

Solo In The Glades

A Picture Story Celebrating Ponce De Leon's 1513 Landing in "La Florida"

Since last year's solo canoe trip in the Everglades National Park was so much fun, paddling the same touring canoe I use at home in Maine and on all my trips in New England and the Canadian maritime provinces, I felt compelled to do yet another loop through the large park. The winter in Maine was also very long and cold, and I was in dire need of thawing out and limbering up my paddling shoulders and back from all the hard snow shoveling and roof raking. Nancy was again sweet enough to buy this excuse for yet another trip to the Glades. With a smile, she further encouraged me to test and get used to my new digital camera and thoroughly test my aging Sat phone and VHF weather radio (see all the trouble I had with them on my last trip in Penobscot Bay "Rounding Islesboro, North Haven & Vinalhaven" on my website ZollitschCanoeAdventures.com).

And then there was the historic motivation for my personal quest. Almost all my past trips were partially motivated by some earlier explorer's venture, like those by John Cabot, Jacques Cartier, Samuel de Champlain or Henry Hudson. 2013, it suddenly dawned on me, was exactly 500 years after Spanish Juan Ponce de Leon first landed on the Atlantic coast of "La Florida". It was on Spanish Easter, the "Feast of the Flowers" or "Pascua Florida", in the year 1513. His was the first written record of a European expedition to Florida as well as the naming of that area. How could I pass up this grand opportunity for a celebratory loop through southern Florida, the verdant Everglades, and especially through "Ponce de Leon Bay", where the Shark River empties into the Gulf.

So, cheerful, eager and full of new motivation I was heading south again by bus, plane, airport shuttle and pick-up by my ranger friends John and Donna, who were again willing to rent me their Kruger Monarch solo sea canoe, carbon bent-shaft Zaveral paddles and PFD. Just before sundown, just like last year, I crawled into my little Eureka tent at the Flamingo campground. It was February 21, 2013. The hardest part of my trip, as I saw it, was over.

I had again planned a 13-day round trip, first up the Gulf of Mexico, this year to the most northerly corner of the park, Tiger Key, and from there through the mangroves along the many rivers and streams and strings of interconnected lakes back to Flamingo, a 183-mile round trip. Like last year, I walked the mile past a vulture tree and lots of Spanish moss to the Ranger station to check in.

I was delighted to get all 12 back country campsites I had chosen, the sun was out, it felt warm, and I was very eager to push off towards Middle Cape Sable. With the prevailing SSE winds in this area, I like to be out on the Gulf going North, and coming home, a mostly SSE direction, on the more protected inner part of my clockwise loop.

My new digital camera was a delight and surprisingly easy to use. I tried to take a "perfect picture" the first time and never reviewed them, in order to save my battery. It took a lot of confidence, but it worked. After 2 weeks I was still on the first charged battery.

After 4 hours in the shallow waters to and around East Cape Sable, I found a great, level, sandy, shady spot for my tent at Middle Cape with a great view of the Gulf.

From there I headed up the mighty Shark River with the incoming tide to the Oyster Bay chickee for my second overnight. It is a cozy-looking, well-protected wooden platform for 2 tents, with a great view down the bay. I felt great paddling the 18 miles effortlessly in only 4:10 hours.

My next day was equally long (19 miles), through the Shark River delta into and across Ponce de Leon Bay and up the Gulf coast to my all-time favorite site on Highland Beach. The third day on any of my trips is mostly wrought with lots of arthritic joint pain, but not this time (and I do not really know why). I had again figured the tides perfectly for the day, flushing out of Oyster Bay and the Shark River with the strong ebb tide, and then up the coast with the incoming flood tide. I do not think I ever paddled 19 miles in only 3:30 hours.

I knew next morning would be a difficult low tide take-off. But since the run to New Turkey Key was a short one, I did not fret. I had a leisurely 9:30 a.m. start, carried my boat to the edge of the incoming tide, took my time loading up and pulled and scootered my boat into deeper water before getting in to paddle off. ("Scootering": with both hands on the gunwales and the right knee on the canoe seat, I push off with my left foot on port like on a scooter – get it?)

I was on New Turkey Key in no time (3:15 hrs for 13 miles), immediately went swimming off the small sand beach and admired the ubiquitous, chalky-white shells plastering the rest of the beach. I even found a lush green cactus as well as equally sharp-tipped agave plants behind my tent site.

