

National Estuaries Days Matlacha Pass Paddling Trip Report - 10/04/08

By Karen Bickford, President of the Friends of the Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve

The volunteers and participants started arriving at Gulf Coast Kayak (4530 Pine Island Road, Matlacha Florida) at 8:00am. The weather was calm, cool and over-cast; a great day for kayaking and wildlife watching. Barbara Fleshman had all of the paddlers registered within 20 minutes and meanwhile the staff of Gulf Coast Kayak along with volunteers Liz Donley and Karen Bickford were outfitting paddlers with kayaks, PFDs and paddles. Liz gave a brief presentation on the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program, their mission and the importance of the conservation of natural ecosystems in Southwest Florida. Karen briefly discussed kayaking safety and proper use of kayaking equipment.

Once launched, the group headed around the southwest end of Matlacha and into the shallow channel on the west side before the bridge. While in the Pass Liz Donley pointed out many species of birds for the paddlers and identified unique characteristics of each. We saw ibis, great egrets, osprey, anhingas and great blue herons. This morning in Matlacha Pass was truly a birder's paradise.

With mullet jumping all around we proceeded north under the low bridge just ahead of us. The direction of the wind was changing a bit and had intensified a little, but we were not concerned. We headed west into the first of a series of mangrove tunnels. It was tight and the paddlers had a bit of a challenge making their way through the tunnel due to the low hanging branches and narrow passage. Once on the other side we found a shallow, open area with a muddy bottom, clear water and an abundance of fish and gastropods such as small queen conchs that were very visible. The mangroves provided great shelter from the wind and a break for the paddlers. This time the bird species we found were snowy egrets, a roseate spoonbill, osprey and an American bald eagle.

We sat in awe while life quietly proceeded in our presence. Liz gave a discussion on the role of mangroves as wind protection and structure for the fisheries as well as a home for filter feeders (oysters). She explained the significance of this structure with respect to our economy and how the importance to of mangroves by supporting such habitat improves water quality and that translates into our quality of life.

We then proceeded back into the channel and toward the next opening in the mangrove to the northwest. Before reaching the next opening, we saw a pod of dolphin hunting for fish. They were circling quickly and chasing in concert, sometimes creating a wake as they sped up. They made an impressive display hitting the surface of the water with their tails periodically, rolling and accelerating quickly. The group lingered for a while to watch the fantastic sight of hunting before us.

We eventually made our way into the next mangrove tunnel. The current was so swift that some paddlers could not proceed up to the mud flat at the end of the tunnel. Some of us stayed behind and enjoyed the dolphins at work and the birds going about their business matter-of-factly. Liz continued the discussion of mangrove ecology, how we affect this habitat and how it affects us.

As we departed the shelter of this last mangrove tunnel we noticed the wind increasing in speed and decided it was time to go back to our starting point. The wind and current in the pass that we had just traveled was stronger than before, so we decided to try taking the alternate route back to Gulf Coast Kayak that would result in our circumnavigating Matlacha. The first part of our journey back was a little more effort than the previous legs of the journey, but not bad. As we approached the northeast tip of Matlacha the wind coming through the pass was very strong. Some paddlers were making very little progress for their hard work. Liz and Karen did tow a couple of paddlers in as their kayaks were just not designed to traverse these conditions. Even with the strong winds at the end the paddlers remained calm and had a great time.

Upon departing, volunteers received additional donations to the Friends and praise for their efforts as adept guides and interesting speakers.

About the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program and the Friends of the Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve...

The Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program (CHNEP) is one of 28 programs around the nation and part of a system that was established by Congress in 1987 under the Clean Water Act. The purpose of this program is to promote and restore the health of nationally significant estuaries, concurrently supporting the economic and recreational uses of the estuary's natural resources through public education and outreach. The CHNEP generously provides grant funding for the National Estuaries Days paddling events to provide access and knowledge about our local estuaries from Lemon Bay to Estero Bay.

Friends members and volunteers provide invaluable assistance and greatly benefit the Charlotte Harbor and the Preserves through trail construction and maintenance, exotic plant removal, Coastal Cleanups and National Estuaries Days educational paddling and wading events. FCHAP provides ongoing financial support for Preserve programs such as the Charlotte Harbor Estuaries Volunteer Water Quality Monitoring Network and *Charlotte Harbor Soundings*, the Preserve newsletter to provide information and opportunities to the community. The Friends support Preserve staff to expand public education initiatives to inform recreational boaters and kayakers about estuarine fish and wildlife habitat loss in Charlotte Harbor and a call to action to provide volunteer assistance in activities related to estuarine habitat and water quality conservation.