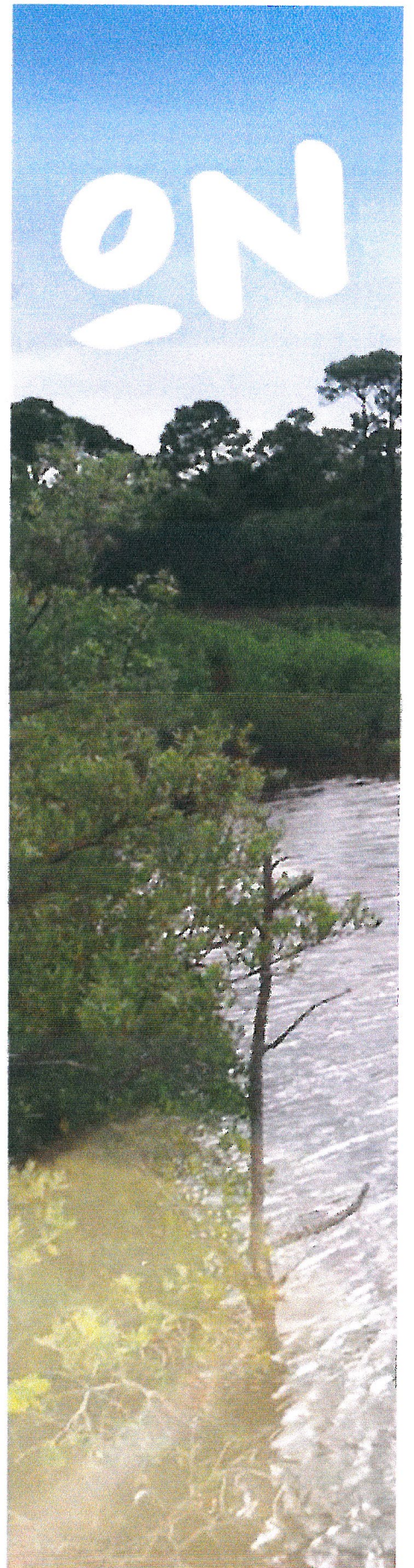
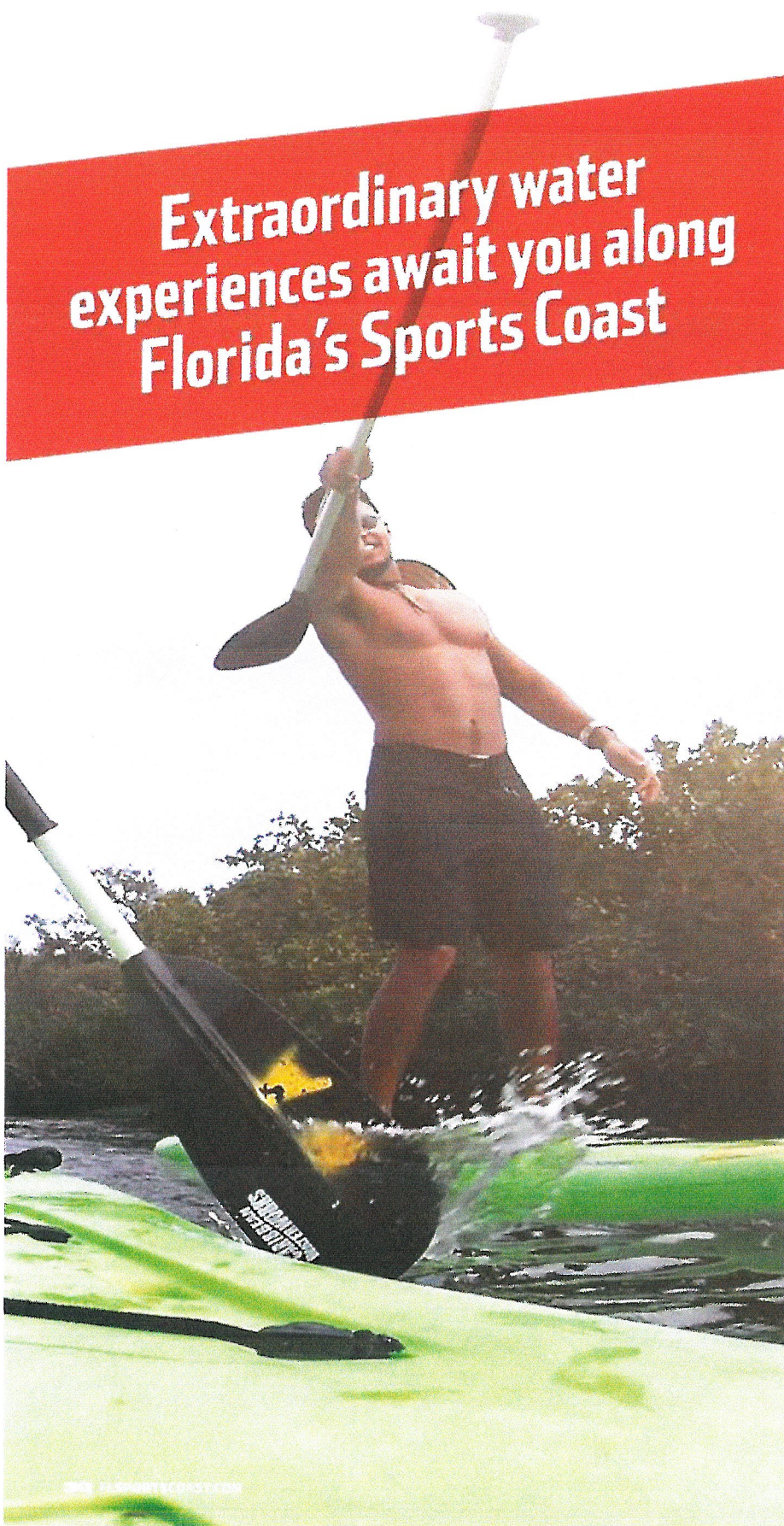


