

Paddle On!

There are few things more rewarding than being instantly immersed into a whole new world. The first time I rolled over a rock and saw ants scurrying to protect their larvae, the first time I peered through a Dobsonian telescope into the deep night sky, and the first time I paddled on the Great Salt Lake were such experiences.

I love to paddle. In all of my water wandering, over 10,000 miles, I managed to overlook a paddling paradise right in my own backyard. One early spring morning my son and I decided to test the kayaks we had built that winter. We drove out to Antelope Island, one of the few public access points on the Great Salt Lake, and launched our kayaks from the beach. There were two obvious directions to paddle, Buffalo Point to the west and Egg Island to the northeast. Egg Island appeared enchanting, so we dipped our paddles into water 3 to 4 times saltier than the ocean and headed north. The water is so salty that you really do float in it. The water was clear and the recently hatched brine shrimp drifted by in clouds of several hundred. Thirty years ago I spent my life savings to get a dozen comical little Sea Monkeys and a pint of salt water, and now I could swim with thousands of them for free.

After paddling two hundred yards we passed a group from Europe wading knee deep in the water, the island's shoals drop off very gradually. A few minutes later we were in deep water and I was starting to realize how unique the lake was for paddling. We were engulfed in a panoramic world, vast, tranquil, and a little exotic. A crisp marine scent drifted in the breeze and sea gulls flew overhead. This was a unique world removed from the red rock deserts, alpine mountains, or downtown Salt Lake shopping district that traditionally defines Utah.

Egg Island, which from the beach appeared like a barren pile of rubble, was becoming animated. Birds that were not noticeable from the beach swarmed the air as others jostled on the island. Experiencing a nesting island in the middle of a salt sea in the desert is like laying in the shade of palm trees at a ski resort. My senses had to quickly reprogram my mind and ensure me that it was all real. The California gulls made more noise than a locomotive as they sparred for prime nest sites. Great blue herons stood like calm but commanding sentinels on the higher rocks. After watching for a few minutes we spotted sandpipers scurrying near the water's edge and double crested cormorants just added to the cornucopia of bird life. My senses kicked in again reminding me that I was only 20 minutes away from the almost 2 million people that live on the Wasatch front, which is a great thing to forget. I was immersed, happily lost, and captivated in this new world. All of my burdens drifted away as we sat in our kayaks a few hundred yards from the island watching the commotion. Egg Island is a protected island; it belongs to the birds and should only be observed from a distance. I have always wondered what makes the difference between a good nest spot and a prime one. As we made a broad loop around the downwind side of the island my nose gave me a clue to one of the critical aspects of nesting real estate. I wonder if Darwin measured the nostril size of the downwind finches.

Since that first trip I have enjoyed many beautiful sunsets, misty mornings, and never ending surprises paddling the lake. What I find most appealing is the quiet solitude, but the lake is much more than a big desert of emptiness. Each trip unfolds new mysteries not experienced on other waters. Bubbling air vents, fresh water layered a few inches deep on top of salt water, or the rusted remnant of a past explorer. The west side of Antelope Island is rugged and remote offering a spectacular backdrop to the sea. Even the sand is different. Most sand is angular coarse pieces of broken rock; the island's oolitic sand is round and smooth, like the difference between sand paper and pearls.

It is actually the result of a growing rock. Starting with the fecal pellet of a brine shrimp or another small piece of organic matter, calcium carbonate precipitates out of the water forming concentric layers of rock around the pellet. The result is an oval oolite that feels heavenly on bare feet and toes.

But of all the wonders of the lake nothing compares to the avian life. The lake is host to six million birds that use it as a stopover on annual migrations. It is one of only seventeen sites that is designated Hemispheric Importance in the Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve Network. Annual visitors to the lake include about 65,000 black-necked stilts and 2,500 American avocets. Over 10,000 white pelicans nest on the islands of the lake. In the heat of summer over 500,000 Wilson's phalaropes will congregate on the lake. They all come to feast on the brine shrimp and brine flies that thrive in this highly saline water.

Great Salt Lake Adventures offers Sea Kayak tours and rentals on the island. However, kayaking is but one of the ways to enjoy the island. There are winding and hilly paved roads for cycling, driving, and wildlife viewing. There are backcountry trails for hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding. Bison, pronghorn antelope, mule deer, and coyotes are common on the island. Long billed curlews, peregrine falcon, and burrowing owls are a few of the 250 species of birds that call the island home. The many trails on the island allow you to experience every thing from 6,596-foot Frary Peak to the shorelines of ancient Lake Bonneville. Utah State Park maintains a wonderful Visitor Center and the historic Fielding Garr Ranch. Buffalo Point has a bistro, souvenir shop, and wildlife tours in an amphibious duck vehicle. To experience the cowboy history of the island first-hand, climb on a horse and ride with one of their wranglers. Or, you may want to just enjoy the beach and take in a sunset like no other. Great Salt Lake Adventures www.greatsaltlakekayak.com