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Take It Slow

A paddle down the Pemaquid River provides the perfect way to slip into a Maine summer mindset.

BY JOSHUA F. MOORE, PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA GRAY

There's a sign on Route 130 as you enter the village of Bristol Mills that says simply, "Thank you for slowing down." Drivers for the most part heed the warning, but it's when you wander down to the clear waters of the Pemaquid River that you realize the sign also applies to paddlers. More than almost any other waterway in Maine, this seventeen-mile network of ponds and rivers meandering through the heart of the midcoast has a way of putting the brakes on even the most hectic summer pace. Whether paddlers choose to head north through lily pads and marsh grasses up to Biscay and Pemaquid ponds or opt to paddle past Colonial and Shingle-style homes where the freshwater mixes with salt in Pemaquid Harbor, kayakers and canoers say this diverse waterway offers a singular experience for both novice and expert paddlers.

"You almost don't know you're on a river when you're on it -- you think of it more as segments, not a continuous river," explains Andrea Williams, who has been paddling the Pemaquid for years from her vacation home in New Harbor. "It's a fabulous way to get introduced to places close to home that you didn't even know existed." Williams, who spends most of the year in Colorado, started kayaking in Maine after joining the Pemaquid Watershed Association, a local conservation group.

One of the group's members is John Will, a local kayaker who formed the excursion group Pemaquid Paddlers and began leading trips on the river shortly after moving to Bristol in 2001. "I thought jeez, I've got waterfront property and I'm paying the high taxes on it, so I might as well use it," remarks Will, standing in his front yard at the mouth of the Pemaquid River. From here, kayakers will venture past the Pemaquid Fishermen's Co-op, alongside multi-million-dollar mansions, and even head across the river to Fort William Henry at the mouth of Pemaquid Harbor.

For some, being with the Pemaquid Paddlers provides a bit of security when voyaging onto saltwater. "In the harbor you're in the water with some pretty big boats -- we were out with some lobstermen last summer -- and it's not really a good idea to paddle that alone, but with a group it's great," says Joan Plummer, who drives to Bristol from her home in Pittston several times a year for Pemaquid Paddlers trips.

A more popular and less daring excursion sets out from the public boat launch in Bristol Mills and winds north for 2.5 miles up the Pemaquid River before squeezing under a low bridge to gain access to Biscay Pond. In this gentle section, where an afternoon breeze might provide more resistance than the half-knot current, paddlers are likely to see great blue herons, turtles sunning themselves, and scores of dragonflies. A few stone overpasses (one, a keystone bridge dating to before the War of 1812, is on the National Register) serve as the only reminders that civilization hasn't disappeared altogether. Duck houses protrude from the tall marsh grasses, tiny islands provide spots for a rest or an outdoor meal, and the most excitement you'll stumble upon will probably be the splashing of a startled muskrat or, if you're lucky, the ravenous diving of a kingfisher.

That's precisely the activity level that local boaters such as Russ Guibord, who has run the Cane & Canvas canoe rental and repair shop in Bristol Mills for the past twenty years, aim to maintain. "This is the quiet part of the coast," says Guibord. "We kind of keep an eye on how many people are on the river, and once we've got eight or nine boats out, we stop. We do not want this to turn into a Saco River." Guibord says he usually turns a handful of people away on busy summer days, but maintains he'd prefer the river remain more pristine than profitable. "I've had people ask me to put in more canoes and kayaks, but I don't

want any more," he remarks. "We want people to enjoy it without the crowds."

He says he learned two summers ago the impact that having too many people on the river can have. The resident great blue herons, which are easily spooked and will often fly a short distance to escape from people, suddenly disappeared after a particularly busy spell on the river. "There were enough people that they were just tiring them out," Guibord says. "That's when we started controlling the numbers of people on the river." Within weeks, the birds returned.

For those who desire an even more remote experience, a portion of the river is accessible through the Pemaquid Watershed Association's Crooked Farm just north of Route 130 in Pemaquid, but this put-in requires boaters to carry their vessels several hundred yards -- a trip Will remarks "tends to get a lot steeper on the way back." The portion of the Pemaquid River between Bristol Mills and Pemaquid Falls features some gorgeous scenery but can be hazardous when the water level drops, usually by June. Finally, even 4.5-mile-long Biscay Pond provides yet another experience for paddlers, with early morning tranquility often giving way to the speedboats that set out by afternoon from the camps lining the pond's eastern shore. Those feeling particularly energetic might head all the way up Pemaquid Pond to Nobleboro -- a four- or five-hour paddle from Bristol Mills. All these options, paddlers say, is what makes the Pemaquid such an interesting river to explore.

"When you go up the Pemaquid River there are so many ways you can go and so many different things to see," says Mary Ann Morse, who for the past three years has joined the Paddlers' weekly excursion from her home in Boothbay Harbor. "Every Tuesday I know we're going to go on a trip and there's no competition or regimentation, just great camaraderie."

Indeed, the kindness of the people paddling the Pemaquid is part of what makes it such a great experience for so many people each summer. In part because its trips are held on Tuesday mornings, most of the dozen or so people who join the Paddlers each week are retirees. Some are experienced kayakers, though Will says he's had "people who bought a kayak on Saturday, and on Tuesday they're on a trip with us." Most, like Will himself, took up kayaking as a way to explore Maine while also meeting people. Others saw paddling as a way to get to know their adopted state. "We thought, 'Gee, we're in Maine, we're not sailors, but we ought to get some water experience,' " says Andrea Williams, who uses a two-person kayak (she shares hers with her husband, Charles). Even locals, though, say paddling the Pemaquid River has helped teach them about Maine.

"I grew up in this area, but I've gotten to explore more places through kayaking than I ever have before," explains Mary Ann Morse. "I never even knew that Pemaquid Pond and Biscay Pond and the Pemaquid River were connected. How dumb is that, for someone who's lived in this area her whole life?"

IF YOU GO

Cane & Canvas, 1164 Bristol Road in Bristol Mills, 207-563-1280, has six canoes and a dozen kayaks for rent on freshwater only. Rates are \$25-30 for a half-day, and reservations are strongly recommended. Open Memorial Day-Columbus Day, but call for hours.

Maine Kayak, 113 Huddle Road in New Harbor, 866-624-6352, offers kayaks for use in fresh or saltwater. Rates are \$15 per hour, \$35 for a half-day.

Pemaquid Paddlers offers free trips every Tuesday morning from May 8 until October 30. Participants must supply their own kayaks and gear, and children under eighteen must be accompanied by an adult. Call John Will, 207-677-6380, for a schedule.

Pemaquid Watershed Association works to protect the natural and cultural resources of the Pemaquid peninsula and offers a

variety of camps and educational opportunities. Call 207-563-2196 or visit www.pemaquidwatershed.org for more information.