

## **SNOWBIRD IN THE GLADES**

February / March 2015

Record snow and cold

"Sorry, dear, I did not have time to clear the snow off the two porch roofs, but all the walkways and parking spaces as well as our entire roof is shoveled off. That'll have to do till I come back. I have to take a shower and hustle to catch my plane."

The winter of 2014/15 had been an exceptionally cold and snowy winter - more than 141 inches of snow (3.53 meters for you metric guys out there). Only the winter of '62/63, my first winter here in Maine, brought more snow. To boot, the month of February set a new all-time cold record. I could not wait to get to warmer climes, but felt a bit guilty leaving Nancy with our big dog Willoughby back home in Orono taking care of our "snow castle". "Remember, your hairdryer works wonders on frozen pipes. Just catch them early. And I know you'll be packing down the new snow on the driveway by driving back and forth every hour," I added with a wink. She gave me a tired smile as we zipped off to the airport.

Flying south

So, where does a snowbird from Maine escape to? I find the most reliable warm weather and most diverse canoe trails in the Everglades National Park, covering the bottom left corner of the Florida peninsula (an area of about 100 X 20 miles). A visit in the Glades for me is also like visiting an old friend. Yes, I have canoed there many times before, but every trip through the Park is different and a completely new adventure, believe me, and so is my story.

Like most years before, there was a snowstorm as I left Maine – this year on February 22. But all flights to Miami went fine. Even my luggage, two big 49-pound army duffels, holding all my camping gear and food supplies, arrived with me, and I did not have to wait too long to get an airport shuttle van down to Florida City, just outside Everglades National Park. But my ranger friend John and wife Donna were nowhere to be seen. What's up? I phoned them on my satellite phone (still no cell phone for me). "Sorry, I

thought it was tomorrow, but we'll be there in an hour."

When we finally got into the Park and down to Flamingo it was pitch black, too dark to set up camp. So I sacked out at their little place in the rangers' quarters, repacked all my gear into my waterproof bags for the trip, while Donna whipped up some meatball hash with toasted breadsticks. Two days later, though, I noticed with dismay that I had caught their bad cold/flu, with all its nasty symptoms.

Anyway, by 7:45 the next morning I was first in line at the Ranger Station to reserve my overnight back-country campsites. And I was lucky again to get every one I had planned; only Sweetwater Chickee was not available, since it was being repaired. "Darwin's place would do fine, if it's available." And it was.

After adjusting my seat and foot braces in my solo sea canoe, John's Verlen Kruger "Monarch", which is almost identical to my Kruger "Sea Wind" at home, and packing my gear, including 5 gallons of water, I was off. I pressed my SPOT locator beacon, which told my family and friends, my trip had begun, and I was out in the chalky green waters of the Gulf towards East Cape Sable. The tide had been high one hour before I left and was now nicely pushing me towards the Cape.

### Shark encounter

It was about 80°, and I was hot for the first time in months. I glugged down a lot of water, but it felt good being warm for a change. Dolphins were playing all around me, but mostly were chasing fish in the shallow water I was paddling in. Fish in turn were jumping into the air in an attempt to escape their pursuer. Rays were darting off, leaving muddy boils behind when they saw my shadow or felt my boat wake. Then suddenly there was a bigger fish chasing some smaller fish off my port beam, so it seemed. But it failed to stop or veer off. "CRASH, BANG, WHOMP!" It rammed my boat amidships with a surprisingly loud and hard bang. The boat shuddered, water was in the air, and my paddling shirt and pants, as well as my cap and gloves were thoroughly soaked with sea water. However, just before this object hit my boat I saw the distinct dorsal and tail fin of a 6-foot shark (or even bigger), possibly a hammerhead chasing a ray, their favorite food

in these shallow, warm waters.

I instinctively threw a low brace and stayed upright, but I was breathing hard nevertheless. I had been bumped by fish before, but never with such force and with such a loud and vehement impact. (A day later I saw another dorsal and tail fin of a hammerhead just outside the mouth of the Shark River, real close, but it turned away before I could see its head.)

