

Introduction

Does this book mention *all* the places to paddle in Florida? Ah, if only . . . All that information would require a book the size of the Gutenberg Bible, and you wouldn't be able to lift it.

As recently as two decades ago only a few thousand hardy souls knew the secret waterways of Florida. From sparkling springs, to twisty dark-water rivers, to broad beaches dotted with Native American middens, these intrepid paddlers hauled their own canoes and kayaks to little-known launch sites.

But something happened. These folks were having so much fun that others noticed. Today the word has gotten out about Florida's gorgeous waterways. Paddling grew from an almost secret sport to big news. And thanks to the foresight and dedication of hundreds of people eager to safeguard our unique rivers, Blueways were designated. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) organized categories and guidelines. Now, in addition to well-maintained hiking trails, natives and tourists can explore Florida by water. Nowadays you have more many choices of where to paddle than ever before.

To whet your appetite for experiencing the beauty and mystery of paddling Florida waters, this book contains a mixture of information—not only places to go, but also what to wear, what to take along, how to keep safe, how identify and cope with a selection of birds, animals, plants, and much more.

This book is not the same as the 2001 edition of *Paddler's Guide to the Sunshine State*. It is a companion, suggesting new waterways, and filling in some of the cracks, such as paddling strokes for beginners.

Back then we didn't have cell phones, extensive websites, or Global Positioning Systems (GPS). Paddleboards were just plain surfboards, and nobody thought to get a really long paddle and stand up to paddle. Kayaks were rare and expensive. Nobody had clear hulls either—which

literally gives you a whole new perspective on what is under your keel. Canoes still show up, but they're quickly being outnumbered by kayaks.

Paddling is so popular that water trails are popping up all over. You can even start in Pensacola, paddle completely around the state, and end up at Fort Clinch, north of Jacksonville—a whopping 1,515 miles. That one is called the Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail—CT for short (see page 433). Of course, nobody expects you to do that in one single trip, so places to stop, eat, sleep, and meet the local folks are being organized as official Trail Towns. Motels are putting up signs on the sea-side of their walls, not just facing roads.

Want to find a Blueway near you? Do a Blueways search for your county; for me, that's "Blueways Pinellas." And, if you are interested in developing a Blueway near you, volunteers are invited to pitch in. You might even have that Blueway named after you! Start here: <https://myfwc.com/boating/waterway/paddling-trails/>. Since 2007, the Florida Paddling Trails Association has relied on volunteers who love to paddle, hike, and generally get outdoors. You could make a huge difference right in your own backyard. Check out the duties of a Trail Keeper at www.floridapaddlingtrails.com to see if you'd be a fit.

A newish and huge safety feature now takes advantage of all those satellites floating around upstairs—the Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates for every inch of our planet. You can still get lost among the Ten Thousand Islands east of Marco Island, or among the braided streams of the lower Ocklawaha. But whip out your GPS unit, which could be on your phone, or wrist, or hanging on a lanyard around your neck and, voilà! You can see where you are and which direction to go to get back to the main channel.

More and more evidence keeps popping up that proves we are not the first humans to use our waterways. Scientists tell us that humans paddled here more than 7,000 years ago. On page 55 archaeologist Julie Duggins tells us about a single site at which more than 400 ancient canoes have been found. Early Spanish explorers met indigenous tribes everywhere they landed. We'll never find the majority of the older Indian sites because rising sea levels have covered their towns. The bits we have found—especially artifacts preserved by being sunken in oxygen-poor mud—show sophisticated art, ingenious crafts, and trading networks that rival our own today (read about the Marco Cat on page 411). We travel by paved roads; they went by dugout canoes.

Let's not forget our hikers, either. Though there isn't room in this book to describe our Florida Greenways in detail, FloridaHikes.com does describe those hiking trails. Sandra Friend, a prolific hiker, has documented trails in more than twenty-five books. (She and her husband, John Keatley, have written several chapters in this book, too.) We even have a read-aloud children's story by Lucy Tobias, a noted outdoor writer.

Which bring us to our list of stars. I wrote the first *Paddler's Guide to the Sunshine State* with only a few guest authors. I'd paddled more than 1,000 miles, including not only Florida, but the Mississippi, New England, the Rockies, the Appalachians, the Amazon, and spots in Europe, South America, and Hawaii. I belonged to three paddling clubs, had a nice selection of paddles, two canoes, one kayak, and two sailboats. I was an expert at sliding a boat either inside or on top of my station wagon or van, hooking up a boat trailer, and I kept a PFD and boating duds in the car. I was an official Red Cross canoe instructor, an American Sailing Association small-boat teacher, and paddling staff for Elderhostel (now renamed Road Scholar).

Along the way I made friends. The Florida Outdoor Writers Association, Windlasses women's sailing club, Windyakers—a spinoff of Windlasses, people I'd interviewed in my ongoing career as a freelance writer, canoe liveries, bird experts . . . it's a long list. So when deciding to write an update, I brought along my buddies! This book is the result. More than fifty experts have chipped in. And they have enriched the book tremendously. These folks know so much about . . . everything!

So while this book doesn't—couldn't possibly—include every paddling destination in Florida, it's got a lot of information for you in one handy container.

Enjoy the book. Head out for new adventures. Keep safe.

And mainly—have fun!