

Coastbusters

The Cross Currents Newsletter for Mid-Atlantic Paddlers

November 2024

Assessing UnCon: What the Participants Say

Rick Wiebush

Note: This article presents the highlights of a recently-recorded conversation with participants in Cross Currents' Unconscious Competence (UnCon) program. It was the end of their second season of UnCon participation and focused on their perception of the benefits and shortcomings of the program. It has been edited for length and clarity, but the content remains as they reported.

The Setting

It's startling. Sondra is riding a surging three-foot swell toward a narrow opening between two rock walls that tower above the water. Using a stern rudder, she gets rocketed through the slot, maneuvering with grace and style. But the wave, outrunning her, has exploded against the wall on the far side of the slot and is rebounding as a staggering wall of white spray and foam. A momentary lapse in concentration, and the resurgent wave knocks her over. Those watching – her UnCon paddling partners - hold their breath. Sondra stays upside down in her boat for about 10 seconds, collecting her thoughts, if not her breath. She then extends her paddle to the surface, snaps her hips, and executes a roll to right herself. Yes! Her peers' hands and paddles extend skyward in multiple, triumphant V's for a major success. Timing the next set of waves, she emerges from the slot all smiles and hollers "Next!" It's UnCon at its best.

Background

The Unconscious Competence (UnCon) program started in 2017 with 10 participants. There have now been seven cohorts, with a total of 62 people. The program goal is to dramatically improve participants' sea kayaking skills through a series of intensive and progressive classes. Training typically involves five or six, two-day weekend sessions spread over three months, with evening practices taking place between the weekend events.



Debriefing an open ocean training. Photo; Rick Wiebush

The basic strategy of the program is to gradually increase the range of skills taught and mastered, ultimately starting to apply those skills in more challenging rough water environments. A typical progression is to: 1) move from basic skills taught and/or refined on flat water in the Baltimore/DC area 2) learning L2-type skills on bouncier water on the Chesapeake Bay and then 3) exploring L3 skills in the Atlantic Ocean on the Virginia Eastern Shore.

Upping the Ante

Several of the UnCon cohorts have opted to expand their learning by participating in a second summer of intensive classes. These “UnCon II” groups have stretched their skill horizons by tackling new rough water environments in the Chesapeake Bay and the Outer Banks, doing rocks and ledges in Rhode Island, and spending a week in the waters around Tybee Island in Georgia. The 2024 UnCon II group recently paddled Tybee. One evening while sitting around the dining room table in the rental house, the talk turned to what they got out of UnCon. That discussion provided the basis for this article.

The Discussion

Growth As a Paddler

Karen: So I would say the difference between UnCon I and UnCon II in addition to the skill building, is now we have these basic skills we're putting them to use in bigger conditions, but you're giving us the ability to think for ourselves, look at the conditions, the weather, the wind, what's the current, and how will you manage that?

That has opened up a whole new world. Reading the water and knowing what to do ... Because we're gaining the confidence, we're in these bigger conditions. And being able to think for ourselves and kind of know this is what it looks like, and this is what we can expect. It's very empowering.

Jack: One of the reasons I signed up for UnCon II was because of all the locations that you (Rick) picked. That was what sold me on wanting to do that this year. And each one of the locations has had

unique challenges to make us better paddlers. Some had surf, some had wind, some had currents like Wading River. Some of them like Tangier were just beautiful and we could do whatever practice that we needed. And then we got down here (Georgia), and we had all this different surf to play in and we did rescues in bumpy water and ... awesome.

Karen: Right. So I'd reiterate that to say UnCon I, we had the foundation. We all have very good foundation basic skills. UnCon II, you put us in building conditions, bigger and bigger conditions to utilize those skills. Always continually building those skills and feeling more confident, which is a big part of it, right?

Laure: Right. And it's because of the different locations, the exceptional instructors, and the community of people.

Bridget: The two things that you need to become a better paddler are lots of repetitions and timely effective feedback. And in a challenging scenario, it's amazing to me in UnCon how much good, timely feedback I get and then the opportunity to do discovery learning and explore and practice. So a lot of times, if you have a question, the first feedback you'll get is, "Well, first, tell me what you think." And that was really effective for me.

Laure: You also had a couple of practice sessions at Rocky Gorge, which wasn't just for us because there were other instructors and UnCon Alumni there as well. Having those practice sessions was really beneficial and I really appreciated those opportunities.



UnCon II rescue practice. Photo: Kathryn Lapolla



In bounce. Photo: Rick Wiebush

UnCon I vs. UnCon II

Ricardo: I know that in this discussion we're talking about UnCon II. I remember when I finished UnCon I, I kind of thought like I had reached Everest, right? And then (this Spring) we went to Pine Barrens. This was our first trip as UnCon II. We went to the Pine Barrens and we had UnCon II and III grads, alumni there. And things happened that we're all aware of. (Several capsize in fast moving current with strainers.) A lot of people (alumni) go in and do rescues. And it clicked.

It's like okay, UnCon I is great, but it's not enough. It gets you there, the foundation, but shit happens. And I would tell anyone that: "Okay, you did UnCon I, but you've got to keep going. You didn't know what you didn't know. And then I see these UnCon alum, UnCon II alums, it's like, "Whoa, there's still more to learn."

Rick: When shit hit the fan, they knew how to deal with it.

Ricardo: That was amazing. That was the takeaway for me. It's like, "Okay, I'm an UnCon grad. These guys are UnCon Plus".

Nature of Instruction

Ricardo: So personally, I've tried peer-based instruction before or peer-based learning, and I found it insufficient for learning advanced and progressive learning that UnCon provided. Peer-based teaching is fine, but it's not methodical. It's not systemic, it's not progressive. Especially last year for UnCon I, watching the three instructors, you, Paula and Laurie's work as a team to convey the lessons and you would hand off one part of the instruction to the other person, it seemed completely seamless. It seemed like you all had prepared way in advance to convey the lesson for that day.

Zhen: The other thing is that they (peer instructors) do it, but they cannot explain why they do it the way they did it. Which part works? Which part doesn't? And for me, particularly, the way I learn everything, I always have a question. What exactly is the physics behind it that makes that thing work?

