

2009 Sea Kayak Georgia Symposium/ BCU Week Trip Report

An ISK contingent of nine headed down to the Sea Kayak Georgia Symposium and BCU Week at the end of October. Sea Kayak Georgia is a kayaking store and school on Tybee Island, which is east of Savannah and south of Hilton Head. Once a year, they hold a 5 day symposium that includes many BCU-related classes (BCU is the British Canoe Union). Three ISK folks attended last year, and their glowing reports attracted six more club members this year.

We rented two cottages on the island, the Marsh Mermaid and the Crabby Pirate. Most of the group arrived in time to take a warm up paddle on Tuesday, Classes started on Wednesday, and we were all able to pick and choose from the wide variety of offerings, ranging from 3 and 4 Star training and assessments to Safety and Rescue Training to Rough Water Discovery to several courses with a traditional paddling focus. We would meet our instructors at 10:00 and head out, returning at 4:00 in the afternoon.

The coaches were among the best in the world, and included Jeff Allen, Nigel Dennis, Russell Farrow, Hadas Feldman, Nigel Foster, Phil Hadley, Marsha Henson, Ronnie Kemp, Jen Kleck, Ben Lawry, Steve Maynard, Danny Mongno, Cheri Perry, Jean Totz, Fiona Whitehead, and Turner Wilson.

In addition to the great coaching, for many of us it was our first chance to experience ocean swells and tides. One of our destinations was "The Triangle," a shoal/sandbar near the launch site. At low tide, you could walk on it. At high tide, the swells crossed right over it. In between, it became interesting. The incoming swells wrapped around and broke across the sandbar, rolling over the shoal from different directions. It became a confused mass of moving water and "haystacks" (where two waves combined) and troughs. Sometimes two waves would approach from opposite sides and break on top of your head; sometimes you would get past one and another would immediately come from another side. Definitely not Lake Calhoun.

The two households got together for great dinners the first and last night, and we attended one of the dinners offered by the symposium on another night. The visiting coaches offered slide shows/talks about paddling topics each night for those who could stay up until 8:00.

The weather was wonderful and the venue was just about perfect, allowing a variety of places and conditions to paddle. The instructors were excellent. The biggest challenge was that it was truly like drinking from the proverbial fire hose. Lots to learn, but there's nothing wrong with that.

Peggy's Perspective

My first two days of classes were 3 Star Training with Steve Maynard as the instructor, six students, and an assistant instructor. The very first thing we did was to head out into the Triangle and paddle through it twice. We all stayed upright, and then we headed off for other adventures. Over the course of the next two days, we played beach tag (see how close in to shore you can ride the waves, then back out and do it again) and school of fish (whilst paddling forward, travel as a school of fish: keep changing position every 30 seconds). We worked on forward strokes (keep the top hand moving in a horizontal plane; get the blade planted before you unwind; keep the stroke short). We did some more surfing and this time I capsized (first time in the surf). I thought about rolling for all of 2 seconds, but I was on my off side, and it felt too shallow to get to the other side, so I bailed. Winter project: get my offside roll!

We played a rescue game – two groups of 3, each with one victim, one towing, and one supporting the victim. Trade places so everyone tows 2 times, and see which group goes farthest/fastest taking 50 strokes each time. We did T-rescues while someone was towing the

rescuer (a great way to practice against a current and make sure you hold on to your boat and paddle). Steve taught us a hanging draw started with a forward stroke that gracefully turned to a draw. We worked on bow and stern rudders in a more vertical orientation and using paddle rotation instead of pushing/pulling (unfortunately, I never got the stern rudder working, and managed to "break" my old stern rudder technique, so that didn't go well on the assessment.)

Friday was Rough Water Discovery with Nigel Foster. We did some warm up surfing on a calmer area, then headed out to the Zipper and Nigel offered each of us the option of going in and trying it. Similar to the Triangle, the Zipper is a long, narrow shoal perpendicular to the swells. There were times when a paddler would completely disappear in a pile of white water. Ignorance being bliss, I went in a couple times. Fortunately, my balance made up for my still developing bracing skills, and I stayed upright.

