

# MANATEE MADNESS, DOLPHIN DELIRIUM, AND HERON HISTRIONICS

By Patty Lee

## Halls River/Homosassa River: A Weekday Idyll

Great blue herons always look so peaceful, standing stiltlegged in an envelope of detachment. Every once in a while, the detached stance turns to one of intense focus, as they lean forward, eyes riveted to some movement underwater. But rarely do they call out or show a ruffled feather. In a word, they are \*poised.\*

Then along comes a paddler. Worse yet, four Colorado paddlers bearing one-eyed privacy-invading devices, better known as cameras. We are, to put it bluntly, an unwanted exotic species in heron paradise — snowbirds!. As we blithely glide by one of the big blues, he (she?) loudly scrawks, "Ehrrrrrrrdt!" amidst a frenzied flapping of wings. The slatey blue statue has morphed into an indignant avian eruption. Terry Smith turns to me with a slight grin: "Barb and I learned that means ASSHOLE in great blue heron." I decide to put away the one-eye.



Great Blue Heron (photo by Barb Smith)

Two days earlier, Tom Barnhart ("Barn") and I had joined Terry and Barb at the house we were renting together on the Halls River, in Homosassa, Florida. We had cheerfully taken up Ernie Frank's invitation to RMSKC members to escape the Colorado winter and paddle among the manatees. Like us, the manatees escaped colder areas by migrating up the warm, spring-fed Homosassa and Crystal Rivers. At the point where the heron cursed at us, we had not seen any manatees...yet. "There'll be plenty of them where we're going," Barb assured me.

The dark waters of the Halls soon brought us to the crystalline languor of the Homosassa River. The search was now on. Barb and Terry cried, "There's one!" as they pointed to an oval patch of smooth water. In a moment, the patch gave way to a rounded dark gray head with two black holes for nostrils. "Pffftz!" said the nostrils, emitting a fine spray of air and water. I had just seen my first manatee, nostril flaps and all. Barb murmured, "I wonder if that's the friendly one we saw the other day. He came right up to our boats wanting his nose rubbed."

We visually scoured the lazy river around us, often rewarded with glimpses of smooth oval "manatee wakes" that foretold of their surfacing. One of the wakes seemed to like hanging around our boats. "I bet that's the one!" Barb could hardly contain her excitement, and I now dared let myself think we could actually \*pet\* a manatee. Terry added, "Henry [the owner of the rental house and the kayak shop practically next to it] referred to it as 'fondling the manatees'."



Oscar the manatee hugs Patty's kayak as Barb waits for a capsizing. (photo by Tom Barnhart)

And fondle we did, or maybe it was the other way around. The friendly young manatee, which Barn dubbed "Oscar," examined our submerged and waiting hands and, apparently, decided we were worthy of scratching his back, his nose, his belly. He even slowly rolled over (manatees have one speed: slow), raising his toenailed flippers. I gently rubbed them -- ticklish! He moved the flippers down, only slightly less slowly than he had put them up. Barb nervously asked, "Can you feel him bumping the boat when he's under you? I hope he doesn't flip me over." We joked of manatee amorosness: "That volunteer ranger said he saw some mating the other day."

Fortunately, none of us went for an unexpected swim. Oscar seemed content to be petted and roll lazily below and among our boats. "Their skin feels leathery," I marveled. "But the nose feels velvety, like a horse's nose." Mr. Velvet Nose must have liked that, because the next thing I knew he floated underneath my boat, rolled over, and placed both flippers up beside the hull, holding my 20"-beam rented Wilderness Systems Piccolo oh so gently. "Uh oh, I think he's getting ideas," someone snickered. But I knew what to do -- touch those ticklish flippers! Down they went.

When we finally, reluctantly, started paddling back, Oscar followed us like a puppy till he couldn't keep up anymore. We all felt wretched at leaving him.

However, it was a relief to escape the motorboats that converged on us whenever the operators noticed us finding manatees. I was a little worried about Oscar, since Barb had seen one of the commercial tourist boats actually bump a manatee as the tour guide shouted, "Look! There's one!" WHUMP. And that was just a boat motoring at low speed; the entire area was signed MANATEE ZONE. NO WAKES. So far, every manatee we had seen bore propeller scars, often multiple scars. The feathered wildlife fared better than the scarred manatees. "A bird on every signpost" became the theme of the trip, and every specimen exuded vigor. Great blue herons, little blue herons, white herons both large and small, cormorants, anhingas, ospreys, a bald eagle, wood ducks, American coots, white pelicans, brown pelicans, storks, turkey vultures...we saw them all. More than one great blue heron called us assholes.