I need to understand. And I think it's 90% of the time, the question I asked got answered. And once I know that I will never forget. The mechanics behind the strokes that make them behave the way

they behave. There's a reason for that. And that's very important to me because once I understand it, even if I cannot do it, I can go back and practice because I know exactly what's the reason

Risk Taking and Sense of Safety

Bridget: When we did the paddle into the entrance of the slough (confused inlet), I thought, "Where else do you get to have an experience that's dangerous with a two-to-one teacher-student ratio?" We went one at a time and there was Rick and there was Kathryn Lapolla. And geez, I was just feeling so confident because I knew I could take some risks right here and go for this. And if anything goes wrong, if there's something I'm just not aware of, like I got the skills I think I need to apply. They're there for me if I get jammed up. So to me, that's a really big deal. Really big deal.

I mean, the whole setup of the experience was fantastic. And yet the instructors have to have their heads on a swivel to watch everybody else, right? So there are other people on the water. How are they doing? Are they okay? Then feedback right afterward and then fun surfing right afterward. I know it sounds simple, but to actually deliver on the whole experience is pretty impressive. .

Laure: And sometimes you've asked: "you guys came through that, and you didn't seem nervous". But why we don't seem nervous is because we know that you guys are there. I don't have to be nervous because I know one of the instructors or one of our teammates is going to be there to help out. So it's okay to take that risk.

Some Shortcomings

More Disciplined Practice

Bridget: We should have done some more rescues in rough water, more next-level skill-building.

Karen: We could be a little lackadaisical and sometimes you let us get away with it, right?.

Bridget: Well, it's on all of us. Because sometimes we would be like, "Yeah, yeah, we can just go back," or we didn't push things sometimes when we could've.

Rick: It's so easy to say, "Oh, let's just head back." As opposed to, "You want me to get wet again?"

Karen: Even this week, we say, "Well, we're just going to take a 10 or 15-minute break," and then it might be 45 minutes. So being a little bit more...

Rick: Disciplined. Yeah. I'm glad we got on the record that there are times for some people where it's not rigorous enough in terms of skill development and challenge.

The Best Part Of UnCon

Rick: What was the best part of UnCon II?

Bridget: As we talked about before, it's the exposure to the different locations that have different conditions to build our skills. So you set up different instructors at these different locations that had the local knowledge, which was fantastic. And they were all fantastic instructors. They had amazing local knowledge but were also just wonderful people to spend time with as well. And then the fact that we're all together. And so we're building sort of our community. So being able, even tonight to have these conversations. We get to know



Surf zone at Metompkin Inlet, VA Eastern Shore. Photo: Rick Wiebush

each other, we know our paddling skills, but we also know each other as people and sort of building that community. And so all of that together for me is what made UnCon II.

Jack: And I couldn't answer that any better. It's exactly... like you nailed it for what I would've said.

Rick: So the combination of developing skills, learning new things in new environments, and being part of a community of like-minded people?

Ricardo: Supportive community.

Jack: You can't forget the trainers that you got us. That was a critical part. The knowledge that they had. The trainers make it or break it.

Laure: UnCon I, getting some instruction and knowing how to move your boat, all the different strokes, and doing rescues, it has just opened up a whole other world. Now with UnCon II this year, even more so because of all the locations we've been to and different conditions we've been exposed to: the Wading River with strong current, the Outer Banks with rough water, wind, along with beautiful scenery and the horses, Tangier Island – another beautiful spot where we practiced lots of our skills – strokes and rescues in some rough water, Metompkin Inlet with waves and surf, Rhode Island with spectacular scenery and learning how to go through features and deal with the big swell and waves near rocks and ledges, and now Tybee Island with bigger waves and surf! In addition to the locations and conditions, the extraordinary instructors have been incredible – Greg Hollingsworth and all the UnCon alumni on the Wading River – made me feel less nervous about the upcoming Outer Banks trip. Then James and Bev Kesterson and Larry Meisner in the Outer Banks – exceptional people and coaches! And then you and Kathryn Lapolla for Rhode Island and Tybee Island, GA! Again, very good instruction, always feeling safe, and wonderful people!

The UnCon II Instructors

Several different instructors were used in UnCon II for 2024 in order to impart their expertise, local knowledge, or both. They included James Kesterson (L5) and Larry Meisner (L5) for the Outer Banks, Greg Hollingsworth (L4) for the Wading River, Mike Hamilton (L4) and Rob Garfield (L4) for the Virginia Eastern Shore, and Kathryn Lapolla (L4) for Rocks and Ledges in RI and for the week in Tybee. Rick Wiebush (L3 IT) was the lead and coordinating instructor.



(Most of) The 2024 UnCon II group. Photo: Kathryn Lapolla

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2025 Cross Currents Calendar Photo Contest

It’s that time of year again! We are now accepting photo submissions for potential inclusion in the 2025 Cross Currents Calendar. If you have what you think is a great photo related to sea kayaking, please consider submitting it. You can also submit for a friend.

I usually receive about 75 photos. 13 winners will be picked (12 months + cover). All photos are judged by a group of eight sea kayakers in several rounds of voting.

There are a few rules:

- The photo should include a kayak(s) OR a scene taken from a kayak
- the photo cannot include the bow of the person taking the photo (pet peeve)
- The photo can be from anywhere in the world.
- you can submit up to five photos

Photos need to be submitted to me in jpeg format. Send them to me at rwiebush@gmail.com

The deadline for submission is November 22nd.

People who are long-term Cross Currents customers receive a free calendar. All others can purchase a full-size, spiral bound wall calendar for \$20 (that's at cost + shipping). They make great Christmas presents for paddling friends!

Back Deck Carry

Dave Winkworth



Jeff Atkins doing a back deck carry. Photo: Corey Robinson

A few months ago I paddled with members of the Western Australia Sea Kayaking Club on Geographe Bay near Dunsborough WA. There were about 10 paddlers in our group. I was a co-leader – the tail end Charlie. The forecast was for building nor’easterly winds and only a meter or so of swell. We were paddling parallel to the mostly rock shore and not too far out. Water temp I judged as cool to cold.

The wind speed increased quite quickly and I saw that some paddlers were in a bit of difficulty in the stern-quartering, wind-generated sea. The group spread out a little. One paddler about mid-group capsized, surfaced ok, righted their boat but lost contact with the unladen kayak in the wind. The paddler attempted to swim to the kayak but I saw

that it just wasn’t going to happen – the boat blowing away downwind faster than the paddler could swim!

