



HORN ISLAND

MISSISSIPPI'S UNSPOILED AND UNIQUE ISLAND WILDERNESS

Written by Dr. Todd Davis / Photography by Rory Doyle



**I KNOW WHERE MY SENSE OF ADVENTURE COMES FROM.
I AM THE SON OF A WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST AND
AN AVID ADVENTURER.**

My father would roam the Idaho wilderness year round, occasionally taking my sister and me fishing for steelhead on the Clearwater River before school in the frigid spring, collecting timber in the late summers for firewood, and skiing mountains in the winter. My childhood was nurtured by nature in the Idaho wilderness, and I developed a keen sense of exploration and a yearning to seek out unique outdoor adventure opportunities at a young age.

In 2008, I made a career transition and took an opportunity at Delta State University in Cleveland, Mississippi, to create and direct an outdoor recreation education program for university students and instruct recreation administration courses in the College of Education and Human Sciences. The goal of this unique program at DSU is to foster a dynamic wellness campaign getting college-aged students involved in outdoor adventure, as well as educate participants about conservation, preservation, and outdoor education ethics. These for-college-credit elective courses are based on an E3 philosophy – providing exposure, education, and an experience enticing and intriguing students to participate in outdoor recreation on their own living a more balanced and healthy lifestyle.

One of the courses I offer is Intro to Sea Kayak. Sea kayaking is a great recreational activity that allows paddlers to load up a fourteen to seventeen foot kayak with minimum essentials and escape to interesting places that cannot be accessed by foot. Sea kayaking also requires human power, so it is a good choice for a healthy, low impact, leisure-time physical activity.

When I began researching places to sea kayak in order for students to receive an experiential education opportunity, I discovered six barrier islands off the coast of Mississippi – Petit Bois, Cat Island, Deer Island, Ship Island, Round Island, and Horn Island. At the time, there was little literature or guidance provided on where to launch from on the coast in order to paddle to the islands, but most of what I found pointed to Horn because of the reachable distance. After extensive map reading and researching all the islands, I found that Horn Island was only ten miles offshore (the closest) and provided a sandy, wilder-

ness setting accessible by a two or three hour kayak paddle – doable for my expertise and experience in a sea kayak. After all, I spent seven years as a Helicopter Rescue Swimmer in the US Coast Guard, and have wide-ranging outdoor, risk assessment, and safety training, so I decided to focus on Horn Island.

As part of the Gulf Islands National Seashore established in 1971 and America's largest national seashore, Horn is the main of four larger barrier islands, and one of two 1978 designated wilderness areas. Now managed by the National Park Service, Horn is described as an 'unspoiled and unique island wilderness setting' for outdoor recreationalists in Mississippi, like me.

The route looked simple – put in at Pascagoula, Mississippi, paddle to and around the desolate and small Round Island, a short forty-five minute paddle, then head straight south to the northeastern quadrant of the island, which from satellite maps appeared the best for protection from the weather and the closest stretch to reach first.

My first trip to Horn Island was in the fall of 2009 with nine outdoor recreation education students and my wife. Although I had researched the island and the best route, I did not have a chance to scout the island beforehand. However, I was not worried about the paddle. It was only a two plus-hour paddle and all of my students were well equipped with appropriate gear, an eager desire for adventure, and good weather conditions.

The paddle went according to plan and there were neither issues nor surprises. However, what I was not prepared for was the stunning and unique landscape Horn Island provided – like a wilderness nirvana with a diverse and abundant wildlife population. This floating hangnail in the Gulf of Mississippi may be a battered and resilient thirteen miles by three-quarters ribbon of sand, pine trees, and wetland sea grass-

Top: Approaching the north shore of Horn Island gives you a sense of the natural realities awaiting you.
Bottom: An alligator makes his way between the beach and a pond, leaving trailing marks in the sand with his tail.





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es. Nevertheless, Horn Island is also home and refuge for the Loggerhead Sea Turtle, American White Pelican and American Alligator, as well as numerous rare and endangered species, including smaller inhabitants such as Gulf Salt Marsh Snakes, Little Brown Bats, and Snowy Plovers.

