



Islands On The Horizon

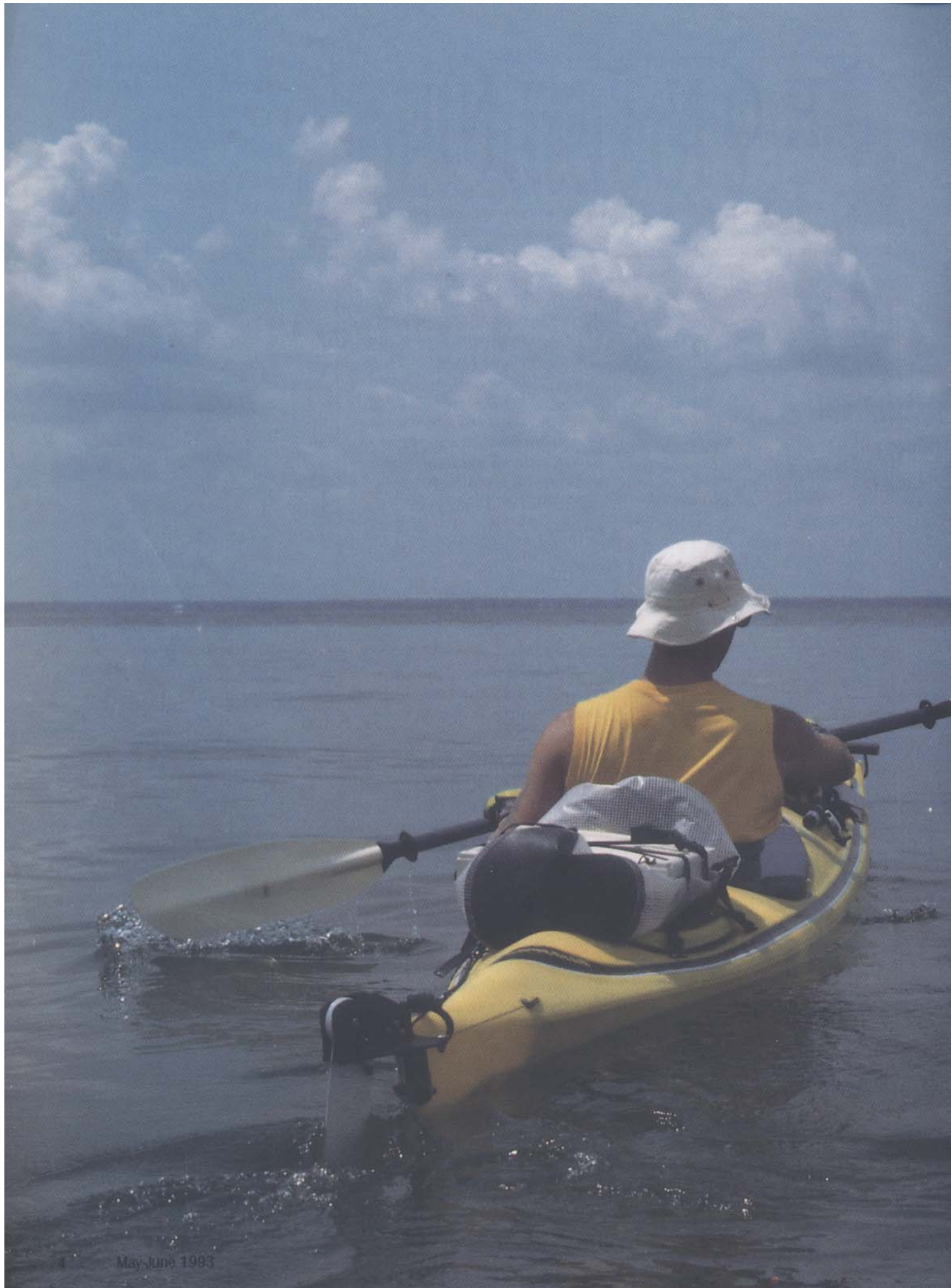
Story and photography by Scott Williams

The wind was near calm on the beach in Ocean Springs as I loaded my 17-foot sea kayak with camping gear, navigation and safety equipment and a week's supply of food and water. It would be a good day to make the crossing of the Mississippi Sound. To the south, the barrier islands were barely visible this June morning, a contrast to the distant slivers of darker blue on the otherwise empty horizon of the Gulf of Mexico.

