



PADDLING PEACEFUL MORRO BAY; KAYAKERS EXPLORE DIVERSE WETLAND AREA.(SPORTS)

From: [Daily News \(Los Angeles, CA\)](#) Date: [July 3, 1997](#)

Daily News Byline: Shawn M. Bush Special to the Daily News

The dark, formidable volcanic mass of Morro Rock looms on the horizon, its peak cloaked in a gray mist. The kayaks bob with the green water as an incoming tide flows toward the estuary at the back of the bay that shares its name.

Dotted with small boats and an occasional canoe, the waterway is a tranquil setting teeming with life. Harbor seals leap from the water. A boggling variety of birds circle above; the area is the winter home to more than 70 migratory species.

An onshore observation point provides a unique setting to witness the nesting habits of the resident cormorants, black-crowned night herons and great blue herons, the latter of which make nearby Fairbank Point their largest coastal rookery between San Francisco and Mexico.

But kayaking Morro Bay below their towering nests in a tiny vessel offers a powerful dichotomy: The rhythmic motions of the paddles approximate the smooth, steady beats of wings. The kayakers become just one of the many beings navigating through the haze.

“It reminds me how small we are,” said Gretchen Beck, a first-time kayaker getting her feet wet in the bay. “It is exhilarating and exciting but at the same time serene and almost spiritual.”

One of the first California estuaries to receive protection by the state, the ecosystem was granted National Estuary status in 1995. Morro Bay is made up of 2,300 acres of wetlands and open water. Two dozen threatened and endangered species, including the peregrine falcon, brant, brown pelican and sea otter live here.

Within minutes, the two kayaks slip past a sleepy sea otter, its feet firmly grasping a clump of kelp wrapped around a buoy. The lazy critter at first does a double take when he spies the boats but soon ignores them, dismissing the visitors as an occurrence nearly as frequent as the rising tide.

Edging closer for a snapshot, the paddlers attempt soft words to attract the furry animal's attention but only succeed in shooing it from the salty sentry. The wary mammal stops cleaning its face, hisses and dives under the surface.

It is such sightings that make kayaking Morro Bay unique.

“There are a lot more mammals here than in Southern California,” said Lloyd Reeves, proprietor of Kayaks of Morro Bay, a local rental and tour operation. “The bird life is incredible.”

Passing a heron rookery, the kayakers employ a self-guided tour map with shaded zones indicating marshes, mud flats and sub-tidal areas to direct them toward Shark Inlet. Situated at the bay's farthest outpost, it is shallow enough that leopard sharks and bat rays may be viewed year-round.

“The month of July is spawning time for the rays,” Reeves noted. “When they pass each other, they flip their wings out of the water. It looks like hundreds of sharks circling, but in reality it's 40-pound rays.”

Separating the bay from open ocean is a large sand spit - a picturesque setting for lunch.

“I couldn't believe it. You walk into the sand dunes, and it's like you've stepped into a desert,” Beck said. “Minutes ago, you were in the water and, now, dry sand. You get to experience every type of environment.”

Drawing sharp contrast to the sandy landing and variety of flat lands are the surrounding verdant mountains and Montana de Oro State Park to the south. (See related story.)

Evidence of the rich ecosystem abounds. Deer tracks are sunk deeply into the beds of eel grass at water's edge, along with those of fox and waterfowl. Oysters litter the mud flats. The bay ripples with ever-expanding circles from jumping fish.

“What gets people completely excited,” said Reeves, “is when a small whale gets into the bay. It only happens once or twice a year, but it is the most spectacular thing - paddling along and having a whale raise up next to you.”

Reeve's best advice to improve the paddling experience: “The biggest trick is to go in the morning to avoid the afternoon wind. It gets choppy then. Also, it is a mistake not going into some of the channels during low tide, because the fish are more condensed. It's amazing.”

Leaving the strip of desert, the kayakers slowly arch across the bay toward the embarcadero, the afternoon winds clearly presenting a challenge. Morro Rock, the most obvious of several similar monoliths that line western San Luis Obispo County, is blown clear of the clouds. It stands silhouetted by the sun.

It is a three-hour drive from Los Angeles, so some might question the reward. But for Beck the answer is obvious.

“How could I not go back is more of the question.”

CAPTION(S):

2 Photos, Map

Photo: (1--color) Pelicans wade in the sometimes shallow water of Morro Bay looking for an easy meal, with monolithic Morro Rock dominating their horizon.

(2) A trip on Morro Bay offers paddlers serenity and the chance to explore an intriguing wetland ecosystem.

Roland and Karen Muschentz / Special to the Daily News

Map: (color) MORRO BAY HABITATS

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