Another group member paddled over to the swimmer who then grabbed onto the stern of that kayak. The paddler then attempted to drag the swimmer back to their kayak but this just wasn’t going to happen either! The drag of the swimmer plus the loss of kayak maneuverability for the paddler was huge. We need to remember that when a kayak turns, the “turn pivot” is pretty much around the front hatch area of the boat. Quite obviously, a dead weight hanging off the stern means nothing will work – no turning and no forward speed!



Back deck carry in surf. Photo: Tom Noffsinger

Another group member paddled to the unladen kayak and clipped on a line. By this time the kayak was well over 200 feet downwind of its owner! They were reunited and all ended well. It should be remembered that the unladen kayak would not have been visible to its owner in the prevailing sea state at that distance! Scary!

Well, we were in a group and the situation was managed ok, but if it had been a solo or duo trip, the outcome may have been different. My thought was at the time that a quick deck carry would've been appropriate and successful – get the swimmer up on deck to paddle them to their boat.

“Deck Carries” are simple – with a few caveats - but not always that easy in execution. Like all our skills, practice is essential. What follows are my training notes on deck carries. As always, no one has all the answers. You should read, consult and practice to find out what works best for you!

So, what exactly is a deck carry?

Simply, it's a rescue! It's the transportation of a paddler or a swimmer on the rear deck of a sea

kayak. It's not quite that simple though.... You come across a tired swimmer well out to sea, a member of your paddling group has smashed their kayak on a bommie (reef) or they've come out of their boat and you need to move them back to it. Whatever...it's a very useful skill to have.

How are you going to do this? Having the person hang onto the stern of your kayak is NOT the answer. Firstly, your progress will be painfully slow due to the drag of the body in the water and secondly, you will have no steerage and control of your kayak.

When a kayak turns it does so by pivoting approximately at the bow hatch which means that the stern must sweep around. If a person is hanging onto your stern...then clearly your kayak cannot turn and you will most likely stay beam-on to the breaking waves that you hoped would aid your progress!

Remember that the conditions in which you may be called to do a deck carry are unlikely to be mill-pond flat. People don't fall out of boats much on calm water! It could be challenging conditions.



Photo: Corey Robinson

Preparing

So, you have to get this person out of the water and onto your back deck. The first thing to do is to prepare yourself before you go in to them. Paddle upwind to them...you'll have steerage into the wind and you'll be unlikely to be surfed over them. Call out to them..."Are you OK?" You're looking for a calm measured response. Get your tow line handy in case you need to use it. Put your paddle on the leash if it's not already on it. Have a good drink of water...it may be a tough paddle coming up!

Now, a few things may count AGAINST you doing the deck carry. I'll go through them:

Panicking Swimmer. Is the person in the water panicking? Screaming, hyperventilating, distraught perhaps? If this is so, then do not go near them just yet. If you do, they may pull you over as they

attempt to climb aboard your kayak. 'Makes no sense having two people in the cold water! Watch them and talk to them. Reassure them. Let them drink a little sea water maybe. You need them to do exactly as you say. If you assess them as being unable to do that then you don't want them aboard your boat. Tough love? Yes it is. Call in the cavalry if you have a radio or a phone you can use.

Skills All Round. Do you have the skills to do this? OK, maybe you do...but does the patient know what to do too? If the patient is a sea kayaker you may be fine but if they're not then it could be difficult on a heaving windy ocean to get your instructions understood and carried out. Think about this.

Competing Masses. How big are you? How buoyant is your kayak? How big is the patient? If you are a smaller person in a narrow, low-volume 15 foot

kayak and the patient is 250 lb.+ then the deck carry most likely will not work. Your kayak will point to the sky and you'll capsize. Do the math as quickly as you can. Also, larger people can sometimes have difficulty getting onto the rear deck of a kayak.

Rear Deck Gear. If you're carrying a pile of gear on your back deck then not only will it inhibit the swimmer climbing aboard but it will force their mass higher and prevent them getting their weight low and as close to you in the cockpit as possible. This may be another case of calling in some outside help. Bulky PFDs and lots of gear – radios etc. will also make the climb-on difficult!

Go For It

But let's say everything's OK and you go in for the deck carry. To do this maneuver you're going to have to brace while the person climbs aboard. The brace you'll need to do is the "Sculling Low Brace." I'm not going to go through that stroke here except to say that your "sculls" should be a good three feet long for optimum support.

Brace on the side that the person will come aboard. Whatever suits you! You're the rescuer so YOU call the shots! And in calling the shots remember to tell the person what YOU want:

"Reach over and grab the far deck line and kick hard to get yourself up." "Pull me over and we're both in trouble!" "Keep your body AND head very low." "Get your head right up behind me."

Communication is very important because you won't be able to turn around to watch!

Generally the person should cross the rear deck of your kayak about a third of the way back from you. Once they feel some "balance" they should swing around so that their body lies along the deck with their head right up behind you. As much as possible their feet should be out of the water on either side of the stern. When they're in position, hold your brace until you're ready to paddle off. Take your time because it will feel a little unstable!

When it's time to jettison your cargo, do another sculling low brace to steady yourself and tell them to slip off slowly.



Happy swimmer. Photo: Jeff Atkins

*Photo Essay***Training in Georgia's Barrier Islands*****Kathryn Lapolla and Rick Wiebush***

Landing on Little Tybee. Photo: Kathryn Lapolla

Introduction

Cross Currents' UnCon II group just got back from a week of touring and skills training in the Georgia Barrier Islands with Kathryn Lapolla of Savannah Coastal Ecotours. We love working with Kathryn because she is both a highly accomplished rough water paddler and an interesting, deeply knowledgeable naturalist. A gigantic side benefit this year was that her husband Fran treated us to an

authentic and incredibly delicious low country boil (which surprising had crabs in it!). He did it at our rental house and there was enough for about 35 people! Dale Williams and Debbie joined us for a total of 12 people, but we barely made a dent in all the food. So lots of leftover shrimp, potatoes and kielbasa for the rest of the week!.