By the way, a hammerhead is the only shark where you can see both dorsal and tail fin at the same time, my daughter Brenda informs me, having done shark research on Bimini with shark expert Dr. Gruber. She also tells me that my shark encounter most likely was not accidental, but a deliberate aggressive territorial bump, telling me as much as "get out of my hunting area!" (see end of article for website video on hammerheads and small boaters).

The rest of that first day on the water was less dramatic, even though the wind sprang up as I approached Middle Cape, which added some different excitement for the last couple of miles. I found the same shady spot along the beach under a mangrove tree, where I had camped before. Setting up camp for the first time on any trip is always a test: had I remembered to pack everything? Back-country camping by canoe is so different from car-camping in an organized campground. If you forgot to pack something, you have to live without it. But everything was there, even coffee, creamer, cocoa and most importantly my propane cookstove with a full tank.

Swimming, reading, writing and resting from the stress of traveling, felt great. It was just as I had dreamt it would be in the cold and snowy, long winter months in Maine. The ivory-colored beach extended to the horizon in the north and south. I was all alone, as I mostly am in the Everglades, and the wide open Gulf's horizon gently curved around my beach abode. A great feeling, and I was soaking it all in.

Just as night fell, a waxing half-moon rose and shone through the sparse foliage above me, creating intricate floral patterns on my tent walls. As a matter of fact, most nights of my entire trip were bathed in gentle moonlight, first from a waxing half-moon to a full moon on Willy Willy (March 5), and from then back to a waning half-moon in Florida City, at the very end of my

trip. A delightful bonus for a solo paddler in the back country of the Everglades, because nights without the moon can be so absolutely pitch black this time of year.

### Night visitors

I was up a tad before sunrise at about 6:15. Fog had rolled in. Before I pack up, I always check for footprints around my tent. Did I have visitors last night? Yes indeed, and I am glad I slept through it all. There were distinct footprints of a very big cat along the beach in front of my tent. A COUGAR, also known as a Florida panther, had visited me, leaving deep footprints in the sand. I had to take a picture of that, because otherwise nobody would believe me. So here they are. There also were some distinct cloven hoof imprints of a smaller deer. They were right beside the big cougar marks. So, was the cougar tracking the deer or was he thinking of a midnight marauding party? I hope the former. But since I never leave anything outside of my tent and double bag my trash, I feel pretty safe. I would worry much more in northern bear country for sure. But just in case, every night I have my arsenal of "defense weapons" handy at the tent door: pepper spray, my sailor's rigging knife with an awe-inspiring, 4-inch marlinspike, a high-intensity LED flashlight and the lid of my stainless steel cooking pot with a spoon as a noisemaker. Cute, you might say, but it does the trick for me, that is, it calms me down somewhat, even though I am fully aware that my "weapons" would be totally ineffective against a cougar, an ornery alligator or a 14-foot Burmese python.

### Into Oyster Bay and beyond

In the fog, I felt my way along shore into the Shark River and through a couple of arms of its extensive delta system into Oyster Bay. By then the fog had lifted, but the wind had come up. But anything under 20 knots is fun for me, unless it is a head wind. After 4:50 hrs in the boat (for 18 miles) I reached my goal for today, the very sheltered Oyster Bay Chickee, two 12X12-foot wooden camping platforms in the water with a roof on top. There even is a chemical toilet. Life was good that afternoon, but I felt the flu was creeping up on me, and strong winds were predicted for tomorrow. Well, we'll see what gives.

The night was windy, and the weather report spoke of 25 knot winds from the southwest, gusting to 30 plus, veering west later in the day, not a very comforting thought for crossing large Ponce de Leon Bay and running up the very exposed coast to my next campsite at Highland Beach. But I was up at 6:00 and off at first light by 7:30, hoping to sneak out of here and hopefully to at least the Graveyard Creek campsite.

