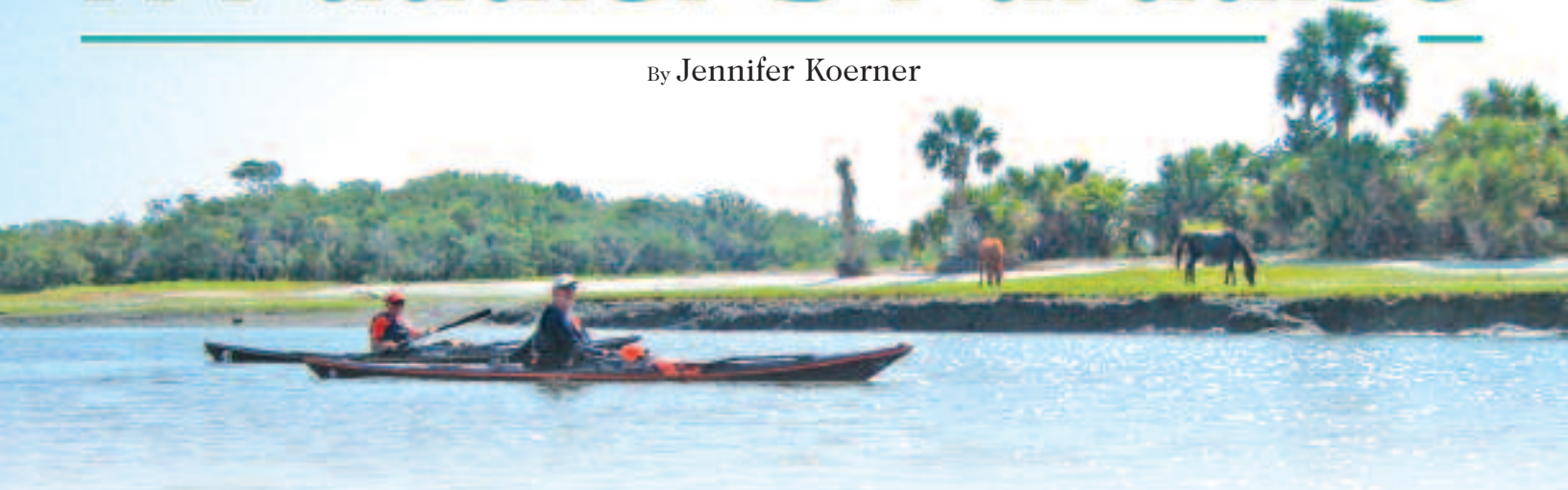


Cumberland Island, Georgia

A Paddler's Paradise

By Jennifer Koerner



Horses grazing in the sand dunes? There's something surreal about that. Yet, along with dolphins "buzzing" your kayak, manatees rolling in the marsh grass, and 8-foot-wide rays skimming across the rolling swells in the Cumberland Sound, a constant backdrop of wild horses grazing on Cumberland Island is just one of the rewards promised by this paddler's paradise. Everything about Cumberland Island—from the abundant wildlife and island architecture to the pristine beaches and maritime forest—is simply magical. And the experience is even more thrilling when you have it in a kayak.

Throughout the year, hundreds of kayakers make the pilgrimage to St. Marys, Georgia, for what many consider to be the ultimate coastal kayaking experience.



Riding the ebb tide out of the Crooked River and through Cumberland Sound to your destination, you'll find that the view from the cockpit of a sea kayak—especially here—can be addictive. Whether eye-to-eye with great white egrets fishing along the edge of the marsh, surfing a boat wake with a dolphin, or watching osprey plunge into the river and emerge with fish clutched in their talons, you see nature up close, from its perspective and on its terms. The waters around Cumberland Island offer striking vistas you'll never forget, including marshes and tree-lined bluffs on the Intracoastal side of the island and sugar-sand beaches, rolling dunes, and live oaks twisted and tangled from facing the wind and waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

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Paddling out to Cumberland Island in a sea kayak sounds like a great adventure because it is. Putting-in at Crooked River State Park, paddlers are faced with 6-to-12 miles of whatever nature has in store for that day. Novice kayakers should definitely take a guide. Fit, experienced paddlers wise enough to seek and heed weather and tide advice from local experts and able to read a map or nautical chart will find the trip is very doable. Navigation can be tricky, but with a map and the aid of some rather interesting, man-made scenery (Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base and distinctive structures, markers, and landmarks on Cumberland Island and in the Intracoastal Waterway), most competent paddlers have no problems finding or reaching their destination.

If you plan on camping on Cumberland Island, you'll need reservations from the National Park Service. Reservations can be made by calling (877)-860-6787, or by visiting Lang's Marina on the waterfront a short walk from the Cumberland Island Visitors Center. Reservations can be made as early as six months in advance, so don't be surprised if you show up without making prior arrangements and the campsites are all full. There's also a fee for landing on Cumberland Island. If you're camping, you can pay at the time you pick up your reservation (\$2/day for backcountry sites and \$4/day for Sea Camp).



If you're just visiting for the day, you can pay the day-use fee at one of the honor boxes located on the island.

With reservations in hand, paddlers drive 15 minutes from Cumberland Island Park Headquarters in downtown St. Marys to the put-in at Crooked River State Park, passing Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base on the way to the Crooked River boat ramp. The trip to the Sea Camp dock on Cumberland Island can be made from the St. Marys riverfront, but that route is less than ideal and has a very limited window of opportunity due to the tidal currents. Whether going to Plum Orchard (6 miles), Sea Camp (8 miles) or Brickhill Bluff (12 miles), putting-in on the Crooked River gives you the best time-window and tidal currents and is by far the safest and easiest way to reach Plum Orchard or Brickhill Bluff by kayak. A visit to Cumberland Island is guaranteed to be filled with memories you'll cherish forever. And, regardless of your destination or route, paddling to Cumberland Island is an adventure you'll never forget.

Editor's Note: For tide, current and kayak trip-planning assistance, call Up The Creek Xpeditions in St. Marys at (912) 882-0911, or visit www.UpTheCreekX.com.

For information regarding the National Park Service and planning your visit to the island, visit www.nps.gov/cuis/planyourvisit/feesandreservations.htm. ■

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