From there we spent more time working on surfing. I've got a long ways to go, but every bit of practice helps. Over the course of the day I capsized 4 times and managed to roll up twice, which I counted as a minor triumph. These were the first two times I'd rolled up after capsizing accidentally.

At the end of the day, Nigel's parting words were to encourage us to be as efficient as possible; we waste a lot of strength and energy in our inexperience.

Saturday was Intermediate Surfing with Danny Mongno. We paddled out beyond the break and ended up riding the swells and waiting for half an hour with the assistant instructor while Danny sorted out someone in a wooden Betsy Bay who had gone over on the way out and had a hatch cover pop off. The swells were pretty big, and to be honest, I was a bit spooked at looking at half a mile of breaking waves coming in to shore.

There were a few challenges in finding the right place to practice (bigger swells than expected, a surf competition going on, lots of swimmers and kite surfers, and a variety of skill levels), so we ended up working fairly close to shore. The goal was to paddle out a hundred yards or so, do a few 360s out in the breaking waves, then ride the waves in. I usually ended up capsizing before I got all the way in, but had fun. I called it a day about 3:00 and watched the others from the beach until the end of the class, trying to save some energy for the next day.

Sunday was my 3 Star assessment. It was pretty clear as the day progressed that I wasn't yet a 3 Star paddler. Some of the gaps were in basic skills; some were in ocean paddling. But it was a good learning experience.

On our way out of town, we stopped by the Sea Kayak Georgia store and ran into a man who had just gotten his 3 Star. He was 70 years old, and had tried once before. He had also done some 4 Star training. This week he had done his 3 Star assessment on Saturday with Jeff Allen. Jeff had his group out in conditions for their entire assessment, including for skills that you normally aren't required to do in conditions. He also had them do a re-enter and roll, then paddle in to shore in rough water (performing several skills while their boats were full of water), then paddle back out backwards, boats still full of water. It's clear that there are variations in how the assessments actually proceed. We did a rough count while talking, and figured that the passing rate for 3 Star was 20 to 30 percent.

But ... it was a great week. I can't even say I'm disappointed about not getting the 3 Star. I can see the progress I've made since I got my boat last fall. One more year and I'll be ready. In the meantime, it's all fun.

Jeff's Perspective

My sentiments regarding the week are very similar to Peggy's: there were multiple opportunities to grow your skills tremendously in a short 5 days, while still having the most fun kayaking you've

ever had. This was Michelle's, Deb's and my second visit to this event, and I was excited to learn and grow as much as had last year.

Those of us who arrived a day early had a chance to "feel" the water during our own informal paddle. For some, it was the first time in the ocean, but we kept to a small region, to maintain a comfort level.

Last year, Michelle and I earned our BCU 3 Star Award, and I was interested in continuing through the curriculum. This curriculum can be rigid and demanding at times, but I feel it's important to take a structured path, to eliminate the missing information that may be needed one day, therefore I was interested in the 4 Star courses, while Michelle was there to "have fun", and take a variety of skill building classes.

Day One for me (and Michelle) was a little bit more mundane than the rest, spent entirely in classroom session, taking a Navigation course required for a Four Star Award. Not a total loss by any means, as I enjoy the science/art of navigation, and picked up quite a bit of knowledge. It was also the beginning of a weeklong training/assessment towards a 4 Star Award taught by two of most renowned kayakers/kayak educators in the world: Nigel Dennis and Fiona Whitehead.

Day 2 and 3 were for 4 Star training. Components were primarily geared towards leadership, which is the focus of this award. Rescues, towing, rocky landings, navigation, group management, etc, were all to be expected to be tested in conditions of currents (2 knots), wind (11-16 knots) and waves (1 meter), and we easily found all this... and more.

There was a time when a container ship was going up the Savannah River, and the tide was coming out (ebbing). The wake from the ship collided with the current, producing a 10 foot wave, which all the candidates were able to surf. The subsequent set of 6 footers gave a little more trouble, causing most to capsize, and 3 others to wet exit; but rescues in those conditions were met with competence and professionalism.