Little Tybee Is. showing various creeks and cuts. Tybee Is. is top right corner

Scenic Flatwater

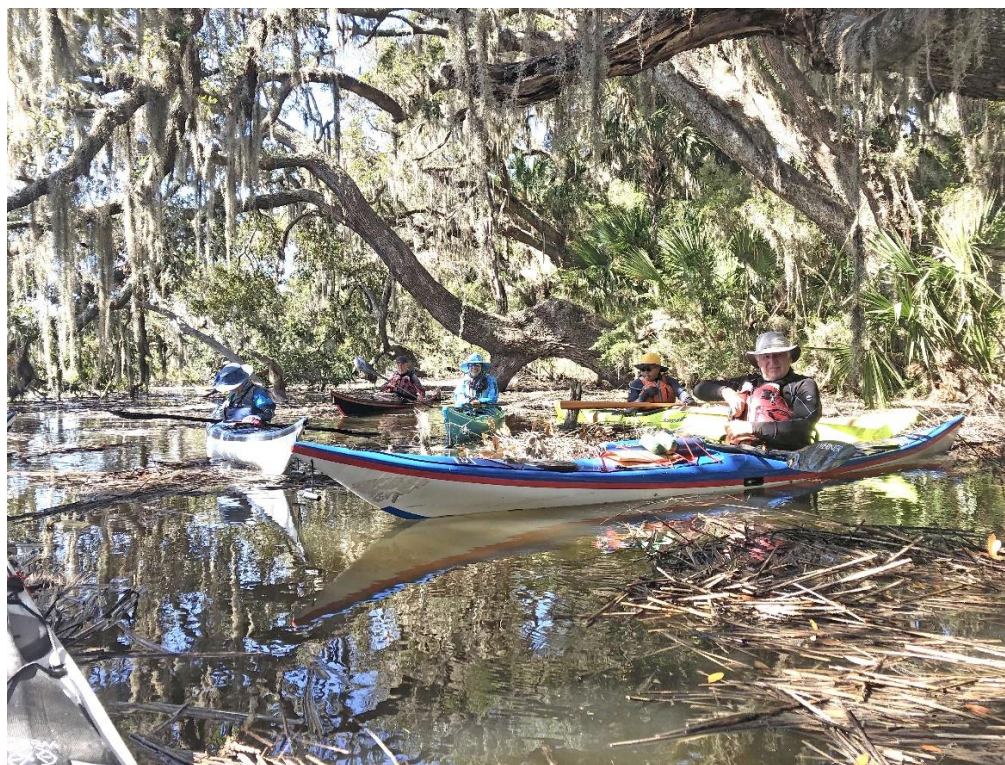
The first half of the week saw fairly high winds (15 kts) so we opted to work on skills in flat water environments like the cuts and creeks of Little Tybee Island, the Moon River, and the fabulous Ebenezer Creek with its huge old Cypress and Tupelo trees.

The twisty, turny channels of Jack's Cut on Little Tybee were particularly good for pushing our edging and practicing a variety of turning strokes. (Happily, there were only a few times that I had to remind people that the use of stern prys as turning strokes are outlawed in UnCon.)

The same strategies were used another day as we wound and squeezed our way through the flooded areas of tupelo/cypress forests on Ebenezer Creek. The high winds on the more open waters of Moon River saw us working extensively on strategies for turning in the wind.



Mosquito Ditch on Little Tybee. Photo; Kathryn Lapolla



Live oak "caves" on the Moon River. Photo: Kathryn Lapolla



Paddling among the Cypress and Tupelo trees of Ebenezer Creek. Some trees are over 1,200 years old!



Photo: Rick Stewart

Rough Water and Surf

The second half of the week was when things got challenging and exciting as we went to the “frontside” (oceanside) of Little Tybee on two days and then the north end of Tybee on the third.

We had great conditions for working on reflexive bracing, loose waists, and the stability of a forward stroke as we spent a couple hours moving back and forth through the big confused waves and clapotis in

the “Triangle” at the entrance to Tybee Creek. Practicing launching and landing through the surf – with a major emphasis on powering up our reverse strokes – was another major emphasis that day.

We left from Alley 3 again the next day, punched out through the two-three foot surf at the mouth of Tybee Creek and then headed way down Little Tybee to the “Slough” (pronounced, as I was corrected, as “Slew”). That day was the first day of Sea Kayak Georgia’s symposium and it was great to run into Ronnie and Marsha, SKG’s owners, at Alley 3.

Getting into the Slough from the Ocean presented the biggest and ultimately most satisfying challenge of the week. We had to work our way in for about 150 yards through about five sets of breakers. Kathryn went in first and remained in her boat with paddle held high, to give us a target. The rest of the group then tip-toed in - without getting surfed - one by one until the whole group was in the calm water of the Slough. With every successful entry, I was bobbing there watching, cheering and silently shouting “Yeeessssssss!”