The tide had not turned yet, and I was bucking a strong incoming tide in the multiple arms of the Shark River Delta. But it was already quite windy, and I was wearing my life jacket and had my hat clipped onto my shirt. I made it fine to Ponce de Leon Bay but immediately realized that I could not possibly cross over to Shark Point and from there up the shore to Highland Beach. The Bay was white as far as I could see. So I danced more or less along the eastern edge of that large bay, with wind and breaking waves hitting my port quarters, till I flew into the small opening of the eastern entrance of the Graveyard Creek. I was glad it was where I thought it was, and I was in. It suddenly was surreally calm in that narrow creek through the mangroves, even though the wind was still howling in the tree tops. I even saw an anhinga, a rare bird sighting in the Glades. The creek eventually spit me out at the official campsite. Landing here from the open bay side would have been impossible. Waves were crashing on the tiny beach surrounded by boat-grabbing mangrove roots.

I was glad to have made it thus far, but I would have to make up 10 miles the next day, or better, the next two days. Since the weather report for later that day did not promise any improvements, I set up my tent in the most sheltered corner I could find and called it quits for today. I felt I could have managed the wind and waves around 3:00 p.m, but by then I would have arrived at Highland Beach at dead low tide, a near impossible time to land your boat there. So I stayed put. No other campers came by to join me here, nor did the Rangers throw me out. It seemed nobody was out on the water.

### Up the Gulf coast

I was off again at 7:30, but feeling miserable after a sleepless night and the flu hitting me hard. 16 miles can be a very long and arduous haul for an aching body. But I made it fine, past the wide mouths of the Broad River

and Lostman's River with their many large sand and oyster bars, all the way to Hog Key. There I literally rolled out of my boat, since my knees were buckling, stripped down and lay in the shallow water for a good time to cool off and regain my composure. It worked. I set up my tent in a shady spot and moved towards a belated lunch of a PB&J sandwich, carrot and applesauce as well as a cup of coffee followed by cocoa. Two Tylenols somewhat helped my aching head and body. Reading yet another adventure book by Clive Cussler nicely numbed my mind, the good way that is. I told Nancy via sat-phone about my flu symptoms, but advised her not to attempt a parachute or drone-drop of special flu medication on Pavilion Key :-)

It was hot again the next day, about 80°, but I prudently dressed in my long paddling pants and long-sleeved shirt, white socks and gloves as well as visored hat, and put on plenty of sunscreen. No sunburn or skin cancer for me, if I can help it. Then I felt a nice wind shift, first coming in from the NE, slowly turning SE. At Mormon Key, the wind was almost from behind and increasing to 10-15. Last night I had thought of stopping on Pavilion Key (after 12 miles), but I paddled right past it to Rabbit Key (16.5 miles in 4 hrs only) – I could not possibly waste a good tail wind. I was back on schedule and felt much better about everything.

Rabbit Key is such a familiar place from my early years in the Glades, when I started my trips in Everglades City, the northern entry point into Everglades National Park. I went swimming before the tide went out, and watched other campers arriving - six students from South Carolina with a guide from Maine, and a young couple beaching their Coleman canoe for a walk on shore. Two hours later they dragged their loaded boat over the sharp oyster bank back to the water. It would only move a couple of inches with each mighty strain. I winced as I heard a lot of sharp grinding as well as cussing. No, I did not offer any help or advice. They deserved the punishment and hopefully learned something about tides. I was glad when they were gone.

Ten miles to Tiger tomorrow, the turning point of my trip. Sunrise was at 6:15, right out my tent door, but the tide was still too far out. So I took it easy, listened to the birds, a catbird, imitating other birds almost as well as a mockingbird, and the sweet descending trill of the red-bellied

woodpecker. (Note: Its head is brilliant red, its belly not so much.) A gecko darted through the mangrove roots, and I saw fiddler crabs on the muddier part of the beach, showing off their bigger left claw, or warning others to stay out of their way. And then there were the brown pelicans diving for fish, and ibis and various herons wading in the shallows. And lots of cormorants, of course, and an occasional anhinga, a close cousin, but with stunning black and white plumage. I learned to identify them even in flight, because of their brief glide after six or so wing beats. (Cormorants only flutter.)

