

[From Fall 2001]

Exploring a Salt Marsh by Kayak

A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to explore a salt marsh in a new way -- from the seat of a kayak! This was not my first kayak experience. I have whitewater kayaked on fast moving rivers in Wisconsin and lazily kayaked on Lake Superior and the Mississippi River. But a salt marsh was something different. I was pleasantly surprised.

Early one morning, a friend and I put our kayaks in at Raccoon Creek, a channel that meanders through a salt marsh at the southern tip of the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge. I don't know about you, but the first thing I notice when I get close to a salt marsh is the smell -- that distinctive aroma of rotting sea lettuce, sulfur, and saltwater. Nonetheless, we grabbed our kayaks from the back of the truck, hauled them off to the water, and pushed and paddled our way into the marsh. Our exploration had begun! This is our adventure.

As we begin our journey, I am immediately aware of how up close and personal we are to nature. We paddle our kayaks down the narrow, high-banked channel of the creek and I can reach out and touch the cordgrass on either side. We spot Atlantic Ribbed Mussels jutting half way out of the muddy embankment and Atlantic Moon Snails gliding along marsh plants leaving their snail trail. Fiddler and hermit crabs scurry out of our reach. We notice casings protruding out of the bank created by tube-dwelling worms. I'm amazed at the diversity of creatures we see.

Overhead, Laughing Gulls, Herring Gulls, Royal Terns and Common Terns continuously serenade us with their familiar calls. Flocks of Brown Pelicans fly in formation, quietly beating their wings as they make their way from one feeding area to another. We frighten a Little Blue Heron and a Green Heron and they take off down the creek, landing just ahead, and affording us a terrific view. A Tricolored Heron cries its alarm and rims from the salt marsh just a few feet from us.

We decide to paddle out to the intercoastal zone and find ourselves in shallow water bordered by mud flats. Blue crabs scurry quickly along the sandy bottom as we approach them in our kayaks. Jellyfish appear to float effortlessly by while Channeled Whelks slowly make their way along the sand flat. Small fingerlings of several species of fish swim by. At least 18 sunbathing Diamond-back Terrapins slide in the water from their mud flat making "plopping" noises. Peeping noises alert us to sandpipers probing in the mud capturing small insects and crustaceans. We manage to identify the "peeps" as Least Sandpipers. After a few hours exploring this area, it is time to paddle back to the salt marsh before the tide goes out and the water is too low.

When we reenter Raccoon Creek, much to our chagrin we realize that we are too late -- the tide is out! Thus starts the second adventure of our trip (one I could have done without). The channel of water that was once a few feet deep is now less than six inches in many spots. We have to walk our kayaks through many areas, dragging them through others. The mucky mud is dark, thick, deep, and smelly! At one point, my friend is knee deep in it and nearly loses his sandal. But as they say, every cloud has a silver lining. Our silver lining is the oyster beds that are exposed at low tide that we missed seeing in deep water. We take care to walk our kayaks around them so as to avoid disturbing the oysters. It takes us twice as long to get back to the landing and we are exhausted, but satisfied. The moral of this story is twofold: first, explore a salt marsh from a kayak if you have the opportunity, you won't be disappointed; and second, always check for times of low and high tides before you put in -- you'll be glad you did!



Rita Y. Hawrot Eastern Shore NWR