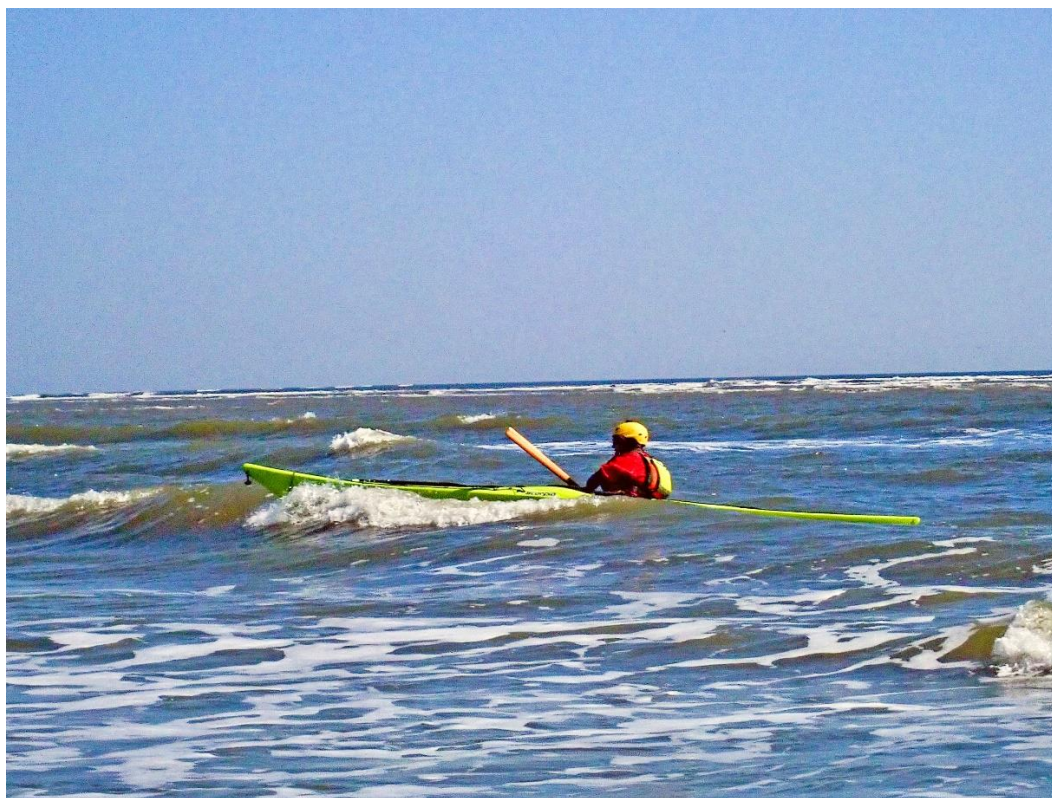


Photo: Rick Stewart

Photos of the Month



Skin on Frame

Photo: Keith Betts

Photos of the Month



Ensenada, Baja

Photo: Bill Vonnegut

Photos of the Month



Reflections

Photo: Rick Wiebush

Kayaking the San Juan Islands

Kathy Ellwood



Pebble Cove. Photo: Kathy Ellwood

The San Juan Islands, northwest of Seattle, are a complex of at least 250 islands, surrounded by the Salish Sea. Most people access the islands by boarding a ferry - operated by Washington state - from Anacortes, which I did, and then traveling to Friday Harbor on San Juan Island. When a friend, Chris, suggested this trip, I didn't hesitate. What better way to explore the rugged beauty of these islands than from a kayak? Local guides are recommended since tidal ranges up to eight feet create strong currents and can leave mud flats of 20 to 40 ft. We went with San Juan Kayak Expeditions. They have a good reputation and are the oldest

outfitter in the islands, having led tours for over 40 years.

Our group consisted of eight paddlers, two of which were our guides, Nate and Maddie. What we didn't know until the first-day introductions was that the other four paddlers consisted of Nate's and Maddie's *parents*. Thus began our "family" vacation. They all had experience in kayaking these islands. Nate's mother was also an accomplished marine biologist who has published books on the marine life in the San Juan's and served as our expert naturalist.

After getting an introduction on using a rudder on our tandem kayaks, we were ready to head off. The tide was out so we had to wade through seaweed and mud to launch our kayaks, which became rather common. I was glad I had booties, since those in open-toed shoes could – and did – sink up to their ankles. Our first wildlife sighting as we neared the island was of a racoon hunting clams along the shore. This would be just the first of the amazing wildlife we would see on and around the San Juans.

Winds, Currents, and Tides

We learned about the winds our first day out since we had to change the original route to cross from San Juan Island to Lopez Island. It would be our shortest crossing during our five-day trip, but one of the most challenging. Our guide was anxious to get across the channel as the winds were picking up, so we had to skip the planned trip to Turn Island, which we visited later. We passed rafts of birds on the water, such as Rhinoceros Auklets and Pigeon Guillemots.

As we neared Lopez Island, we were protected from most of the wind and could enjoy more of the scenery: evergreen forests descending almost to the water where they were met by large rocky boulders. Most of the islands are covered with mixed evergreen/deciduous forests. When viewed from the water, it's a sea of dense greenery that is very hilly with rocky cliffs rising up several hundred feet.

Lunch was on a sandy beach, as it was most of our paddling days. That said, sandy beaches are few and far between; most are rocky and often muddy at low tide. By the time we finished lunch and launched into Fisherman Bay, the winds had picked up even more. We were going against a 16-mph wind with gusts over 20. This created a challenge when getting used to using a rudder. I'd be turning us in the wrong direction and the winds wanted to take us into shore on the wrong side of the Bay. However, after a few "oops", we got the kayak heading up the Bay into the wind, and safely to the beach by our first Inn for the night. Though this trip took place in July, it was like springtime on the islands. The wildflowers were colorful and plentiful due to the cool, wet climate.



View of the Cascades. Photo: Kathy Ellwood

Harbor Seals, River Otters, Sea Stars, and Ferries

The next day after a hearty breakfast prepared by our guides, it was off to Orcas Island. While traveling along the shore of Lopez Island, our marine biologist identified the many invertebrates we saw along the way, such as the large orange and purple sea stars clinging to the rocks. The water is incredibly clear, and very cold. Continuing along the shore of Lopez we came upon harbor seals and river otters, the first of many encounters.

After a picnic lunch on Lopez, we headed across the channel to Orcas Island. Orcas is the largest island in the San Juan archipelago. Since the winds were more favorable, there was no shortage of boat traffic. It's one thing to encounter the numerous motorboats, but quite another to always have to look out for the ferries that traverse the main channels. We felt very small in our kayaks, especially since we were the only ones in kayaks!



Orcas Island. Photo: Kathy Ellwood

Once reaching Orcas, we went along the shoreline and enjoyed the array of sea life, including kelp, sea grasses, and worms clinging to the grasses. Upon our arrival at our take-out on Orcas, Maddie greeted us and offered some cold beer. This became a way to celebrate an enjoyable day of paddling. (Our luggage was taken by van on the ferries, which one of the guides would do.) Our evening was spent in Eastsound at a wonderful Inn, where our spacious condominium had a view of the Bay.

Change of Plans Due to the Wind, Again

The second morning we woke to high winds and white caps in the cove off Eastsound. As a result, our guides went to the other side of Orcas Island to check out the conditions there for our planned crossing to Sucia Island. They called a meeting for us all to be involved in the decision, since this would be our only chance to go to that island. Since conditions were calmer on that side of Orcas, it was unanimous: we were going. The next day the winds were predicted to be even higher which would make the long open water crossing too hazardous. After

launching our kayaks, we had to paddle up the channel a couple of miles to take advantage of the current. The Straits of George funnels water into the channel between the two islands and it's like a mixing bowl, with very choppy conditions. This made for a fun crossing as had nice swells and little boat traffic. While crossing the channels between the islands one can often see the stunning snow-covered mountains that are part of the Olympic Peninsula, all the way up to Mount Baker in the Cascade Range.