I finally got off at 8:00, staying outside of all islands, all the way up to Indian Key, the outer entrance point to the Barron River and Everglades City. Just beyond it I saw a 2-foot sea turtle swimming at the surface, a loggerhead with front flippers and beaked nose. It was almost at the same spot where I had seen a truly huge sea turtle in 2013. Tiger Key is the last of the keys in the northwest corner of the Park. My favorite camping spot is on a thin spit of land pointing straight north, with tall mangroves for shade, and water on both sides. I suddenly felt very accomplished: I had made it to the top of the Park, in only six days, despite my cold/flu and the fierce winds on Ponce de Leon Bay.

### Landing on Tiger Key

Swimming felt great; so were my lunch and the leisurely afternoon in the shade of the mangroves and a gentle breeze. Life was very good at that moment.

Tomorrow I would start heading back down to Flamingo, but this time through a long string of inter-connected lakes and winding tight little creeks. With the tide coming in I decided to try a new route to the Barron River and the Ranger Station in Everglades City. It looked like a perfect straight arm through the 10,000 Island mangrove jungle, starting right at my little boat landing on Tiger Key: leave a couple of islands on my right, veer slightly left, then right and straight for several miles – well, you need a NOAA chart to find it and not get lost. But this West Pass Bay approach worked out great for me. It avoided all other boat traffic and got me all the way to the mouth of the Barron River and the Ranger Station in Everglades City eventually. I beached my boat there, refilled my two 2.5 gallon (10 liter) water containers, got rid of my trash, and quickly washed out my paddling

clothes in the washroom sink. The salt spray almost made them stand on their own, they were so stiff. I wrung them out and put them right back on for some air-drying. No, I do not pack a second set, and also only one set of shorts and T-shirt. I travel light.

The Ranger Station can be a very busy place, especially when groups are preparing to launch. A group of ten sea kayaks was getting ready for Pavilion Key, and several other boats for other keys in the area, all going for about 3-4 days, I found out, no through travelers, and definitely nobody going down to Flamingo and back, as I usually do.

I was off again in no time along the Chokoloskee causeway, first outside, then inside and up the Turner River into Hurdles Creek. This remote, winding little creek gets you into Mud Bay, the two Cross Bays and the top of the Lopez River eventually. From there it is less than a mile south to the branch-off to the Crooked Creek Chickee, which by the way is technically still on Lopez River and not on Crooked Creek, as I found out the hard way two years ago. 5:10 hrs for 17 miles including my stop at the Ranger Station - not bad at all.

Again, the other camping platform remained empty. Where is everybody, I wondered? In past years the chickees used to be occupied every night, especially so close to the put-in place at Everglades City. I also noticed fewer and fewer canoes along the designated 100-mile waterway between Everglades City and Flamingo, but more sea kayaks along the Gulf coast and on the keys. I personally still like both stretches, along the more exposed Gulf coast as well as through the more protected mangrove rivers and lakes. Both have such different characters.

### Meeting at Darwin's Place

My Everglades friend Thornton had given me some more thoughts on how I could avoid the bigger lakes like Sunday, Oyster, Huston and Last Huston Bay, and I decided to try some of his "short cuts". Most of them turned out to be very pretty and remote, but so convoluted, that it was hard to stay on course in a relaxed way, navigating with chart, compass and stopwatch only. So I eventually popped out of the mangrove jungle and into big Last Huston and then Chevelier Bay, going mostly east, right into the wind.



However, I do not mind much in this Kruger solo boat with rudder. It would be a different story in a rental 2-man aluminum canoe. But his "short cuts" took me an extra hour (11.5 miles in 4:15 hrs, instead of 3:15 hrs).