Friends often ask me: "How can you live/function in such a small space for more than a weekend?" Well, here are some interior shots: My sleeping bag on a comfortable Thermarest pad and my Crazy Creek chair with extra pillow (my office).

My food, propane gas for my one-burner stove, etc., all brought from home in Maine in two large Army duffels, now transferred to waterproof bags for the canoe trip.

On Rabbit Key I noticed I had pitched my tent a tad too close to the high-water mark and had to build a small shell/coral dike to keep the saltwater from licking my tent etc. - not a good idea.

This would not happen again at my next stop on Tiger Key, I told myself.

On the way there, between Stop, Picnic and Tiger Key, I had one of my best wildlife sightings ever: I got a real close-up view of a huge 5 foot sea turtle, breathing heavily at the surface. It had a large beak-like mouth, like a raptor and large front flippers. Its shell was mottled, its markings covered by sand, lichens and dirt, like an old ship's bottom. I had never seen a turtle that big other than in the Hagenbeck Zoo in Hamburg, Germany, when I was a kid. I was only feet away from the turtle and wished I had a picture of the big beast. But it eventually dove down before I could get my camera out. Later that afternoon, at high tide, I paddled over to the long sand beach on Picnic Key to see whether the turtle had crawled out to lay eggs, but found no signs of it.

A beautiful sunrise sent me on my way to the Ranger Station in Everglades City, where I had planned to meet my old friend Thornton and top off my two 2.5-gallon water containers.

Unfortunately Thornton could not make it down from Sebring, but I met another old friend of mine, Sammy H., the kingpin of Everglades City (mayor, hotel and restaurant owner, as well as tour boat and canoe rental owner), a most delightful and colorful "local boy" from the island of Chokoloskee.

An hour later I was on my way again to a new chickee on Crooked Creek. It replaces the one on Sunday Bay, I was told, where the water was getting too shoal. "You'll have no problem finding it. They just moved it over a bit", I heard people say. Others thought it was close to trail marker #125. Anyway, I was sure I would find it. I had always found what I was looking for in the past.

After bucking the incoming tide for 17 miles, I looked all around #125, the entrance/exit to Crooked Creek. It just was not there. So I paddled into the Creek and even down its entire 1-mile length to marker #126. Again, nothing, nowhere, nohow, just a manatee warning sign further up the much bigger Lopez River. Up the creek with my paddle again towards Sunday Bay – nothing. So I finally mustered the guts to stop a fishing boat for information. I was mortified! This was the first time EVER that I had to ask for trail information, like being lost. (However, I had already come up with a plan B, i.e. to camp out on the Lopez River campsite, 1 mile downriver, if I could not find the Crooked Creek site by myself.) I was not panicking, just awfully tired after 19 miles, and annoyed about the inaccurate labeling of the site by park authorities. The chickee was definitely not on tiny Crooked Creek! I could not have missed it twice!!

Then I was told that it was tucked away behind a small island about a quarter mile north of #126, the southern entrance/exit point of Crooked Creek, near the manatee sign. By then I had paddled 20 miles and had spent 5:25 hours in my boat, and was truly miffed. The incoming tide of the LOPEZ RIVER, (not Crooked Creek) was still running strong behind the island into the Cross Bays as well as into Mud and Sunday Bay eventually. The new site was well protected from the winds all right, which in this case, however, was a detriment: it was buggy as hell. In summation, the Crooked Creek chickee on Lopez River was a very bad replacement choice for the lovely, open-vista Sunday Bay chickee, if you ask me, and needs to be re-labeled, or at least amended with a note like "A quarter mile north of #126 on Lopez River". Ah well, if only Park Officials had asked paddlers/campers before putting up this new site! (And that goes for the new Plate Creek chickee also – see my later comments.)

But my trip picked up again next morning, and I was in a great mood paddling up the narrow arm to Sweetwater chickee, and next day through Alligator and Plate Creek to the new Plate Creek chickee. I was sorry to see the old historic massive chickee go, but wished the rotting underpinnings had been removed also – maybe next year.

As I had already noticed last year, the new chickee is so high that I could not even get my chest onto the platform to get out, not even when standing on the seat of my boat. Heaving my packs from my boat to the platform took me back to my kayak racing days, when I trained by lifting my typewriter with straight arms in order to build up my shoulder muscles. Being a former gymnast also helped my clambering up onto the platform, but at 73 this was more of a challenge. I pitied the kayakers getting their gear in and out of their boats. How do they do it? Lying on the platform, they would need gibbous arms even to touch their boats.