My previous trips to the barrier islands had been solo excursions, but today I was accompanied by David Sievert, another sea kayaker from Biloxi. Our destination was the west end of Horn Island. Soon we were under way, paddling our narrow boats side by side over waters as still as those of a quiet pond. In conditions like these, we easily can sustain a paddling speed of more than 3 mph,

so the 10-mile passage only took three hours.

A sunny Saturday with calm conditions brings out large numbers of vessels of every description, and several powerboats already were anchored off the beaches on the north side of the island. Upon seeing us, one group immediately hailed us to shore and offered us greatly appreciated cold drinks.



Like most boaters I've encountered in my kayak travels, they viewed our paddling in the sea as a foolhardy stunt. Even after listening to explanations of the seaworthiness of this type of kayak, they still seemed unconvinced. There was no use telling them that our boats, completely sealed and as buoyant as corks, could easily ride out waves that would keep them stormbound in the harbor.

Whatever type boat you choose, the barrier islands, managed by Gulf Islands National Seashore, is a water and nature lover's paradise. Miles of pristine white beaches line the north and south sides of the islands. And not one condominium, resort or beachfront hotel can be found. These are wilderness islands. The seashores, dense pine forests and brackish marshes are the domains of a host of wild creatures.

The islands always have been important to wildlife, but little used by humans. Pre-Columbian natives of the coast paddled to the islands to gather food from the marshes and the sea, but evidence has not been found suggesting that they built permanent settlements there.

It is thought that Europeans first visited the region in 1528, when the Spanish explorer, Cabeza de Vaca, took refuge from a storm behind one of the islands. Later, the French arrived, and the names they gave to the islands stuck, though most have been translated to English.

Because of its safe natural harbor and proximity to New Orleans, Ship Island became the most important of the chain, and was used by the British during the War of 1812. During the Civil War, the Union built Fort Massachusetts there. The island again was used by the U. S. Army during World War II. Horn Island

was inhabited by the Waters family from 1845 to 1920 but, has since seen little use.

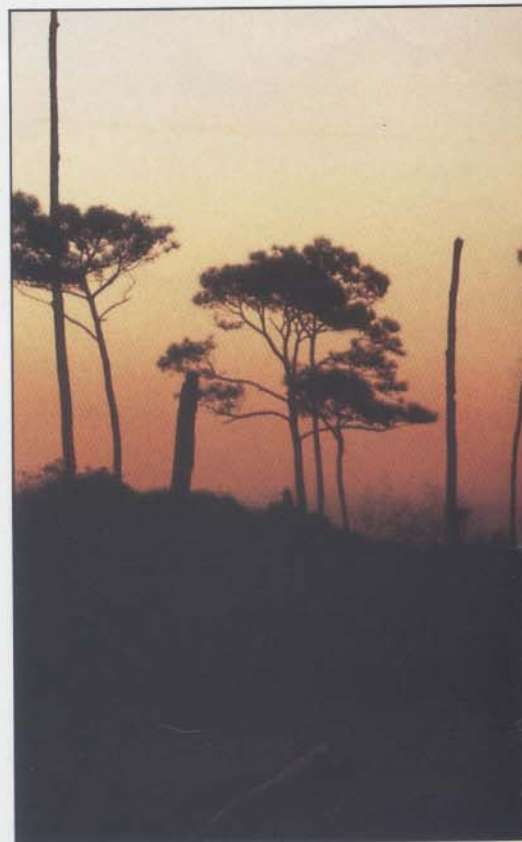
In 1971, the islands were set aside by Congress to form the Gulf Islands National Seashore, which includes parts of Santa Rosa Island and Perdido Key in Florida, and all of Petis Bois, Horn, East Ship and West Ship Islands in Mississippi. In 1978, Horn and Petis Bois became federally designated wilderness areas because of their isolation and primitive state. They are among the least disturbed barrier islands along the coast from Maine to Texas.

Of the 250 species of birds identified on the islands, many are permanent residents. Ospreys, black skimmers, snowy plovers and several species of terns nest there. A variety of waterfowl and other birds use the islands part of the year. Great blue herons, gulls and brown pelicans are especially common.