**Terry petting Oscar, the manatee  
(photo by Terry Smith)**

### **Halls River/Homosassa River: A Weekend War Zone**

When we paddled the same route again two days later, on a Saturday, the motorized crowd chugged all around, many of them commercial outfitters guiding overly-eager snorkelers who chased the manatees. Most of the manatees fled (a relative term) past the barrier markers indicating where people were not to enter. A couple of snorkelers persisted in following them even there, eliciting an irate warning from an observer on a motorboat. To nobody's surprise, the manatees did not seem interested in interacting with people that day, instead preferring to stay well below the surface save for the occasional breath of air.

We passed yet another of the many motorboaters proclaiming profundities about kayaks vs. canoes. This fellow stated loudly, "With a canoe, you can stand up in it, and you can get in and out real easy. You can't get back into a kayak after you get out." Hmmph!

Each night had been more humid and warm, with corresponding days, and now the air temp was in the low 80's. With water said to be 72 degrees, I was only too happy to take a dip. First, Terry went into the water. Then I slid off the 16' Wilderness Systems Tarpon SOT I was using this day and peered through my swim mask. The manatees were too far for either of us to see through the stirred-up murk. Oh, well; swimming and treading water (I had forgotten to bring a PFD) felt wonderful on this respite from Colorado February weather.

There was just this little matter of getting back in, or rather on, the kayak, since the rental company did not supply either pumps or paddle floats. Curious motorboaters surrounded me, waiting to see if I could get back on the kayak. Not wanting to depend on others for an assisted rescue, I eyed the 27"-wide Tarpon critically. I found good holds for my wet fingers, then stiffened my upper body and lunged across it, simultaneously throwing a leg over the stern deck as if it were a horse. It worked. I swear I could hear a collective sigh of motorboater disappointment at being deprived of a whopping good capsized scene.

Airboats marred our trip back through the formerly-placid river corridor. If you've never seen or heard an airboat, imagine a fan about 8' x 8' mounted on the back of a small boat, churning at three levels above High. The boat can thrash in shallow water close to shore, all the while drowning out nature's sounds with its deafening roar. Luckily, our final stretch of paddling took us through a line too sinuous and shallow for airboats.

Negotiating the slalomish section of the Halls River, I compensated for the extra length and non-leanability of the Tarpon by anticipating the bends and starting my sweeps and stern rudder strokes earlier than I had with the 13.5' Piccolo. Not bad: the boat merely required more hp to paddle, period, plus a bit more forethought in the bends. It wasn't as if I could lean the Piccolo much anyway, because the outfitter had not supplied sprayskirts. Unlike the earlier jaunt, today we had a tailwind to help push us against the current.

## Rainbow River/Withlacoochee River: Sprite or Iced Tea?

The lack of sprayskirts and pumps/floats came as a surprise. While the rivers we paddled were flatter and less windy than Chatfield and I found virtually no difference between upstream and downstream, I wondered what people did if they capsized without someone else around to help with an assisted rescue. Then it dawned on me that the outfitters were more concerned about tourists being unable to wet exit with sprayskirts on than they were about hypothermia or drowning in the warm, shallow rivers. If the typical tourist knew nothing of exiting from a sprayskirt, they probably would not know how to complete a deep-water re-entry. The first outfitter we rented from, Dragonfly Kayaks in Dunellon, had told me they only provide sprayskirts on their guided trips.

But Dragonfly did provide me with a pump and paddle float after I specifically requested them. They also gave us our pick of boats, some of which looked like they had never been rented. For our paddle on the famously clear Rainbow River, Barn and I chose a Current Designs Storm and Squamish, respectively. Barb and Terry paddled the Wilderness Systems Cape Horns they had chosen from the racks of Riversport Kayaks, the outfitter on the Halls River right near the rental house.



**Barn, Jack, and Carl prepare to paddle the clear waters of the Rainbow River (photo by P.S. Lee)**



**The Rainbow (photo by Barb Smith)**

After some last-minute phoning regarding logistics, Ernie Frank and two of his Florida friends met Barb, Terry, Barn, and me at the KP Hole put-in of the Rainbow River. I stared slackjawed at the water: "You can see the bottom from all the way over here!" Current? What current? Paddling leisurely, I felt no resistance from any current. Soon we arrived at the warm springs of Rainbow River State Park. The springs resembled swimming pool water, their utter transparency backlit like an aquamarine gem. Sprite in a light blue-green bottle.