The "rocky landing" skill component was very interesting: using a very small lighthouse that was out in the middle of the water, we had to exit our boats, one at a time, and swim along a line, leaving our boats tethered a safe distance off. Reverse the process to leave. No longer am I telling folks that they don't have to be a swimmer to kayak. Sounds scary, but my only regret is that I left my camera in my boat.

Day 4 and 5 were spent entirely assessing the 6 candidates, and thanks to the volunteer "students" (also known as 'teabags' for their repeated dunking), one of which was Michelle, there was somebody to lead, rescue, etc. A permitted free form paddling period gave the assessors time to see what the candidates could do in the surf conditions, and we had fun simply playing: surfing, rolling, touch-and-go, side surfing (bongo surfing). We also used each other to demonstrate skills (all done in conditions) such as rescues, tows, problem solving, navigation.

Alas, I didn't pass the assessment, but had very positive comments from my instructors. Besides that, it didn't matter; I learned a lot and had a blast! There's always another time.

Logistics were simple, having arranged to stay at a "cottage", our costs were less per person than camping would have been. Having all the amenities, made life easy: places to hang wet gear, a washing machine, hot showers, home cooked meals (another \$ saver), comfy beds, and even a hot tub, made the perfect endings to the perfect days. The learning didn't end at the beach; our housemates did thorough, relaxing and enjoyable sharing during sit down dinners.

I feel like my skill and confidence has increased again this year and I would like to attend again next year. The warm water allowed me to take greater risks and push my personal limits, and the level of instruction is the best in the world. I encourage all those who are interested in improving their skills to attend this symposium, or any symposium for that matter.

Doug's Perspective

For me, this was an opportunity to extend the warm weather kayaking season, acquire some paddling skills, and see the ocean from a kayak for the first time. I've only been paddling for a year and without any formal instruction, so it was a chance to learn from some world class instructors. It was also great getting to do this with with 8 other ISKers. There were about 40 total participants this year, so ISK made up almost a quarter of the participants.

The first classes I took were Combination and Coordination, and Living on the Edge both with Hadas Feleman. I learned that there is a lot more that you can do with a paddle and a boat than just forward strokes and sweep strokes. For instance you can link a sweep stroke on the outside edge to a stern rudder on the other side with a sweep to a bow rudder and turn the boat around in a narrow space. Or that you can do a couple reverse strokes followed by a slow forward sweep stroke with a huge outside lean and brace on the paddle to nearly pivot the boat while putting the side of your head in the water. It's a Jim Rockford turn in a kayak. Fun Stuff!

Next two days were Rough Water Discovery and Fun with Foster, both taught by Nigel Foster. Nigel is a pretty quiet instructor. He often speaks by gesturing with his hands. When he wants to shout he just gestures more vigorously. For Rough Water Discovery we went back to The Triangle and observed the wave action and some people paddled through it with Nigel's coaching while others just watched from the edge. We then spent the rest of the day surfing increasingly larger waves. I'd definitely had more than my fill of breaking waves by lunch time and spent more time watching than surfing. For Fun with Foster, Nigel spent the day showing us "things the BCU doesn't want you to know". Most of it was things you wouldn't use directly, but encouraged us to get more of a sense of paddle blade awareness and think more freely about what you can do with a paddle.

The last day was Finesse Paddling with Hadas and Russell Farrow. The focus was on using paddle strokes, boat edging, and wind and sea conditions as efficiently as possible. For instance, it's much easier when turning into the wind or waves to use a bow rudder to anchor the front of the boat and let the wave or wind push the stern around than it is to try to sweep stroke the boat into the wind. Visa versa for turning down wind with a stern rudder.

All in all it was a lot of fun, six straight days of paddling in conditions that constantly changed with the tides and wind. I learned a whole lot and met lots of great people. Too bad we're approaching the end of the outdoor paddling season so I won't get to put it all into practice for a while. But there's always the pool for the next few months, and before you know it we'll be back on the Mississippi, dodging icebergs and talking about our next trip to down to Georgia where there's warm weather, salt water, sand, and things that can eat you. And we'll want to do it all again.