Reptiles and amphibians are at home in the marshes and desert-like sand dunes. Alligators, cottonmouth moccasins and many types of frogs and turtles can be seen along the fringes of the interior lagoons. Rattlesnakes, a variety of harmless snakes and several species of lizards inhabit the sandy palmetto thickets and piney woods. Giant sea turtles crawl up on the beaches to lay their eggs. Otters, skunks, raccoons, rabbits, nutria, squirrels and mice also make the islands their home.

The surrounding waters of the Gulf are especially rich in marine life, and Mississippi Sound is one of the nation's richest shrimping and fishing grounds. Bottlenose dolphins are common around the islands. I have never paddled my kayak far in these waters without being investigated by these inquisitive creatures.

Because of their isolation from the mainland and lack of



Sunset on one of Mississippi's scenic barrier islands. This is a sample of the many beautiful views of art, just a sample of the many treasures.

facilities, some islands are difficult to reach for those who don't have their own boats. West Ship Island, westernmost of the national seashore, receives the bulk of the visitors. Two excursion boats from Biloxi and Gulfport make several trips daily to the island during the summer. On West Ship Island, rangers give guided tours of Fort Massachusetts. There are shower and bathroom facilities, a souvenir shop, snack bar and a beach with a lifeguard on duty for swimming on the Gulf side. This is an excellent place to spend a day on the beach, but camping is not permitted.

Created in 1969 when Hurricane Camille cut a channel across Ship Island, East Ship Island is the next in the Island chain to the east. Two miles of water separate both islands which are steadily drifting apart as currents wash away sand.

East Ship Island has a



s turns an old lighthouse into a breathtak-
s these islands have to offer.

Left: Beaches on the barrier islands provide a day of fun in the Mississippi sun or a unique camping experience.

dense stand of pine forests and large interior marshes.

Six miles to the east of East Ship Island lies Horn Island, which stretches 11 miles farther east and is a mile wide in places. It is a haven for wildlife, with its large forested areas, high rolling sand dunes and freshwater, brackish and saltwater marshes and lagoons. A ranger station is located on the island and manned by personnel with the U. S. Park Service.

This island was the favorite of Ocean Springs artist Walter Inglis Anderson. He logged 82 visits to the islands in a small rowboat, often staying for weeks to draw and paint the wildlife and landscape.



The easternmost island in the Mississippi portion of the national seashore is Petis Bois. It is perhaps the most isolated and least visited of all. Like Horn and East Ship, Petis Bois has forests, high dunes and deserted beaches. I often have camped for days on this island in the winter without seeing another human.

Boaters going to East Ship, Horn or Petis Bois islands need to have a seaworthy boat, a knowledge of navigation, a VHF marine radio and other safety gear. The Gulf of Mexico can produce some unexpected nasty weather, creating high seas in the passes between the islands and rough chop in the Sound.

There is no fresh drinking water on East Ship or Petis Bois and only one well on Horn Island at the ranger station. When paddling to the islands in my sea kayak, I never venture out without enough food and water for several days, in case I get weatherbound.

Most boaters cannot approach the Gulf side of the islands when a large surf is rolling in, but this presents no problem for a kayak. The passes between the islands are perhaps the most dangerous areas for all type of boats. Submerged sandbars and shallows can create steep, unpredictable waves in unexpected places when big swells roll in off the Gulf.

Visitors can camp with few restrictions on East Ship, Horn and Petis Bois islands. Permits are not required, but campers should take home everything they bring to the islands. It is appalling to see all the beer cans, rusty beach chairs, worn-out coolers and other junk that thoughtless campers

leave on the beach.

Fires are permitted, but only below the high-tide line where waves will carry away the remains. Glass bottles are prohibited on the islands, as are firearms, hunting and the collecting of plants and historical and archaeological artifacts. Fishing is permitted and is



the most popular activity among of island visitors.

The warmer months are popular for swimming and boating, but mosquitoes and sand flies can plague campers this time of year. The best time to find solitude on these islands is between October and March, when fewer boaters venture out.

On this most recent visit I made to the islands in June, my paddling partner, David, and I camped one night on the Gulf side of Horn Island. In the morning, we launched through light surf and paddled to the west end of the island. David headed north to return to Ocean Springs and work, and I pointed my kayak west for the six-mile crossing to East Ship Island.