After a few tighter river-like arms I suddenly came upon Darwin's Place, a land site on Opossum Key, where Arthur Darwin homesteaded from about 1934 to 1971. The cement and shell foundation as well as a few walls of the house he built there in 1945 can still be seen. He had also cultivated large tracts of land behind his house and was kind of self-sufficient as a hunter and trapper. My friend Thornton had known him personally, as he did Totch Brown, who raised his family on an island in the Huston River. Darwin was a kind and quiet old fellow, I learned, who later moved to Everglades City, where he worked as a carpenter and boat builder. He was the opposite of the notorious Ed Watson from the Chatham River. Ed was a moonshine distiller and gunslinger and all-around bad boy. He was finally gunned down on Chokoloskee Island by several of its inhabitants, when Watson pulled his gun one too many times and his ammo failed, so goes the story. He was shot multiple times. Lots of people had a score to settle with him.

I was thinking about the old-timers in the Glades while I was cautiously taking my BDS, my brief daily swim. I was scooching/squatting in the shallows near shore, always facing the murky river, ever so alert for the beady eyes and nostrils of a gator (Thornton had told me he had seen the biggest gator ever right here on Darwin's Place), when a fishing boat suddenly appeared around the corner. I had just enough time to grab my minimal towel, before the boat grounded out on the coarse, hard shell beach. "There is going to be a beach party here today. May we stay?" a familiar sounding voice boomed into the stillness of the Glades. His face was hidden under a big floppy hat, so I could not see who he was, but instantly answered: "Why not, but wait till I slip into my grass skirt." Yes, it was my old friend Thornton and wife Jacquie and another couple.

I had given Thornton my itinerary before I left, but had no idea he and Jacquie could make it all the way down here from Sebring. He had just celebrated his 85th birthday. What a guy! The party started immediately with an ice-cold beer followed by another. By then the coals were ready for scrumptious venison-burgers, served with a very tasty Swedish potato

salad by Ulla, with a side dish of lettuce and tomatoes, and cookies eventually. What a meal! By 4:30 the phantom had gone, and I was alone again. It was a truly historic meeting here on Darwin's place. If only I can get Thornton to write down all his stories and experiences of his 65 plus years in the Everglades.

The route from Darwin's Place to Plate Creek Chickee is one of my favorite stretches in the Park. Tight little Alligator and Plate Creek on either end of large Alligator Bay and Dad's Bay always feel very remote, both cozy and exciting at the same time. You never know what wildlife you might encounter here. I have met dolphins speeding through here, throwing a large bow wave over my gunwales, and of course gators, the biggest one when I was paddling through here with my wife Nancy. At the last minute it dove down, right under our aluminum rental canoe, while we held our breath, ready for a low brace with our paddles.

This time I met the "guardian of the creek" properly at the entrance to Alligator Creek, and a big cousin of his sleeping on shore near marker #70. When he saw or heard me he leapt into the air and like a komodo dragon hustled into the water with amazing speed. He splashed in, just feet away from my bow, and dove out of sight. That was enough excitement for the day.

The new Plate Creek Chickee is very high. I had to stand on my canoe seat and heave my packs onto the platform, then follow myself, holding on with all fours like a monkey.

By then the wind had picked up, and I had to put my gear bags into the limp tent before I could insert the poles. This has happened so many times, that I do not think about it much any more.

I had a peaceful afternoon, though, no visitors, only a few sport fishing boats speeding by. Well, one boat broke down right in front of me. The driver tried to fix it, but couldn't before he drifted towards shore. So he anchored. Still no go. Then his friends in the other boat threw him a line and started to tow him. The line snapped, zinging through the air when the tow boat tried to reach planing speed. Nobody thought of raising the broken motor, lightening the boat, and taking it easy. They attached a new line,

which also snapped as they careened around the next corner. I am sure they had a long and stressful afternoon back to their Chokoloskee marina.

