do the dishwashing.

Our 20-degree rated sleeping bags are a bad joke in the hot humid weather. Between the insects and the heat, neither of us sleeps much. We cuss and swat bugs all through the night.

When dawn breaks we see that the weather has taken a bad turn. We can't make out the mainland and it is raining lightly. We had planned to explore a little and take the mile and a half hike over to the Atlantic coast (the real ocean) today. Cumberland is known as a prime sea turtle nesting ground as well as being home to a

Cumberland Island continued

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we don't have to cook out in the clouds of noseums.

After supper I decide to wash our few dishes at the hand pump. I don't bother to take

large variety of birds and other wildlife. The weather, the insects and the thought of the 11-mile paddle back make us decide to pack up instead. Our exploration of the island has covered about 500 square feet.

Tracing our way back along the Brickhill River, we again delight in watching the dolphins play. Barb says something and I look over to see a large dorsal fin between our boats. It is not a dolphin. A four or five foot shark cruises alongside Barb, not more than a foot or two away. Don't see many of those in Aurora Reservoir!

We feel more comfortable after we again cross the Intracoastal Waterway and can see the start of our route back through the salt marshes. A large brown head suddenly rises from the channel in front of us—a manatee. We get but a brief look before it submerges again. It is our first sighting and quite a thrill.

We are both pooped as we reach the boat ramp at Crooked River State Park. Because we were unsure of the tide changes and time constraints, we power-paddled almost all 22 miles. Barb and I would love to return with more time to explore the treasures of Cumberland Island now that we know how to be better prepared. Next time we will go when the tide gives us more daylight, bring and use plenty of bug repellent, and give ourselves an extra day for exploring.

Trip Summary

Launch point: Crooked River State Park. - North side of Saint Marys, Georgia.

Destination: Brickhill Bluff primitive campsite, Cumberland Island.

Distance: 11 miles, one way

Date of trip: 10/2000

Difficulties: Route finding, wind, waves, misinformation

Hazards: Tidal currents, ship traffic on the Intracoastal waterway, navigation in the salt marshes, possible high winds and higher waves, bad weather, gators, sharks & bug bites.