The sea was relatively calm that day. With a gentle tailwind, I easily made the passage in an hour and a half. After landing on the east end for a quick lunch and a swim, I cruised slowly west along the north shore, taking a detour

into a narrow channel to explore a brackish lagoon surrounded by marsh grass. Schools of fish panicked before me as the shadow of my hull passed over the shallow bottom. But the silent kayak did not disturb a great blue heron stalking fish at the water's edge.

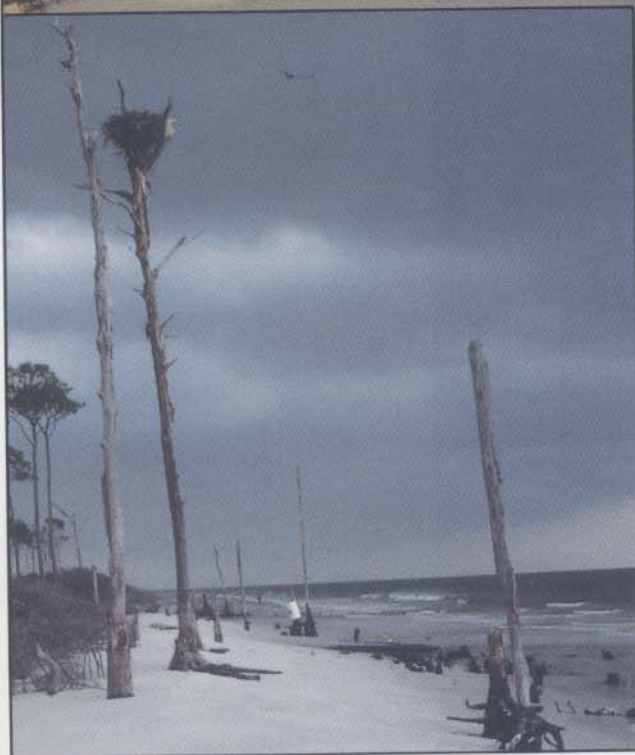
Ospreys wheeled overhead, some with fresh-caught fish writhing in their talons. I could see several of their huge nests nearby. I paddled back into the Sound and continued on to the west end of the island, where dozens of Sunday boaters were picnicking on the beaches, fishing and swimming.

Not wanting to camp with so much company, I paddled around the point to the Gulf beach and set up my tent among the dunes. By nightfall, I had the island to myself. That evening, I spent time walking for miles along the water's edge enjoying the solitude.

Next morning, I paddled to West Ship Island and circumnavigated it clockwise, stopping at the fort to top off my water supply and talk to the rangers. A big line of summer thunderstorms was moving in from the west, so I headed back to East Ship Island. Paddling down the Gulf side to an area of dunes, I securely staked down my tent for the coming storm.

That night lightning flashed all around, and 50-knot wind gusts drove pelting rain into my tent. But the worst of the storms was past by daybreak, followed by a steady rain. I stayed in my tent until I heard someone calling from the beach, I looked out in surprise.

A man and his young son were standing there, soaking wet,



Opposite page: Old-man crab takes a stroll on an island beach. Above and left: For humans, a walk on the barrier islands beaches may prove to be an exercise in solitude. Haron and Petit Bois islands are designated federal wilderness areas. A camper may go for days without seeing another person.

asking if I had a radio that could contact the mainland. They had been camping on the island's north side, and, during the night, the wind and seas had torn their 22-foot powerboat free of its anchor, putting it hard aground on the beach.

I radioed a Coast Guard vessel on my VHF. Soon they had the boat pulled free and back afloat. These islands are no place

to go without such basic equipment as a marine radio. Yet, I'm amazed at the people who so completely trust their motors that they take off 10 miles across Mississippi Sound without a moment's hesitation or preparation.

I waited out the rain the remainder of that day. The next morning, I launched into the surf that ran four to six feet and paddled into the Gulf to go through the pass and head for home. Rough seas breaking on the bars off the east end of the island forced me to take a wide detour round the point by several miles. Once in Mississippi Sound, I had

easy paddling to Ocean Springs in three-foot following seas.

Another kayak trip to the barrier islands was over. Though I had been only a few miles from the mainland during the past five days, I felt like I was returning from a faraway land of uninhabited, sun-drenched islands, and, in fact, I was.

The islands of the Gulf Islands National Seashore—those wonderful islands just at the edge of the horizon—are one of Mississippi's special treasures. They are a world away from the cities and traffic that crowd our mainland coast. 🌲

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