



Adventures in kayaking

Roadrunners go on kayaking odyssey on Gulf Coast

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(Feb. 13, 2006)--Winter explorations along the Texas Gulf Coast can be truly magnificent - though not without trials. Participants in the UTSA Campus Recreation sea-kayaking trip in December unwound from finals by sharing an unforgettable adventure through a marine wonderland.

This was the last and arguably the best trip of the year for the Outdoor Pursuits Program, which also took students rock climbing, backpacking and canoeing in 2005.

The group paddled traditionally designed sea kayaks to the desert island of Shell Bar -- a wild speck on the map between Matagorda Island and Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The trip blended the excitement of kayaking with the fascinating spectacle of abundant marine wildlife.

The group consisted of six UTSA students, one staff member and your humble narrator -- the guy with the best job on campus. We were accompanied by our outfitter, Bill Minor, of Tide Guide Expeditions, who captivated us

all with his enthusiastic love for shorebirds as well as with his skill and ingenuity as a boat builder.

After careful packing of our tiny vessels and a brief introduction to the basics of kayaking, we shoved off for Shell Bar. We set off with the forecast calling for cold and wet weather and were rewarded for our trepidation -- it stayed cold and dry. It was quite a windy weekend, so we were glad we came prepared.

The program provides top-quality equipment for a variety of outdoor adventures, so participants needed only to come well clothed for the cold. Amazingly one participant who forgot her gloves found a pair washed up on the beach. Because the program is partly funded through students' recreation fees, we are able to run trips like this one at significantly reduced rates. Students were excited about how affordable the trip was, and felt that the low cost helped broaden the mix of participants.



Everyone took to the kayaking right away. There's nothing quite like the feeling. You're right there in the water, paddling with a smooth cadence and making hardly a sound, just rising and falling with the waves. And it is really marvelous the way people's personalities come out when they're that happily engrossed. In spite of the cold, there were big toothy smiles all around.

Along the way we spotted a nesting pair of whooping cranes and one of their young offspring. The adult birds were amazingly beautiful

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and represent an incredible story of species endangerment and tenuous recovery. The sights and sensations of the weekend provided tangible immediacy to the usually nebulous environmental issues of water management.

We took note of the fact that we were paddling in a giant estuary fed by the outflows of the San Antonio River. The complex ecosystem provides habitat to the great flocks of pelicans and migratory ducks that filled the sky in whirls as well as to microbes, fish and shellfish that remained mostly invisible underwater. Bill called his camp on Shell Bar the real end of the River Walk.

Outdoor Pursuits aims to take people on adventures, and this trip was an especially good one. Robert Duran, a junior engineering student who participated in the trip, made the observation that it was as much of a mental adventure as a physical one: iffy weather, astonishing wildlife, small boats and broad expanses of water.

Elements of uncertainty and challenge can do wonders for group cohesion and camaraderie - and for one's appreciation of the little things. Our simple camp felt lavish and our meals were thoroughly savored. It even seemed that the locals were being friendly; on our arrival at the island we were greeted by dolphins that paid us frequent visits during our stay. The trip was a great success and will be run again soon.

For more information, contact Campus Recreation at (210) 458-7575.

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