Extraordinary water
experiences await you along
Florida's Sports Coast



THE

BY KATHY A. JOHNSON

WATER

Florida has more than its share of magic on the water. Visitors and residents alike know there's something magical about the many ways you can enjoy being in, on or near the water. And along Florida's Sports Coast, you can find some of the most unique water experiences in the state. Whether you want to hit the beach, steer a kayak through a mangrove tunnel, fish for redfish or dive in the clear waters and explore man-made reefs, you can do it all here!

WERNER-BOYCE SALT SPRINGS STATE PARK

If you'd rather fish, kayak or paddleboard in more intimate surroundings than fight crowds at the beach, the peaceful inlets and bayous of the **Werner-Boyce Salt Springs State Park** are perfect for you. Most of the 4,000-acre park is wetlands made up of salt marshes, mangrove islands and tidal springs, as well as four miles of coastline on the Gulf of Mexico.

The main entrance to Werner-Boyce is off Highway 19 in Port Richey. Park there to unload your kayak, canoe, or paddleboard—or rent a kayak on site. It's just a short walk to the launch ramp, where you can ease your craft into the water. From there, enter one of the park's paddle trails, marked by orange buoys. Whichever trail you choose, you'll explore winding inlets, drift by stands of mangroves and glide beneath overhanging branches. The splash of your paddles, a breeze stirring the palmettos or the cry of an osprey may be the only sounds you hear.

If your paddle trail leads to the Gulf of Mexico, you may see some stilt houses in the distance. Head out for open water to get a closer look at these iconic structures. Originally built as rough shelters for working fishermen, they're privately owned—you can paddle around them, but cannot climb onto them. Stop on nearby Durney Key to stretch any stiff muscles with a little swimming or shelling before paddling the half-mile back to shore.

When you're ready for a break, there's also plenty to see if you drift along the shore of the gulf. The park is one of the best bird-watching spots in the state—look



for wading and shore birds like roseate spoonbills, egrets or wood storks hunting for their next meal. If you're lucky, you may catch a glimpse of the elusive black rail or even a bald eagle perched in the shady branches. Keep your eye out for tiny crabs scuttling into the undergrowth, and you might see dolphins, otters or manatees.

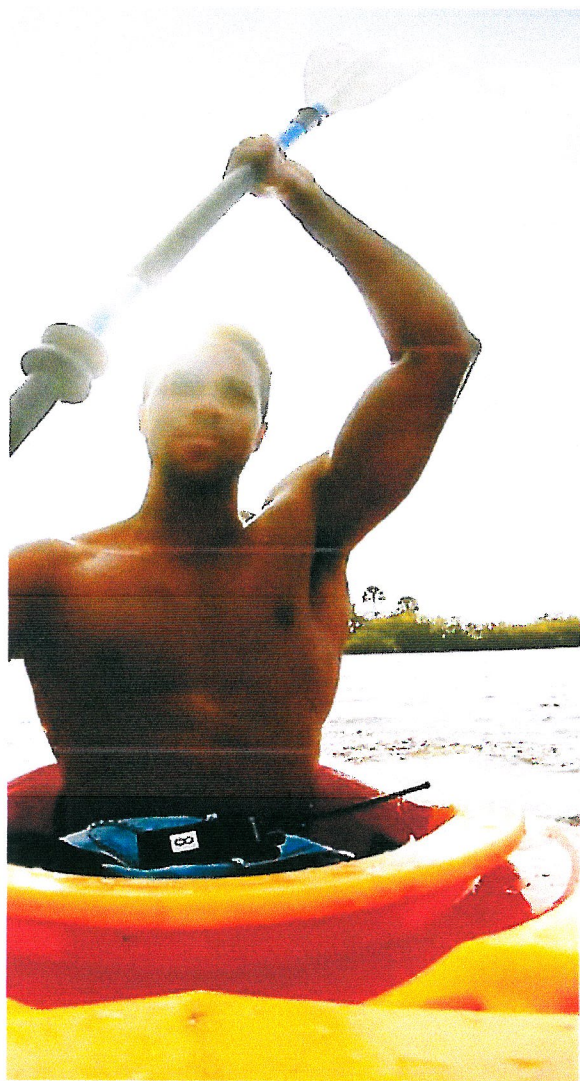
Bring your fishing gear: In-shore saltwater fishing is prime in the park, with anglers catching redfish, drum, sheephead, snook, snapper and more.