Speaking of Sprite, we had been strongly warned to pack nothing disposable. Energy bars and sandwiches had to be unwrapped and packed "naked" in Tupperware or similar containers. Likewise for beverages; cycling water bottles were allowed but soda bottles were not. Any trash sinking to the bottom of those clear waters could not escape notice, so warnings and rules were backed up by hefty fines for violators. We audibly wished Colorado instituted and enforced similar laws and chewed our regulation lunches thoughtfully.

The group hiked the shady paths around the springs, clicked a few snapshots, and proceeded to paddle back toward the take-out at 41 Bridge. Barb and I hoped we would see some dolphins but the rich dark hues of the Withlacoochee held no promise for those. "It's like a really strong iced tea color," I said while gingerly dipping a hand in the tannin brew. I remembered someone commenting that we might see alligators in the Withlacoochee. Out came my hand in a hurry.

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**Ernie & the Colorado Four (photo by Terry Smith)**

## King's Bay/Crystal River: Manatee Madness on Valentine's Day

Valentine's Day -- the day we celebrated Manatee Madness as guests of Ernie and the Florida South Paddlers -- dawned cloudy and cool. It still felt balmy after the previous week's four snowstorms at home. A total of 14 or 15 people, most in singles but one couple in a canoe and two pairs in double kayaks, gathered at King's Bay in the town of Crystal River. We paddled the first half mile or so without seeing any manatees but quickly reached an area where Ernie told us to keep an eye out. Bobbing gently in the ripples, I spied a wide dark shape deep below me. Really wide. This manatee must have been five feet wide, with a tail (fluke) sized to match. Holy cow, holy manatee! Nearby two more dark shapes floated closer to the surface, a cow and calf manatee pair. None of the manatees was as bold as Oscar, so we took satisfaction in just watching them before moving on toward 3 Sisters Springs.

To enter the swimming-pool-like water at the springs, we paddled between metal poles placed across a narrow opening that widened to a leafy tunnel. That meant no motorboats could get in. Swarms of snorkeling tourists made up for in numbers what no motorboats meant in volume, though. With a sigh of relief, I scooted away from a be-finned and be-snorkled kid who had popped up right next to my Piccolo after I had taken my non-waterproof SLR out of its Pelican box. If any manatees had been there earlier, they had long since hightailed it away from the splashing, shouting kids. "Hey, maybe we'll see a dolphin," Barb and I mused.

Back at King's Bay, three of us felt restless for more paddling and more manatees. As Barn headed back to shore with the Florida paddlers, Barb, Terry, and I went searching for more manatees. We were so intent on watching for manatee wakes that we only dimly noticed Ernie's and Barn's frantic shouting from shore. When we returned to see what the commotion was about, they exclaimed, "Some dolphins swam practically next to you! Maybe you can go paddle after them." And the race was on. We did catch up to them, though our "sprint" must have seemed comical to them (especially me in the Piccolo firing off high-rpm strokes). Dolphins supposedly cruise at 18 mph, with occasional faster bursts. Our max was not even a third of 18 mph.

## Cedar Key: The Mysterious Sea Creature

The Colorado foursome capped off its last day together with a late-afternoon drive to Cedar Key. Due to kayak transportation problems, we did not paddle there but we still wanted to smell the ocean, soak up the pounding spray, dream of shooting down the front of swells. Upon trolling for ocean paddling recommendations, the general response had been that the nearby ocean paddling wasn't really ocean paddling. Huh? "It's not surf or sandy beaches...just lots of seagrass marshes and muck."

Cedar Key and its four islands elicited a little more enthusiasm. Two people mentioned its beaches of white sand, though one of them subtly hinted, "It's where I go to get a little dose of sandy beach, something we don't really have in this area." There was sandy beach, all right -- all 100 feet of it! We stared in disbelief, then burst out laughing. Even Chatfield has more beach than that.

Gazing at the cotton-candy horizon, Terry pointed out a black fin cutting the sea's surface. It sliced below the water, then reappeared and disappeared several times. For several minutes we watched, hoping it would come closer. Speculation as to what it was ran the gamut from cormorant to shark.

We never did identify the mysterious sea creature but that's OK. Gotta leave something for next time...

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Many thanks to Ernie Frank for dangling the bait that brought us to Florida and for making sure we had boats to paddle and manatees to meet.

**Where:** Homosassa, FL  
**House and Kayak Rental:** Riversport Adventures  
<http://www.flakayak.com>