Willy Willy has been one of my all-time favorite stop-overs since I first paddled in the Glades in 1992. It is a very remote Calusa Indian ground site on a small mangrove island in Rocky Creek Bay, way off the beaten path in the mangrove jungle. I have stopped there several times since then, and its remoteness holds a special magic. A few years ago Thornton had shown me a new way to get there. I love paddling off the beaten path, ignoring all official numbered waypoints, just navigating by chart and compass. It took me all the way from Onion Key Bay through Third Bay to a northern lobe of the very large and always windy Big Lostman's Bay into a tight little creek running east into Rocky Creek Bay and my campsite on Willy Willy. It would be easy to get lost en route, just like in that last long sentence of mine. However, to my surprise, six big stand-up tents had already taken up all the camping space. So I decided to pitch my little Eureka tent in the woods behind a large gumbo limbo tree. A fishing party of 10 guys in 5 sport fishing boats had chosen Willy Willy as their base camp for 3 days. They all showed up around supper time. It turned out to be a very congenial, considerate group of smart guys from Miami. And they must have been tired from an intensive day of fishing and turned in early. A full moon came up, creating the most intricate shadows on my tent. It was yet another magical moment under the big old gumbo limbo tree – male alligators were rumbling in the distance, a barred owl was calling its mate...and ten fishermen snoring.

By sunrise, even before breakfast, my fishermen friends were gone again, for another full day on the water, hoping to catch some big snook or tarpon, I gathered. No swimming for me on Willy Willy, for sure, as I knew there were too many aggressive alligators around. In past years I have seen them come out of the water, sunning themselves on the campsite and defending their turf.

It was an intricate route south through Rogers River Bay and down the entire length of Broad River, including through 2-mile long Broad River Bay. I stopped just short of its mouth on an official ground site I had stopped at before. The 1992 Hurricane Andrew went right through here after devastating the small town of Homestead. I had seen the damage along

Broad River the following year. The trees looked plucked like kale stalks; only the leafless main branches were left on the trees. But today, 23 years later, none of the damage is visible. Nature has fully recovered, a very comforting thought.

I cooled off on the sloping wooden take-out/put-in ramp before the tide went out completely, but made sure my bug net tent door was closed, because I remembered this to be a very buggy site – mostly no-see-ums. The tide was again running out when I left in the morning, and I had to stay way out to sea to find deep enough water to paddle in. Off the Harney River I noticed a huge sandbank even farther offshore to my right, but I was able to stay in the somewhat deeper actual river outflow going south all the way to Shark Point and eventually around the corner to the Graveyard Creek campsite.

I was distinctly getting closer to home now, Flamingo that is. I was off the Gulf, knowing that I could sneak across Ponce de Leon Bay via the Graveyard Creek, as I had done on my trip out. Wildlife reports for today: 1 frog, 1 gecko and a couple of fiddler crabs at my boat landing, as well as a curious raccoon at my tent, nothing big, nothing threatening, but a lot of birds, including a barred owl. I finished reading my second book, and my coffee and creamer, and noticed that my carrots and my one loaf of bread were also getting real low.

With time change (spring forward one hour) and the tide running out forever, it seemed, I slept till 8:00 and finally got off at 10:00, but it was still too early to catch the incoming tide through the Shark River Delta into Oyster Bay. I was a bit impatient, since I knew I had 14 tricky miles ahead of me, and strong northeasterlies were predicted. I had to get to the Joe River Chickee. I did not want to spend another night on the Graveyard. So I fought the tides as best I could. At the last corner from Little Shark into Oyster Bay the current got ahold of me and turned me at least 90°, even though I had anticipated the strong surge at that pointed headland. Well, it was not enough, but it did not roll me over either.

Then the wind piped up to 20 plus knots, easily gusting to 25, if not 30. It came in from the northeast across the wide open bay, and I had to watch my step to avoid being swamped by the breaking waves. As I found out

later, this was the same wind that halted the 200 or so boaters in this year's Everglades Challenge Race from Tampa to Key Largo at the first check-in, after the Coast Guard had to assist 12 capsized boaters. They halted the race for the first time ever and cancelled the rest of the Challenge. Would I ever have been miffed if I had been in this race. A total waste of time, not to mention money. Yes, the wind continued for 2 more days, that is the rest of my trip back to Flamingo. But I maintain expedition boaters should be able to handle 20-25 knot winds and waves. The real challenge starts beyond 25, as I see it.