Dan's Perspective

For me the fun and learning started before the classes even began. On the trip down, Doug, Mike, and I spent a pleasant trip down to Georgia. Apart from the beautiful scenery (except Illinois) we spent some of our time discussing navigation, which is an essential component of the 3-star training. We particularly touched on tides and currents and reading the NOAA charts. Along with this and the training for the rest of the week, I learned more about the effects of tides and currents and putting the information to practical use than I ever thought I would.

Monday night was spent with the rest of my housemates, the venerable Crabbies named after our cottage, the Crabby Pirate. We had an eclectic mix of personalities that in the end led to an interesting and well meshed group. Monday evening was spent pouring over charts in the area

and watching a video that Stace Larson brought called "The ABCs of the Surf Zone. Little did we know at the time, we would be putting what we learned on this video to good use.

The next day turned out to be one of the more fun days of the week. All of the attending ISK members that were there took a shake-down cruise in Tybee Inlet. Jeff and Michelle took us across the inlet where we could play around in small waves. It didn't take long for the group to look for more challenging conditions up the beach further. I don't know how it happened but Jeff and Michelle headed to a shoal in the inlet to take a look at the rough water breaking on the ocean side. Next thing you know, Jeff was on the other side, followed by Michelle and the rest of us. The water on the other side was challenging (at least for me) to say the least with waves coming from two different directions. We spent quite a bit of time surfing and playing in the waves and learning how to deal with the rough water. Michelle and I got flipped but both of us managed to roll back up. All in all, I am glad we went into this area of rough water because it really boosted my/our confidence and helped set the tone for the rest of the week. If we hadn't done this, I think the week may have gone very differently. The main lesson that I learned is that if one thinks the training one puts in on flat water doesn't mean anything in terms of handling rough water they are sadly mistaken. Even though my rough water experience has been limited, all the edging and bracing skills I learned on flat water was indispensable.

As far as the 3-star training is concerned, Peggy has pretty much covered everything. My experience was similar and I learned quite bit from the two days of training.

Next day I was in the Rough water discovery class with Nigel Foster. If anyone has a chance to paddle with Mr. Foster you should jump at the chance. He is one of the most positive people I have ever met. This turned out to be the next most fun day of the week. We spent some time bopping around in some haystacks that were forming on the shoal known as the Zipper. We were given some excellent tips on controlling your boat in rough water and especially in the surf zone. This included using low braces in different positions to get your boat to surf sideways on a wave, turn and control the direction that your boat moves on a wave. He showed us boat control on the wave face using just edging techniques to carve curves in the wave. He even showed us his new take on a Greenland forward stroke. We spent a large part of the day surfing.

I was supposed to take intermediate surfing the next day but I had been doing quite a bit of surfing already, so to rest up, relax and use the time to polish up for the 3-star assessment the next day I moved to the Exploration class. It turns out that I was the only one signed up so I went out with Russell (didn't get his last name) and a local guy with SKG named Dan Genrich. I told them what I wanted from the class and we pretty much used the time to explore the salt marsh and hammocks, practicing things I needed to polish up on for the assessment. Actually we ended up surfing for a little bit also. My last wave turned out to be huge, steep, and fast. At least that was what the instructor told me. I knew it was a fast moving wave because I was catching up to a fairly large wave ahead of me. When I hit the wave in front, my bow buried in the wave and I nearly pitch-poled. Subsequently, the wave broke and I was buried, and flipped. This was probably the most fun wave of the week.

I won't say much about the assessment other than I barely missed getting it. Ronnie Kemp, the assessor was very tough but very fair and managed to make the assessment a fun and positive experience. He was able to list out the things that needed work. So I will spend the next 6 months or so polishing up on my weaknesses and will hopefully reassess in Chicago next summer.

Socially, the time spent with my fellow Crabbies turned out well. The meals the ISKers spent together were fun. We had met a guy named Tim from Rhode Island on the beach when we took our shake-up cruise. He was training with Jeff and by the end of the week he had been invited to the last night's hamburger feed. The Island Extravaganza was the perfect opportunity to meet other people at the symposium.

The whole trip was a great experience, even the drive to and from the symposium. I really got to like surfing and I will spend my remaining paddling days scheming, plotting, and figuring out ways to get back to the ocean.