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Summer months in SW Florida can be spent paddling

BY BYRON STOUT

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Saturday is National Trails Day. But it's also just a couple of weeks shy of the longest day of the year under the brutal Southwest Florida sun.

How not to become a summer barbecue?

More and more Lee Countians are yakking it up - enjoying trails that are cool by their very nature.

"Summertime paddling belongs to Southwest Floridians," said Lee County waterways coordinator Betsy Clayton. "The tourists and snowbirds are scarce, and the waters are smooth and calm."

The Great Calusa Blueway offers 190 miles of fresh and saltwater paddling on marked trails that meander through oak-shaded hammocks and mangrove tunnels in Lee.

Jeanette Chupack, a member of the Southwest Florida Paddling Club and Paradise Coast Paddlers, likes to paddle creeks close to the W.P. Franklin Lock in Olga. "We try to get out early," she said. "And you do try to find shady places."

Telegraph Creek runs off the river's north shore, downstream of the lock, and Hickey's Creek is just east of the lock on the river's south side.

"They have a canopy overhead, and they're shorter paddles," Chupack said.

Outside of Lee, "I love Prairie Creek," the artist said of the shady Charlotte County waterway that connects to Shell Creek and its reservoir. "It's one of my favorite creeks to do paintings from."

Even in open water, paddling doesn't have to be an invitation to sunstroke.

Harold Bruner keeps three kayaks at the south Fort Myers home he's renting until his new waterfront home is completed in St. James City.

"I've got nothing but sit-on-tops. When you're on those you're basically wet much of the time. You wear a wide-brim hat and sunscreen, so I never considered hunting shade much of a priority.

"One time I came out of "Ding" Darling (National Wildlife Refuge) and I picked the tide just right. The outgoing (tide) carried me right back to the Sanibel Causeway.

"It was right on the summer solstice, and I was amazed at how pleasant the trip was, on the hottest day of the year."

Pat Owen's six years of experience kayaking have resulted in a personal stable of six kayaks, her favorite of which is a sleek 18-foot sea kayak. But even with her speedy boat, she has learned to play the elements, especially in saltwater venues.

"I would never paddle out of Pineland without consulting the tides," said Owen, 59, who noted the wind also is an important factor.

"I might start out paddling against them, because on the way back you'll be with the tide and the wind, unless the wind changes. You want to have everything in your favor when you're coming back."

Not only is it easier to paddle downtide and downwind, summer can bring threatening storms in a hurry.

"You don't know when the storms are coming in, and newer paddlers may not know how long it will take them to get back," Owen said.

Mel "The Guide" Newell, of Gulf Coast Kayak in Matlacha, said most people new to paddling take a guided tour to start. But after one trip, he said, most come back, ready to lead friends.

"Inside of each kayaker is a tour guide waiting to be born," Newell said.

"In nine years that I've done this, only one person couldn't paddle a kayak."

He has seen successful kayakers with only one arm, and he recently guided a 79-year-old woman who paddled solo, legally blind.

"When you ask can anybody paddle, yeah, I would say anybody can paddle," Newell said.

Additional Facts

SUMMER PADDLING TIPS

Betsy Clayton, Lee County waterways coordinator and boating columnist for The News-Press' Tropicalia, offers the following tips for summer paddling:

- Check out the Great Calusa Blueway Web site for paddle craft rentals, launch sites, 190 miles of designated trails, and lots of trip-planning tips.

- Check the weather - both online at news-press.com/weather before you head out, and also visually while you're out there - especially during summer months. "When the only horsepower you've got is in your arms, you don't want to be toying with thunderstorms."

- Plan trips to end by noon. Leave a note with your destination and estimated return time upside down

on your car's dashboard, or in a place at home where family or friends can alert authorities if you don't return as scheduled.

PADDLING CLUBS

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