Just as I got in my tent, the winds suddenly started to blow out of the NW, building to 30+ knots in no time, gusting even higher. The water was suddenly black, and the tops of the waves blew off. And then it rained to boot and got noticeably colder. I held up my tent from the inside, leaning my back hard against the buckling sides. I also stuffed toilet paper in my ears and phased out completely, reading yet another adventure novel by Clive Cussler.

My Sat phone, by the way, worked flawlessly again, and was still on its first battery pack. My new digital camera, as already mentioned, was a delight. Even though I had brought a back-up battery, I was still on my first one. (Remember, there are no electrical plug-ins along the Wilderness Waterway to recharge anything!) My VHF radio, though, only worked intermittently since it had a hard time reaching the weather stations near Key West to the south or Fort Myers to the north. (It has a max 40-mile range.) But I knew from experience that the strong winds would/could be back next day, and they were. So I planned to start even earlier. I flushed down Lostmans River (nautical charts do not use apostrophes) with the last of the outgoing tide and got to Highland Beach just in time before the winds sprang up again in earnest.

I felt smug and well-protected back in my favorite palm grove along this 3-mile-long headland and enjoyed an entire afternoon and evening with reading and writing and lots of coffee and cocoa and a scrumptious meal of Hormel chili with beans. But it got real cold again. I was in polys, polar fleece, wool socks and watch cap. In the morning I could see my breath in the air, just like back home in Maine.

For the next day I had planned a short 8-miler (a mercifully brief 2-hour paddle) to the Graveyard Creek, a compression day of sorts, in case I had been delayed by unavoidable adverse weather conditions the days before. But I was still right on schedule, and the bad cold weather system of the last two days had passed through late last night and was gone in the morning. The sun even came out again, it got warm, and I enjoyed 3 more brilliant days back to Flamingo.

The following day was a long 20.5-miler across Ponce de Leon Bay and through the Shark River Delta, one of my favorite stretches and navigational challenges. I was able to plan paddling with the incoming tide through the many delta arms I chose, deep into Oyster Bay and down Joe River, before the tide turned. Three and a half hours later I was already at the South Joe chickee, my last stop-over, like last year, but fortunately no wind this time.

I enjoyed a beautiful sunrise the next morning, and got ready for my last easy 11.5 miles to Flamingo.

When I stuck my bow out into large Whitewater Bay, I noticed two kayakers about half a mile ahead of me, and I could not help myself, wanting to catch up to them. However, they were swifter than I had anticipated, no drifty dawdlers, like most of the boats I meet on the water. I really had to paddle! It took me 8.5 miles to catch them, just before we entered the last home stretch down the Buttonwood Canal into Flamingo. One was paddling a fast Epic 18 kayak, the other an equally slender surf-ski. It turned out they were racing in the 300-mile Florida Challenge from Tampa to Key Largo. They told me they were leading at one point. (As it turned out, one finished second in his class, the other third in another class.)

That explains it. They were keen paddlers, a tad sleep-deprived and on a long-distance pace, but they were pushing, racing for time, and I had to hustle to catch up to them in my loaded touring canoe. They were also surprised to see me catch up to them, but were glad to hear that I was not in the race. I in turn assured them that I would not function as well as they did with so little sleep. On my recent 5-week trans-Atlantic sail (from Antigua/Caribbean to Hamburg/Germany), 4 hours on, 4 hours off during watches, was all I could muster.

Cameras were everywhere when we three arrived in Flamingo. I tried to stay out of the picture and let them bask in the glory of racing. So I swung into the service basin, where I landed 30 minutes early for my 11:00 a.m. pick-up date with my ranger friends John and Donna. They then drove me back to Florida City, where I camped out one last night in the courtyard of the Everglades Hostel.

The trip home the next day by airport shuttle to Miami and from there around yet another snowstorm to New York and Portland, Maine was mostly smooth. The bus ride home to Orono was tiring, but sleepily, dreamily playing back in my mind the 13 wonderful days on the waters of the Everglades National Park, the mangrove-clad rivers and lakes and the wide open chalky-green Gulf of Mexico, made me smile and already think of yet another visit in the Glades.

No, I did not find the "Fountain of Youth" either, that Juan Ponce de Leon so fervently searched for, in Florida's many aquifers, but my trip was again certainly as invigorating and rejuvenating as ever.

HAPPY QUINCENTENNIAL, "LA FLORIDA"!

THE END (for this year!)

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