Sucia Island and Mud Flats

Sucia Island is a state park. Like many of the islands in this area, it's protected and there are no (human) inhabitants. It's a popular island for camping, as well as for kayaking day trippers. The shoreline of the island consists of interesting limestone formations and shell fossils can be found (collecting not permitted). The large bright orange and purple sea stars along the shore were the most numerous of the trip.



The daily routes. Google Earth

As our guides prepared lunch, the rest of us explored some of the park. At one point we had to hike a bit through the mud flat as the tide had gone out. Then, adding to our appreciation of the big tides, we had to drag our kayaks almost 40 feet through the mud to launch them! The crossing back to Orcas Island was easier as we were going with the tidal flow and the winds didn't pick up until we were close to shore.

On Orcas

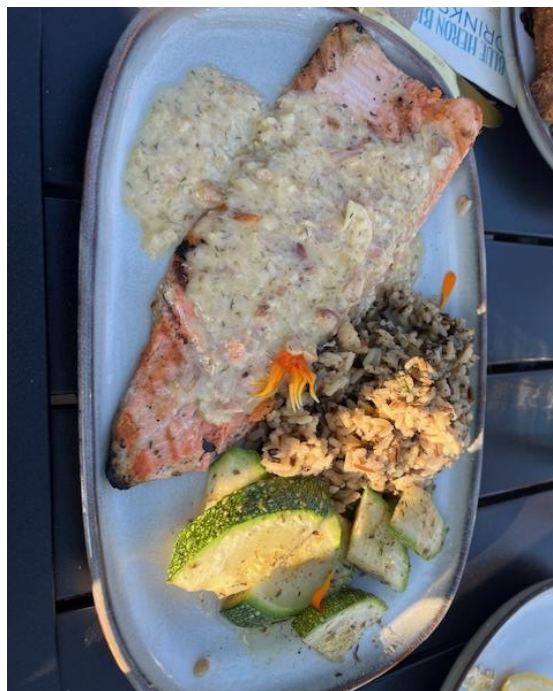
Our next two evenings were spent on Orcas Island at a small waterfront farm and inn which had beautiful gardens and an array of farm animals. Dinners were at very nice restaurants that offered locally caught fish, such as salmon and halibut. There are few restaurants on the islands, and in the

summer they can be crowded with tourists. Prices are higher since all food and beverage must be transported out to the islands by either boat or sea plane.

Our second day on Orcas was spent off the water. Winds were high and it became a day to explore the island instead. Some of us took a hike on Turtleback Mountain, which ascends over 1,500 feet. At the summit there are gorgeous vistas of the islands and the surrounding Salish Sea. Later we took a drive to the top of Mount Constitution, the highest point on the San Juan Islands. We were rewarded with breathtaking views. With clear skies we could easily see several of the islands – including Sucia Island, where we had kayaked the previous day - as well as the Northern Cascades and Mount Baker.

Islands Preserved

On our final day of the trip, we awoke to a beautiful calm morning and launched from the beach at the farm into Pebble Cove. We crossed a couple of channels to Yellow Island, which is a preserve owned by Nature Conservancy. There were several harbor seals with pups on some of the beaches around the island, so these areas were closed and we kept our distance.



Yum. Photo: Kathy Ellwood



Yellow Island. Photo: Kathy Ellwood

Turn Island (our aborted Day 1 destination) is a marine state park. Its proximity to a launch site on San Juan makes it a popular destination for campers and paddlers. Getting there involved for us several channel crossings and very choppy conditions. As we approached Turn, we had to deal with a small channel that gets rough as waters come in two different directions and form a funnel. The water appeared to swirl, like a mixing bowl. But it just provided more fun on the water.

We had our final meal together on Turn. Afterwards, some of the group took the short paddle to San Juan Island and the take out. However, Chris and I, along with our guide Nate, chose to go another three miles to Jackson Beach. We had no regrets as we paddled a narrow rocky area where we were surrounded by Harbor Seals with pups.

A Paddle to Remember

Our 36-mile paddle over four days allowed us to explore the beautiful, rugged coastline of the islands. Pristine waters, amazing views of snow-capped mountains, a plethora of sea life, and great food made it memorable. The challenges in crossing some of the channels added to the fun. I came to appreciate the planning of the trips based on tides. The area is vast, so at times it seemed we were the only ones on the water, creating a sense of peace in being virtually alone in nature.



Belize in 2025: Join Us!

Rick Wiebush

Get away this winter to a truly spectacular destination: Belize! This is the trip that we have done for the past two years. Last year we had 12 people and they all raved about it. You probably saw stories and photos on Facebook. It was fabulous.

Trip Highlights

There are two basic components to the trip. One is a five-day, four-night stay on Lighthouse Reef, an island that sits about 50 miles offshore from mainland Belize and is close to coral reefs and the famous diving/snorkeling location, "The Blue Hole".

This is about relaxation, snorkeling, kayaking, kayak sailing, snorkeling, relaxation, eating and staying in glamping tents caressed by ocean breezes. The second component is a three-day, four-night inland experience where we learn more about Belizean culture, take in the

famous San Ignacio street market, hike to spectacular waterfalls, explore giant caves and travel to Guatemala to experience the ancient Mayan city of Tikal. Also: incredible fish, howler monkeys, spectacular Frigate birds, friendly iguanas, red-footed Boobies.

Note that this trip is not hard core kayaking - not at all. It's much more "touristy", so it is appropriate for almost anyone. See the story in the May 2024 edition of Coastbusters about our 2024 trip.

Some details

Dates: March 3 - 12. The 3rd and 12th are travel days to/from Belize. Cost: \$2,995 + airfare + misc.

Trip leaders: Greg and Luci Hollingsworth

Info: contact Rick at rwiebush@gmail.com

Kiptopeke

Rick Wiebush



Flooded marsh. Photo: Rick Stewart

Decision

I was gnashing my teeth and rending my garments. I almost called it off. As of the Tuesday before the symposium, tropical storm-driven winds were predicted for 20 -25 kts – with gusts to 30 one of the days - for Sept 19 – 22, the weekend of the symposium. I was like: “oh shit, not again!”