The island made me feel like a modern day explorer. There were no people on the island other than our group that weekend, and this made us feel remote and free from society. On the island, we walked to the top of sand dunes and could see the south and north side in on panorama view. The south side of the island is amazingly beautiful, but barren with fine sand as far as the eye can see. The middle sections of the island houses numerous fresh water ponds, lagoons, and mini-lakes, with large pine trees and mounds of sea grass at high points, which are essentially mirco-ecosystems sustaining alligators, turtles, birds, snakes, and other small mammals. The north side has smaller beach lines and you can just see the mainland.

The island landscape is unique and beautiful, but it also has its adverse aspects. Being an island near a commercial section of Mississippi with large fishing vessels and many boaters, as well as a barrier island off a major coastline, there tends to be much debris and trash on the island and in the sea grass. Plastic water bottles, broken fishing and crab-pot buoys, and other assorted floating debris litter the natural setting, but not to the point where it's a disaster, just annoying.

My second paddle to Horn Island in 2011 was a spring escape for my wife and me. We packed our seventeen-foot sea kayaks with a week's worth of food, water, books, hammocks, and camping gear, and settled on a beachfront tent site on the northeast section of the island. After the first trip to Horn two years prior, I wanted to know more about the islands history.

Come to find out, Horn Islands' life is long and captivating, reading like a fiction novel full of twists, turns and oddities. Perhaps first discovered and explored by early Europeans, researchers suggest Juan de la Cosa, a colleague and pilot of Christopher Columbus,

may have drawn the first map of the western ocean in 1500 showing today's Gulf of Mexico with several islands near the coast. Although Amerigo Vespucci has been credited by many as the first European explorer to document the gulf coast of America in 1497, historians advise that Portugal's, Gasper Corte Viall, be cited as the first explorer to share with his homeland of continental existence and island areas off the coast, of now Mississippi, for ship landing. Perhaps the most interesting to me, however, is how the namesake of the island is credited to Frenchmen. In 1700 Sieur Bienville, recorded that while exploring the coast in wood bark canoes, one of his men lost a powder horn on the island. Powder horns were an important part of exploration as they housed gunpowder, and it was noted in Bienville's journals, thus notating the island as 'Horn'.

But even more, the recent history of the island for me was intriguing, specifically because I served in the US Coast Guard, which now oversees all lighthouses and light saving services. In 1874, the US Lighthouse Service built a small-unmanned lighthouse near the island in the water to assist sailors and ships, but it was deemed unstable and unsafe and was moved, then destroyed in a storm in 1893.

Opposite: Pine flats and weedy wetlands border the lagoons on all sides. These lagoons are secluded little worlds unto themselves filled with fish, birds and other animals hidden among the bulrushes and tall grass.

Then a second, more traditional lighthouse was built with keeper quarters on Horn Island in 1887.



Photograph by Todd Davis



Photograph by Todd Davis



Top Left: Approaching the island's north shore. **Bottom Right:** An osprey soars above the vegetation. **Top Right:** A snake slithers through the sand. **Bottom Right:** Base camp set up for the duration of the Davis' first visit. **Above:** The pine trees on the island respond to violent storms by bending and changing, sometimes even moving - pruned by the storms.

Charles Johnson, a Polish native, and his wife Catherine, and their eighteen-year-old daughter, were hired to keep the lighthouse lit. They enjoyed island life raising chickens, cattle, and a few domestic pets. On the evening of September 26, 1906, however, a terrible hurricane devastated the island. The next day, several mainland people noticed the light was out and they launched a search and rescue party for the Johnson family. Sadly, the search party found the body of Mr. Johnson, but never, after days of searching, did they find Catherine nor their daughter. Johnson has been referred to the "Hero of Horn," because it is believed he sacrificed himself and his family to ensure the Horn Island lighthouse stay lit, even in the face of tragedy.

In 1943, during World War II, the US Army acquired the island for the devel-

opment and testing of chemical and biological warfare. The Horn Island Chemical Warfare Service Quarantine Station opened in March and employed fifteen hundred people between the island facility and a station on the mainland at Camp Detrick. The mission of the station was to develop and test studies on insects as biological weapons. As with most military projects, the findings and studies were, and are, still classified. A short three years later, the government shut down and dismantled most of the facilities shortly before the end of the war stating the island did not provide enough space for adequate testing and was too close in proximity to a human population on the mainland.

