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# *A Texas Nature Kayaking Guide*

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## **Kayaking Activities**

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The two most common kayaking activities are challenging nature and communing with nature. White water kayaking is an example of the first, and bird watching from a kayak is an example of the second. Following is more information about communing with nature. Remember, if you want to challenge nature, you need training. We can help you find that training.

### **Touring**

You and friends get into your kayaks and paddle into the wilderness. That wilderness might be the 10,000 lake region of Minnesota, or the coastal islands of the northwest. If you are not quite that adventurous, paddle along the shores of Medina Lake in South Central Texas for a meal at a local restaurant. Kayak touring is whatever you make it. It can involve short trips, or long trips. It can involve camping equipment and supplies, or arranging to stay at motels each night. If it involves camping, it extends your ability to get into the backcountry. You are limited by the food and gear that can be stowed in your kayaks or that you can have resupplied. Decide what kayak touring means to you and make it happen. Guides make such trips easier. If you decide to go on your own, plan your trip well.

Some people will always find an excuse not to go kayaking. They may say that they are too old, or not physically fit enough, or they are afraid of getting wet. We had one man who told us that he was too old to kayak, even though his 80-something-year-old mother was kayaking with us.



**Figure 1** If you look carefully, you will see a kayaker exploring along the cliff face.

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## Running Rivers

Many people picture running rivers as a white-water adventure. It can be. There are rivers that only the experts should consider, but there are numerous rivers that do not require that much skill. Texas



Parks and Wildlife Department is developing Paddling Trails to encourage kayakers and canoers to get out on the rivers. Other states are following suit. The first fresh-water trail in Texas was the Luling Kayak Trail, a 6-mile stretch that, when the river is not in flood, can be paddled by most people who can spend 3 or 4 hours in a kayak. Numerous birds can be seen on such a paddle. We often see deer, muskrats, and an occasional raccoon. Last year several of us watched an osprey catch a fish that it could barely carry.

Figure 2 Running a riffle in the San Marcos River below San Marcos, TX.

## Wildlife Viewing

Wildlife viewing can range from casual viewing to a very serious avocation.

Your goal could be getting out with friends on friendly waters, enjoying communing with nature, and looking at all of the friendly creatures. No major activity except to enjoy the day. Several of us were paddling on a local river when the lady in the lead stopped paddling and was very quiet. As we approached, we noticed a damsel fly had landed on her paddle, and she was just watching it, letting it rest.



Figure 3 A little blue heron rests on mangroves in Lighthouse Lakes, near Aransas Pass, TX.

Fifty years ago bird watching was perceived as being for men in pith helmets, and little old ladies with blue hair and tennis shoes. Bird watching has advanced since then. Bird watchers range from

those who like to look at birds but do not know the names, to people who not only know their names but also know their habits and songs.

Kayaking is a way to quietly approach water birds, birds that are in vegetation close to the water, and other wildlife. A kayak and kayaker do not seem as threatening as a person on foot. Watching a little green heron feed from 15 feet away is a thrill of a lifetime. Putting someone into that position is an even greater thrill.

Binoculars and field guides make this much more enjoyable. Ensure the binoculars are waterproof, and protect the bird books so they do not get wet. Binoculars can disappoint you. On one trip we observed a mountain goat about 1,200 feet above us on a cliff. One of the members of the group pulled out his binoculars and after a little while said, "It's a white donkey." If you carry binoculars, you may have problems holding any higher than 8 X power steady. To have them accessible, you will want them on a strap around your neck. Larger binoculars get very heavy as the day wears on, so consider weight when making your selection. Waterproof binoculars last longer when kayaking than other binoculars and are not that much more expensive.

A camera is always nice, but most quit functioning when they get wet. While underwater cameras have traditionally been expensive, each year more-reasonably-priced waterproof digital cameras come on the market. As of early 2010, the Canon D10 appears to be one of the better reasonably-priced ones. Since it sinks, attach a float to the camera. Then test the float to determine whether it has sufficient buoyancy. With my camera, I attach it to my PFD and when not using it place it inside my PFD with the lens facing out. In this position the lens is less likely to fog and get splashed with water. If water gets on the lens, there will be blurred spots on your photos.

### **Observing Geological Formations**

Many rivers pass through canyons. This gives opportunities to observe the various layers of the earth's crust. The upper reaches of Amistad Reservoir on the Texas-Mexico border are lined with limestone cliffs and caves. Some of the caves that contain Indian art can only be reached via the water. The canyons of the Rio Grande in the Big Bend Park reach over 1,200 feet above the kayaker and make the kayaker seem very insignificant. Except as a river moves into a flood plain, it usually has cliffs to study. But observing geological formations is not limited to rivers; there are many coastal areas with significant cliffs.



**Figure 4** Is this a geologic formation in dolomitic limestone, or a prehistoric ICBM that is being uncovered?

### **Greeting the Dawn**

Some people like to watch the sun set. Others like to watch it rise. Whichever you prefer, it is more glorious from a kayak. If you like solitude, you will often find it as you watch the sun rise. A friend even named her kayak, "Dawn Treader."



Figure 5 Sunset along the Rio Grande River near Big Bend National Park.

### **Moonlight Paddles**

The full moon rises about sunset. Each day before the full moon, the moon rises 55 minutes earlier. If you want the moon high in the sky when you launch, you go a few days before the full moon. At night a familiar area takes on a whole different look. Even the sounds are different. Congress Street Bridge passes over Lake Lady Bird Johnson in Austin, Texas. 1.5 million Mexican free-tail bats make the bridge their summer home and provide an interesting time for children of all ages. If you are going on a moonlit paddle, know the area during the daylight so you can avoid any hazards that may exist.



Figure 6 Mexican Free-tail Bats exit Congress Street Bridge in Austin and fly along the tree line on the south side of Lake Lady Bird Johnson.