

A daytrip on St. Johns River, Florida

The St. Johns River

by Peb Elliott, Florida

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The St. Johns river starts in the marshes just a short distance south of my hometown of Melbourne, Florida. The river then slowly winds its way about 310 miles north to Jacksonville where it flows into the Atlantic ocean. Though the river is wide and deep enough to support heavy commerce and a U.S. Navy base in Jacksonville, at the headwaters it is mostly marshland and a narrow, meandering channel of flowing water connecting many lakes.

I have a small boat that I take out on the river, and, since it is beautiful, untouched nature at its best, I also take out my camera.

Recently I bought a small Canon Powershot point-and-shoot camera and have been testing it out on the local wildlife. As soon as a boat goes by the animals and birds take off, so I have to be really quick to get a shot! Since I am driving my boat with one hand and only have one hand left for operating the camera, a point-and-shoot is just the thing for snapping quick photos of creatures who don't want to pose.

It is the final days of winter here, and while the trees are already budding out in fresh, green leaves, there are few flowers and a smaller number of bird species to see. Some birds, like the Great Blue Heron, stay year round and nest here. Other birds will migrate through in the spring, and it is like being in an aviary to see them flying everywhere and try and identify all the types.

The Anhinga is another full time resident. They have a long pointy beak that they use to catch fish - they will spear a fish through the body, then toss it up in the air and swallow it face-first as it comes back down. The Anhinga, who catches his dinner underwater, is also called a Snake-bird because it will pop its head and long neck above the surface of the water to take a breath. At a quick glance they can look like a snake on the water. Snakes are a greater danger than alligators out here, so it's good to keep an eye out for them! Since the Anhinga is a diving bird they have very oily skin to protect them underwater. To dry out the excess oils you will often see them airing their wings like this one is doing.

Since the marsh is so shallow most motor boats can't go much further south, hunters and weekend enthusiasts run airboats. Airboats are lots of fun and can take you places you just can't get to otherwise, but they are built to run on mere inches of water. When you run them in deep water it is quite easy to sink them. It was a cold day for a swim, but this guy had two other airboats with him and they were able to pull his boat out and get back to camp.

The day was warm enough for a few alligators to be out sunning themselves. My boat is only 13 1/2 foot long and I saw several 'gators that day that looked to be 11 or 12 foot. The 'gator in the photo was only 5-6 foot - the big 'gators jump into the water too quickly for me to get good photos of them. You don't get to be a big 'gator by being slow!

The water is too low right now to be able to get back to the deep cypress (unless you have an airboat), but there is a stand of Cypress trees right along the river where I like to pull up and take a lunch break.

A red-shouldered hawk liked this lunch spot, too. This was one of a pair I saw together, so their nest must be close by.

I never remembered seeing this breed of bird before this year, but now I see them all over the place. I had to look it up - it is a Yellow Crowned Heron. It looks much like the Great Blue Heron, just with shorter neck, legs and beak. This one, too, had a mate with him/her when I approached. The mate tried to draw me away from the area, but I lingered to get this photo.

Most of these photos were taken one-handed while motoring past at full speed, so I'm quite impressed with this tiny camera. Come spring-time there will be many more birds and flowers to photograph - the river is constantly changing and always beautiful.

For more photos and stories of the St. Johns river please visit my site at www.marshbunny.com.
Peb Elliott

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