Anyway, I kept on dancing towards my goal on the Joe River. When a distinct dark cloud bank approached from the northeast, I prudently stopped to put on my Gore-Tex jacket and draped a tarp over my legs. There is no way of getting into long rain-pants sitting in my boat in this kind of weather and sea state. And then it rained for the rest of my paddle for today. The 14 miles to Joe River Chickee took me 3:30 hrs, not bad considering the conditions. Putting up my tent was relatively easy, since all chickees have a roof over them. I dried off, crawled into my tent, enjoyed my belated lunch and coffee, and started reading the third book I brought along.

The home stretch

Next day's paddle was mercifully short, a compression day of sorts, a day where I could have made up some distance, had I gotten behind in my schedule. My last overnight was on beautifully situated South Joe chickee. And then came my last day on the water, day 15, a mere 11.5 miles back to Flamingo, but it was almost as windy as in 2012. Even little Coot Bay was churned up big time, and I was pretty wet when I finally got to the entrance of the 3-mile-long Buttonwood Canal. Right at its mouth I almost tipped out of my boat when a huge boil off my starboard quarter rocked my canoe and startled me big time. It must have been a huge manatee suddenly noticing my approach and diving down with a mighty swish of its big round tail. I had seen those boils many times before, but never that close and so vehement.

An event like this definitely takes one's breath away for a few moments, till you figure out what it was. A bit later on the canal I met a handful of canoes zig-zagging towards me from Flamingo, eager, innocent paddlers, mostly in

overloaded boats (too much gear or too many people in each canoe), asking me whether I had seen crocs and other wildlife around here. I could only point towards an osprey and a great blue heron and the sweet trill of the red-bellied woodpecker. "But keep looking for those beady eyes and nostrils; the mangroves are full of them," I slightly overstated my encouragement. "And watch out for the big boils of the manatees!"

The "Monarch" has landed

In no time I was back in Flamingo and veered off into the service basin, where I met my Ranger friends John and Donna. We efficiently transferred all gear from my Kruger "Monarch" canoe into his van, tied the boat up on his power cruiser, and off we went towards the Everglades Hostel in Florida City, near Homestead. This is such a convenient place to have found for staging my trips. I pitched my tent in their courtyard and immediately started repacking my gear back into the two Army duffels for tomorrow's flight from Miami back to Portland, Maine.

I did it! The real trip was over: 186 miles, 15 days on the water, 12.5 miles per day on average, four challenging wind days, but otherwise the weather was nice and warm, almost too warm for the snowbird from the cold northland of Maine. At one point I was 100° warmer than Nancy back home in Maine (-20° F versus 80° F), and that during official "Spring Break".

My trips always "sound so great" when I tell family and friends about them, and they are, but don't be fooled: they are not easy. They take a lot of determination, effort and guts. Paddling the Everglades' big loop from Flamingo to Everglades City and back solo is a big deal, especially at my advanced post-retirement age of 75. No wonder not more boaters are doing it. I too may have to cut back some year, but that will be OK with me also. I have the memories of my big and very successful trips in that beautiful Kruger sea canoe from the years 2012/13 and now, 2015. That'll last me for some time...till the urge to paddle the Glades becomes too strong once again.

Till then, be safe, enjoy and be kind to your family, friends and nature.

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For more info on the Everglades, including a map, check: <http://www.nps.gov/ever>"[www.nps.gov/ever](http://www.nps.gov/ever).

My daughter Brenda sent me this interesting video to underline her point:  
Hammerhead sharks in Florida stalked kayakers for two miles  
<http://ftw.usatoday.com/2014/11/kayak-shark-florida>

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