In 2023, another tropical storm had caused the last-minute cancellation of the event. I mean last minute: we were set up in lodge 3 at the state park, registering people as they arrived. I had checked in the first five people when the ranger walked in and

said “shut it down, the Park is closing”. Some people had traveled six hours to get to Kiptopeke, and arrived right on time, only to be told to turn around and go home. I spent the next week writing 70 refund checks. Ouch!

I was in a bind. On one hand, if those predictions proved to be true and I didn’t cancel, I’d run the risk of having a repeat of 2023. Everyone shows up, but we can’t do anything on the water, so everyone trudges dejectedly back home. On the other hand, if I took the conservative route and cancelled – and

the high-wind predictions did *not* materialize – it would be a lost opportunity for the participants, the coaches and me. It also, by the way, would mean that I would have to eat about \$6,000 worth of state park lodge reservations.

Luckily, Ashley Brown and some of the other coaches pressured me to not cancel, arguing that “things always change; those predictions don’t hold”. I listened and took a chance. I’m glad I did, since the conditions moderated somewhat, at least to the extent that with some modifications, we were able to have a successful symposium. Thank you Ashley!

Disruption

“Conditions moderated somewhat” means that instead of the predicted 20 – 25 with gusts to 30, it was only 15 – 20 with slightly higher gusts. And by Sunday, they had dropped to less than 10 knots. But the winds were only part of the story. Associated with the wind were big seas on the Atlantic Ocean side of the Delmarva Peninsula. During the weekend coaches doing the open water classes reported dealing with 6 – 8 foot waves both in the wave train off Smith Island and on the south side of Fisherman’s Island. (Consequently, and understandably, no photos of these conditions!)

The conditions disrupted the use of the traditional venues and practices. For the more advanced classes, the coaches pretty much had to keep people on the fringes of the really big stuff. Note that these “fringes” were still big and, although people had a lot of fun, there were still some, shall we say, “incidents”. Thanks to the skill and judgment of the coaches, no one was hurt.

The high winds also had an impact on several of the intermediate skills classes which, instead of being held on the Chesapeake Bay side of the peninsula, had to be moved to highly protected areas, like Cape Charles harbor. In addition, a trip for intermediate paddlers scheduled to go out to one of the Barrier Islands had to be altered. We felt that the wind and bounce would just be too much for some

of them, so we switched that class to the Bay side. Those folks were happy with the decision.

Intro to Surf? - Nope

There was particular disruption for the two “Intro to Surf” classes that Laurie Collins and I ran. This class is usually conducted in an area off Smith Island where we can get 1 – 2 foot waves, perfect for an “Intro”. But there were no 1-2 foot waves to be found anywhere that weekend – the surf was way too big, and we were not going to take people into a situation in which they would be: 1) in over their heads (so to speak); 2) spending most of their time terrified; and 3) not learning anything. The problem was that there were few other areas in which we could even find conditions that might approximate rough water and surf. It was like conditions either were too big or, conversely, non-existent. While we found some little bumpy tide-racey areas one day, and teeny-tiny breaking waves another, it overall was a frustrating experience for us and the students.

"The entire weekend, I felt welcome and supported, and all of the coaches (again including you!) created an environment in which I felt safe to challenge myself and try new things without fear. I really couldn't have asked for anything better! So to all of you, my deepest thanks and appreciation. I will definitely be back next year!"



Wise Pt launch at mid-tide. Photo: Rick Stewart

Wise Point Woes

The disruption caused by the weather included the launch site parking lot and surrounding areas. All the ocean-based courses leave from Wise Point, a huge parking area that accommodates 20 – 25 cars with trailers and another 20 cars. It also has an area reserved for commercial fisherman. During the symposium, big, wind-driven tides covered almost the entire lot at high tide and played havoc with normal launching and parking procedures. For example, while we usually stage our boats next to the two concrete ramps, those ramps were totally under water and the staging areas were about 30 yards back from the normal launch site. More importantly, there were a couple of participants who thought they were safe parking far back from the water only to find water up to their doors when they returned. Two of the cars sustained damage to their electrical system and had to be towed.

I had a great time at Kiptopeke. It's been a goal for me for a few years.....All the instructors I interacted with were knowledgeable and generous, compassionate and just excellent. I don't have a roll yet, but they helped me practice in ways that move me closer to that goal. ... All of the instructors were excellent. The facilities and the state park were lovely.



Paddling along the top of a previously impassable marsh. Photo: Rick Stewart

Swamped Marshes

Finally, the marshes near Wise Point were totally inundated. There is a huge, half-mile long, north-south oriented marsh right across from the launch. It sits between the launch and the path to Smith Island, requiring paddlers to either go all the way to the south or north ends or, if the tide is high enough, to search for and negotiate a narrow “cut” in the middle of the marsh. For the symposium, there were no such worries. The marsh was eyeball deep in water and everyone just paddled straight across it! (See photo.)

Delightful

All the above notwithstanding – or maybe partially because of it – the symposium was an enormous hit with all the participants and all my initial concerns proved to be groundless. The 60 participants and 15 coaches all had a great time, people learned a lot, had fun, and absolutely demolished the Saturday night dinner of tacos and rice and beans from the local Mexican grocery. Looking forward to the 12th annual symposium September 19 – 21, 2025!



New style drying rack. Photo: RARA

Kiptopeke was AMAZING. I learned so much! Thank you again for all you did to put this on. Really, really well organized and professional. It's obvious to me that Cross Currents is THE place to go to be a serious (and playful) sea-kayaker.

Thank you Rick for the fantastic symposium. It was a 10 out of 10 for me! Great facilities, training, and participants just like you promised!

Beach House Blues

Ashley Brown

I really want a beach house.

A friend has a beach house on Folly. It is the second row from the beachfront.

Our family is really lucky to have great friends that include two other families. We have Christmas together, and we walk into each other's houses anytime. It is the village of co-parenting that formed this strong bond. We all go surf and play at the beach together. Peas in a pod.

Hurricane Irene was in 2011, my children were five, seven 13. Paul and Shannon had a five- and two-year old and Ken and Leigh had a six- and three-year old.

