

## **Paddling our State Parks**

By John McKinney

“This is a part of California most people never see,” declares Ranger Mike Whelan, pointing with his canoe paddle up Railroad Slough. “The delta probably looked like this 200 years ago and this state parkland preserves it, a special part of the Great Central Valley, the way it used to be.”

A lucky dozen of us paddlers signed up for a canoe tour of Delta Meadows, an obscure state park unit tucked into the well-watered tail of Sacramento County near the Mokelumne and Sacramento rivers. As our mini flotilla follows Ranger Whelan through a narrow channel into what appears to be the film set for *The African Queen*, I observe the smiles in our family’s canoe—from my wife Cheri in the bow, Daniel, 7, Sophia, 12—and can’t help grinning myself. This is a great adventure.

“You can’t get this point of view from a power-boat,” Whelan tells us. “The quiet, the chance to see wildlife. We’re coming up to a beaver dam on the left bank...” Our family, like so many others, has long enjoyed hiking and biking in California’s state parks. More recently, we’ve discovered that our parks offer many miles of paddling pleasure. Here are four favorite parks to consider for a gentle canoeing or kayaking exploration.

### **Big River State Park**

You’ll have a great time paddling Big River, which wasn’t named for its length or breadth, but for the size of the redwoods that once grew along the banks. Big (second growth) redwoods and a big estuary are among the compelling natural attractions of Big River State Park, a big (7,334 acres) unit added to California’s park system in 2002.

Paddling Big River’s 8 mile long forested canyon is a delight—provided paddlers time their travels with the tides. The river is ranked a Class 1, a gentle river, suitable for beginning paddlers. With judicious use of a tide table, you can ride the incoming tide up the river canyon and return with the outgoing tide back to the river mouth.

As you paddle along, you’ll observe that Big River is big on biological diversity: freshwater and brackish marshland, mudflats, fern-filled hillsides, plus stands of redwoods, hardwoods, bishop pine and pygmy cypress.

The lovely Stanford Inn by the Sea, located just south of Mendocino on the bluffs of Big River, offers canoe and kayak rentals. We chose the outrigger canoes, which feature padded seats and easy steering with a foot operated rudder, and are designed specifically for use on Big River. Made of redwood strip construction, the outriggers, handcrafted by a local artisan are beautiful watercraft, fast and stable.

Big River State Park, c/o Mendocino District State Parks (707) 937-5804

Paddling Plans: Rent watercraft from Catch a Canoe & Bicycles Too (707) 934-0273, operated by The Stanford Inn by the Sea (800) 331-8884, [www.stanfordinn.com](http://www.stanfordinn.com)

## **Delta Meadows**

Delta Meadows is located about 28 miles south of Sacramento, 28 miles north of Stockton and seems altogether in the middle of nowhere. The sleepy backwaters here attract anglers, house-boaters, and those who just like to sit back and watch the river flow.

Paddlers may have close encounters with lively otters, beavers and muskrats, which inhabit the slough and shores. Along the banks of the slough grow oaks, cottonwood and tules. Scads of slough-side blackberries offer a seasonal treat.

Sponsored by the nonprofit Delta Natural History Association, and led by rangers and volunteer guides, canoe tours take place twice daily on Saturdays and Sundays during a dozen weekends in autumn and another dozen in the spring. After reviewing a few basic canoeing skills, guides take you out paddling for about three hours.

Close to the park is the historic hamlet of Locke, built in 1915 by Chinese who worked on the region's farms, railroads and extensive levee system. Chinese Americans still make up most of the population of Locke, which boasts some art galleries and the marvelous Locke Garden Chinese Restaurant.

Delta Meadows, c/o Brannan Island State Recreation Area at 916-777-7701.

Paddling plans: Canoe tours cost \$15 per person, canoes included. Reservations are required.

## **Morro Bay State Park**

Kayaking around the scenic bay is a great way to appreciate the bold beauty of California's Central Coast: the chain of extinct volcanoes including famed Morro Rock, the marooned-in-the-1950s Morro Bay waterfront and, above all, the shell-sprinkled dunes that shield the bay from the Pacific and make Morro Bay, well, a bay.

You'll want to allow at least two hours for an introductory tour of the bay. Better yet, take a half day to poke around the seabird abundant south bay, and to visit Morro Bay Sand Spit.

The best time to land on the sand spit, we learned, is at high tide when one's watercraft simply glides over the mudflats that fringe the spit's bayside. Our low-tide landing meant squishing through the primordial ooze past feeding willets, curlews and sandpipers.

You can walk along the surf's edge, which is littered with shells and sand dollars, or hike down-spit amongst the heather, saltbush and other hardy plants surviving in the harsh, wind-swept environment. About 2.5 miles from the north end of the spit, look for a large shell mound, a massive artifact left by Chumash Indians and now a protected archaeological site in Montana de Oro State Park.

To learn more about the bay's ecology, animal and plant life, visit the newly modernized and expanded Morro Bay Museum of Natural History, which is located in Morro Bay State Park just south of town. Exhibits are well done and the panoramic view of the bay is superb.

Morro Bay State Park, (805) 772-7434

Paddling Plans: For kayak rentals call, Kayak Horizons (805) 772-6444,

[www.kayakhorizons.com](http://www.kayakhorizons.com) . For an excellent naturalist-guided kayak tour around Morro

Bay, complete with gourmet picnic lunch, contact Central Coast Outdoors, (805)528-1080, [www.centralcoastoutdoors.com](http://www.centralcoastoutdoors.com)

### **Salton Sea State Recreation Area**

The Salton Sea's most intriguing trail isn't for hikers. A new kayak trail extends 14 miles along the shoreline, from behind the visitor center at Varner Harbor to Bombay Beach Campground. As you paddle along you'll look back at an intriguing, sun-baked shoreline, quite unlike any other locale in the California desert.

Kayakers enjoy warm lake temperatures that range from the 60s in winter to the upper 80s in the summer. Two kayak camps—Salt Creek and Bombay Beach—beckon with kayak racks, picnic tables, restrooms and showers. A thin film of salt and plankton coats anyone who swims in the sea, so those showers are particularly welcome!

“A kayak offers a wonderful platform on the sea from which to watch thousands of birds,” points out Roland Gaebert, Sector Superintendent. “Paddle along the shore on a typical winter day and you'll be amazed at what you see.”

The Salton Sea's unusual combination of desert and aquatic environments attracts a wide variety (350 species have been counted) of birds. Some four million birds hang-out at the Sea each winter day, including 30,000 pelicans. Most noticeable are the geese, particularly the loud-honking Canada geese that fly here in their distinctive V-shaped formation.

Salton Sea State Recreation Area, (760) 393-3059 Paddling Plans: (BYOB) Bring your own boat. No Kayak rentals are available anywhere near the Salton Sea.

Author of numerous California hiking guides, John McKinney shares his tips and trails at [www.thetrailmaster.com](http://www.thetrailmaster.com)