

# Kayaking the Maine Island Trail

By Matt Lutkus

I was very fortunate this past summer to have been able to take a mini leave of absence from my job for six weeks. I loaded up my sea kayak and mountain bike on my minivan and headed eastward. All told, I drove about 6800 miles in 14 states and two provinces, and put on about 220 miles kayaking along the Massachusetts and Maine coasts, Lakes Ontario, Huron and Superior and in Voyageur National Park with other members of RMSKC.

One of a number of trip highlights was kayaking the Maine coast. I am familiar with Penobscot Bay, having spent three one week vacations in coastal cruising classes with the Wooden Boat School (another one of my passions) and having vacationed on an island in the western part of the Bay for several summers growing up.

The Island Trail and the public access to 102 islands exist because of the efforts of the Maine Island Trail Association (MITA). 49 of the islands are publicly owned, 22 are owned by nonprofit organizations and the balance are in private



Shell Beach on Little Sheep Island (Photo by Matt Lutkus)

ownership. The publicly owned islands can be used by anyone while one should be a MITA member to use the privately held islands. The membership costs \$45 per year includes a guide book that has descriptions of all of the islands including permitted uses and, in some cases, GPS coordinates. The islands in this system stretch some 325 miles from Casco to Machias Bays. Unfortunately, I could only cover a fraction of that distance in the week that I was there.

My launching point throughout the week was Deer Isle in central Penobscot Bay. Although there are a

number of places to launch from Deer Isle, I found it best to launch from Old Quarry Adventures not far from Stonington. The \$5 a day fee includes an excellent launch site, car parking and, probably best of

all, someone to keep your itinerary and check on you if you are not back by the designated time. The office monitors marine radio channel 16. I was able to make use of this service when I needed to communicate with a friend waiting for me at the launch point.

Old Quarry is also a great place to rent roto-molded kayaks which is nice if you are vacationing with friends who don't have their own equipment. Or, if they are new to the sport, they can take advantage of the paddling classes while you go off and explore.

Isle Au Haut, one of my destinations during the week, is a beautiful section of Acadia National Park about eight miles from the mainland. The closest MITA campsite to the island is on Kimball Island, a private island located across the channel from Isle Au Haut. Again, having the MITA membership is advantageous in this regard.

Kimball was the location of my one overnight paddle during the week. Especially since I was paddling alone during this portion of my trip,



Matt off Little Sheep Island (Photo by Matt Lutkus)

I made sure that I had all of the right equipment: a drysuit, GPS, a chart and compass, a whistle, a small air horn, flares, a strobe and a marine radio. When added up, this stuff is not cheap but definitely worth the investment. And, with the exception of the flares, they will last many years.

My Northwest Pursuit XL is about one and a half mile per hour slower when fully loaded so I can still maintain about a four mph cruising speed. I almost never use the rudder but with my loaded kayak in any kind of chop, it was a necessity. In my opinion, paddling out through the Deer Isle Archipelago is a paddling experience second to none. Bird life of all kinds and seals abound. Occasionally, one can catch a glimpse of a Bald Eagle or an Osprey. When I have sailed here previously, we would see dolphins swimming along side the boat at least once during the week.

There are quite a few lobster boats and this is a Mecca for all types of pleasure craft, mostly under sail. I had no difficulties –

but it helps to respect the space that the lobstermen need around their buoys and the area needed for a sloop to tack. I have been on the Maine coast previously where the fog would have made such crossings unnerving. This is all the more reason to have a GPS and loud air horn.

The MITA rules regarding the use of the islands are restrictive but very reasonable given the fragile environment and the number of people who use the islands. Typically, fires are not permitted, you must have a boom box or other device to take out your own waste, camping is allowed only in specific sites and there is a limit on the number of campers at any site.

Due largely to my guidebook and GPS, I landed squarely on the approved campsite on Kimball Island. (Quite frankly, if you are not very familiar with the area and from a kayaker's vantage point, many of the islands look the same.) I settled in to the perfect campsite and quickly moved my gear up from the quickly rising tide. I then set

out for the general store on Isle Au Haut for my ration of ice cream and then leisurely paddled around the wonderful vessels moored in the harbor. My only regret was that I had not planned for a two night stay so that I could have spent more time exploring the beautiful landscape.

My other kayak adventures that week consisted of day trips. I am sure that the people I was with were sick of hearing me say: "this is the best kayaking day I've ever had", for several days in a row. The scenery, wildlife, salt air, and chop all contributed to making it so. Some of the islands we visited were Sheep, Little Sheep, Hell's Half Acre and Russ. We made a one day car trip up to Acadia National Park for some biking. There are some great lakes in which to kayak, but it would be tough to justify given that there is such fantastic coastal kayaking so close by.

For more information on the Maine Island Trail see the MITA website at [www.mita.org](http://www.mita.org).



View of Center Harbor - Brooklin, Maine  
(Photo by Matt Lutkus)



View From Kimball Island Photo by Matt Lutkus)