Hurricane Irene was a category 1 hurricane passing 140 miles offshore. We thought, let's go watch it pass by! The waves were predicted to be 12 feet, approximately 8 feet above normal height. There were sure to be the cloud fronts that came across the sky like a freight train, lightning, thunder. We were headed to the show.

We packed coolers, Capri sun, food, wine and beer. We planned to watch Hurricane Irene roll past from the porch of the house on the second row of the north end of Folly Beach, near the lighthouse.

We walked down to the beach and leaned into the wind while the sand blasted our legs and we struggled to stand up straight. We went back to the porch pretty quickly.

The view across the Atlantic was of cloud formations, blackened and layered with rain falling

in columns and lightning dropping into the ocean and lighting up the sky. The sky had dramatic long, dark, heavy clouds that made me cower a little.

The ocean was getting riled up, the waves were constant; where you usually see a trough between waves, they were stacked like a staircase and falling onto shore with a force and a splash back up to half the height of the initial wave stack. They seemed to be bouncing off a wall instead of bouncing off sand that has absorbed waves for millennia.

The house was oriented so there was one house between our porch and the ocean, another house on the beach to the right of that one. To the left was a wide-open space for five or six lots. It wasn't long before the wind and tide brought the waves past the front houses and their parking spots; all the way to our house, water swirling around the stilts that held up the porch.

The two houses in front started to suffer. First the AC units that were attached to the side of the house at the second floor crackled, popped, and shot out some sparks and man-made lightning. Under the house were walls that were built with space between the boards (for water to pass through) that started to come apart, and soon after, the cement floor of the garage started to break apart and fall into the ocean where there used to be a sand foundation (funny - a sand foundation).

We "heroes" ran out, rolled the neighbor's golf cart past our house and gathered bikes and surfboards



Hurricane Irene hitting the Carolinas. Photo courtesy of: NASA

from that house and the house to the right and filled our garage. We were pretty proud of ourselves.

Wave after wave hit the second floor of the front houses. The AC units on both houses soon tumbled off the sides of the buildings, broken wood and siding and shredded wires. They fell into the sea, rolled back and forth a couple of times and then disappeared. The cement floor split, broke away into smaller pieces and the Atlantic ate it, too.

Humans have dug posts into sand on the beach, built a four-story house above the posts, poured cement onto beach sand and moved expensive toys and equipment into a house that hovers feet in front of the ocean. It is not as if hurricanes and massive wave events are rare. As we humans know, but don't seem to care, the ocean is in charge when it wants to be; actually, the oceans are in charge all the time.

However!! I admit to beach house envy! God - I want a beach house! I don't have one because I

can't afford one, not because I'm too smart to purchase one! We can't really protect the fragile coastal barrier islands. We need the tourist dollars! Tourism is South Carolina's biggest industry! The islands used to be resilient, but now they are covered with VRBO's. Our apocalypse is founded upon this economic instinct.

The front beach houses are really on the beach. The spaces on either side of them aren't empty lots that are available to be built on; it is just the beach. The space to our left side has a small trailer on stilts and green briar and saw palmetto that is very dense. The water washed up onto the embankment with the dense growth and started to scrape it out to sea with a messy backhoe efficiency. This invited the ocean into the driveway and sandy parking area under our house. The sand and plant berm eroded and the water started to fill and soak in, fill and soak into the sand below the house with each wave that rolled in.



Photo: obxconnection.com

What If?

What if humans observed what was coming, left maritime forests intact and let barrier island's erosion and accretion happen naturally? Maritime forests grow on coastal barrier islands and provide not only a diverse habitat for the weird and wonderful animals that live near and in salt water, but they are a gigantic sponge that absorbs millions of gallons of water that is dumped during a hurricane. They are a soft spot for all those brutal winds to dissipate. A bird might have a chance to hunker down in a maritime forest during a hurricane. But we "paved paradise and put up a parking lot," then filled it with golf carts and surf boards.

The ocean will continue to rise while people charge extra for a house on the beach. The oceans are not going to be ignored. They are not going to behave. They are the boss.

We retreated to the now power-free house on Folly full of toddlers who, luckily, were oblivious.

But really, who was oblivious?

Why do I act as if nothing can happen to me? I mean, something is going to happen... to somebody... but, ME?!?! I don't think so. I have a white-girl blanket of privilege that means I can not only fly on commercial airlines with pot gummies, but I can get front row tickets to a hurricane with my little kiddos and be just fine!! Everything is JUST FINE!

There is a famous surf spot on Ashley Ave. on Folly Beach called "The Washout" It is called the washout because Hurricane Hugo washed out all the houses and the road at that site in 1989. I knew that when I made this plan to go watch the no-big-deal-Category 1 Hurricane Irene roll past on its way to the Outer Banks.

The foolish folly of the families on Folly shows the personally indulgent interpretation of events that allow otherwise intelligent adults to take a group of little kids to watch a hurricane.



Maritime forest on barrier island. Photo: lowcountrystyleandliving.com

Contributors

Ashley Brown - lives in Charleston, is an ACA L5 Instructor, L2 IT, and is Adjunct Professor of Coastal Kayaking at the College of Charleston.

Kathy Ellwood - lives in southern Maryland on the Chesapeake Bay. She frequently kayaks the Bay and has led canoe and kayak trips up Parker's Creek, the most pristine creek on the western shore. She has been paddling for over 20 years and has kayaked throughout the U.S., Alaska, Galapagos, and Canada.

Kathryn Lapolla - operates Savannah Coastal EcoTours. She is an ACA L4 instructor and a Georgia Master Naturalist.

Rick Wiebush – runs *Cross Currents Sea Kayaking* and is the editor of *Coastbusters*. Rick has been paddling for 25 years, He is an ACA L3 IT and British Canoeing 4* Sea Leader.

Dave Winkworth - is an Australian sea kayaking instructor and expeditioner who lives on the rugged southeast coast of New South Wales, Australia

Coastbusters welcomes submissions of trip reports, incident descriptions and analyses, skills and “how-to” articles, boat and gear reviews, book and video reviews, and sea kayaking-related photographs. We are interested in receiving submissions from all paddlers. It just so happens that some of this month’s contributors are instructors. That is not a requirement. Articles should be limited to about 1,000 – 1,500 words and submitted in Word. Photos should be submitted in .jpg format. Please send your submissions to Rick Wiebush at rwiebush@gmail.com.

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