Back toward the entrance, you'll find access to hiking trails that lead through the marshes to several of the park's springs, including the deceptively deep Salt Spring. While much of its 385-foot depth has been explored by professional diving expeditions, portions remain a mystery.

Werner-Boyce has a way of casting its spell on you, making you feel like you're miles away from civilization.

Tip: On the first Saturday of the month, park rangers lead free, two-hour kayak tours starting at 10 a.m.





ANCLOTE KEY PRESERVE STATE PARK

Take a trip even farther offshore and visit **Anclote Key Preserve State Park**. This park, made up of four largely unspoiled barrier islands, lies three miles off the coast of Holiday, and is accessible only by boat. If you don't have your own, you can rent one, or book a tour that includes a visit to Anclote Key with one of the local outfitters in Port Richey and New Port Richey. Experienced sea kayakers can also make the three-mile, open-water trip, but it's not suitable for beginners.

No matter who's at the helm, the turquoise water will mesmerize you as your boat cuts through the waves. On your way to and from the park, you might be escorted by dolphins or see pelicans diving for fish. Anclote Key, the largest of the islands, looks a little like

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Kayak along the waterways of Werner-Boyce Salt Springs State Park.
Anclote Key Preserve State Park is perfect for picturesque camping.
Spot interesting birds like the great blue heron at Werner-Boyce Salt Springs State Park.
Paddle up close to the iconic stilt houses in the Gulf of Mexico.

a curving arm. The long sweep of sandy beach on its western side is perfect for shell seeking. Wade through water so clear you can see your toes, don a mask and snorkel to catch a glimpse of fish or rays, or simply relax on the snowy white beach, feeling the sun on your face and the sea breeze in your hair. Grills, picnic tables and pavilions are available, as are two composting toilets, but there's no fresh water on the island, so be sure to bring your own.

Relaxing on the beach not quite your style? The park also has nearly 12,000 acres of gulf water open for boating, fishing and leisure days on the water. Offshore, sea grass beds harbor sheepshead, redfish and sea trout just waiting for you to drop them a line—or dive below and scout for bay scallops among the sea grass. Fishermen also reel in snook in this area.

When it's time to leave, you might not want to return to the mainland after soaking up the sun and serenity of this enchanting, almost-private island paradise.

Tip: If you can't get enough of the tucked away tranquility, you can also camp on the island for the night and get back in the water bright and early in the morning.





THE "COTEE" RIVER

For an excursion that combines both wilderness and urban paddling, look no further than the **Pithlachascotee River**, or "Cotee" as most residents call it. The Cotee is a blackwater river, deep and slow moving. Its name translates to "Boat Building River," since it was once a place where Seminoles dug out their cypress canoes.

The Cotee is still popular with canoeers as well as kayakers, and one of the best places to put in is the **James E. Grey Preserve** in New Port Richey. Here the water is dark, stained by the tannins that leach into it from the vegetation that lines its banks. A canopy of

trees draped in Spanish moss surrounds the river, and it's so quiet you might hear the plop of slider turtles leaving their logs as you stroke by. The river twists and turns through the preserve, and if you're lucky you may see some of the wildlife found in the area, including deer and some of the many bird species.

If you're ready to end your sojourn in nature, keep following the river past the boundary of the preserve. It flows right into the heart of New Port Richey, where you can admire the homes that border both sides of the river before landing or docking your watercraft at one of the boater-friendly restaurants near Highway 19 in Port Richey.

Tip: If you'd rather let someone else do the navigating while you sit back and enjoy the scenery, a couple local companies offer guided boat tours on the Cotee.

Whether you opt for a kayak paddle trail through the rustic beauty of a salt marsh, a prime snorkeling spot in crystal clear water or a guided boat trip down a blackwater river, you're sure to discover the unique magic found in the waterways of Florida's Sports Coast. —PGC

CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT

*The iconic lighthouse at
Anclote Key.*

*James E. Grey Preserve's
beauty must be seen to
be believed.*

*Bring along your gear
for these prime in-shore
fishing spots.*

*The sandy beach at
Anclote Key Preserve
State Park is a popular
getaway spot.*