Then there is Mississippi's, Walter Anderson (1903-1965), whose life story is as captivating and curious as Horn's. A painter and early naturalist from New

Orleans, his family settled in Ocean Springs in 1924 and fostered an artistic and creative mindset in their children. In 1928, the Anderson family opened Shearwater Pottery, which is still operating as a family owned business today, and Walter would work there until his death in 1965 as a designer. However, Anderson is known for his brilliant and beautiful paintings, not his pottery. Anderson's art used watercolors to highlight sea life and seascapes around the Mississippi Coast, with most of his work coming from Horn Island. Rowing or sailing in a crude oar boat across the rough Gulf of Mississippi, sometimes even at night, Anderson used Horn Island as an artistic escape for inspiration and solace, evident in his prophetic writings and distinctive art. The Horn Island Logs of Walter Anderson displays the island's natural and wild beauty

in numerous colorful block prints, and is in my opinion, Anderson's best work. Located in downtown Ocean Springs, Mississippi, the Walter Anderson Museum of Art (walterandersonmuseum.org) is a must visit for those who appreciate nature, cultural history, and art meshed together.

Forty years since being tagged an official wilderness area, Horn has seen its share of natural devastation. In 2005, however, Hurricane Katrina forever transformed the landscape taking with her two-hundred year old Slash Pines, much of the various sea grass species, and shifting lagoon locations, as well as washing away a large portion of land area. Just three short years later, Hurricanes Gustav and Ike ravaged the gulf islands significantly affecting the flora, fauna and geography. Yet, the island remains intact and still a destination

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ventured to for its unique landscape and bountiful birdlife.

Because the island is now part of the National Park Service, there are no longer human residents, which allows paddlers a rare opportunity to visit an uninhabited island. The island is a little over 13 miles long, but not even a mile at its widest point. Horn sits just ten miles off the Mississippi coastline in the Mississippi Gulf Coast and can be paddled to from several key spots. The best and easiest access is to launch from Pascagoula Point at Beach Park Fishing Pier on the Singing River near Round Island and paddle to the northeast quadrant of the island, which in good weather has taken me just over two hours. With Round Island just about three miles from the mainland, this route allows for a respite at Round and the ability to assess the next seven-mile paddle to Horn.

Once on Horn, the white sand is gorgeous and there are 100s of primitive camping spots on the south and north beaches. In the four times I've paddled to Horn, I have always set up my base camp at the same sandy spot near the largest of the freshwater ponds called Big Lagoon, on the northeastern part of the island (Lat: 30.2284/ Lon: -88.6243). Here there are

numerous trees and high sand dunes for wind protection. Wood for fires is never a problem with tons of dry driftwood scattering the island. The island is a wilderness setting, which means there is a strict pack it in, pack it out policy enforced by the National Park Service. Raccoons can be nosy and hungry, so be sure to keep food in a locked case like a bear box, and be sure to bring your



Photograph by Todd Davis



own drinking and cooking water – there is no water on the island suitable for either.

The island does provide, however, some of the most majestic scenery and sounds I've ever witnessed. At sundown, the birdlife calls and songs provide an incredible natural concert. There is no light pollution, so on a clear night I have been able to see the Milky Way and millions of stars. The sunsets are out of this world, as are the sunrises, and you can see both from the same camp spot- a rarity.

On one of my trips, I counted twenty-two different species of birds, and I was not really even trying. From Bald Eagles, Osprey, Pelicans, Cranes, Red-wing Blackbirds and Piping Plovers, to Grebes, Egrets, Herons, Sandpipers and Mallards and many more, I was astounded by bountiful birding opportunity the island provides.

Horn Island may not look like a pristine and unique destination on the map, and the island's history, although fascinating, may deter visitors. Mother Nature has tried to wash away and destroy the island, nevertheless, Horn remains, like a tattered American flag whipping in the wind, spirited and strong, but weathered. For me, Horn Island is a destination full of intrigue, wilderness, wildlife, changing landscapes,

sandy beaches, and an off-the-beaten-path location which equates to the perfect kayak adventure. nps.gov/guis/planyourvisit/horn-island.htm

This page top: Todd Davis making his way to Horn Island in his kayak.

This page bottom: The beach with its dunes, is littered with debris, both natural and man-made.

Opposite: A full moon hangs in the sky over the hurricane ravaged landscape of the island.

