

Following the Way



BY *Phyllis Edgerly Ring*
PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Jody Shenn*

of Water

Fred Shenn's business name, Paddler's Retreat, is a fitting one. Spend a few hours with this North Sutton resident on one of the region's "quiet waters" and you're bound to feel better — even if you've been having trouble remembering what "retreat" means.

A longtime runner, Fred tore a hamstring while training for a marathon and needed to find a safe way to stay active. He decided to give kayaking a try and quickly became hooked. The second fastest growing sport after snowboarding, it has grown more popular in recent years because it's affordable, can take you very close to nature and is something you can easily approach at your own pace.

Fred's work today combines three of his favorite things — kayaking, people and time in nature and, to sweeten the deal, he's put an emphasis on peace and relaxation. "My vision is to help people discover how accessible and enjoyable kayaking is, plus get them out into the distinctive natural beauty of some of the very special places New Hampshire has to offer. And that gives me more chances to get out there on the water, too," he says.

A beginner's trial by paddle

I arrived at Danbury Bog frazzled and, frankly, somewhat anxious about doing something so outdoorsy when I'm more the book-in-a-hammock type. Our tour with Fred was part of a birthday surprise for my husband, Jon, an inveterate nature lover always up for new adventure. If I'd known what just

one morning's odyssey in a New Hampshire bog could do for me, I'd have tried this much sooner.

Fred's company supplied all the essentials we'd need for our half-day (2½ to 3 hour) tour: kayaks selected for our size and experience, paddles and safety equipment, including a PFD (personal flotation device) vest. This is cut shorter than the average life vest so that you can sit comfortably in a kayak, and has larger armholes to accommodate the movements that paddling requires.

Before we headed into the water, Fred offered an introductory lesson and had us settle into the kayaks while still on land to get the feel of them. Since the paddle is such a key piece of equipment, he showed us how to position our hands properly for a grip in the center of its single, long span, and how to wield it correctly for forward motion, slowing down and directing the craft to the left, right or turning it around.

Once the lesson was complete, we donned the life vests and water shoes he provided and climbed into our kayaks. His brother-in-law, Kelly Dowd, launched us into the water then took his rod and reel to the small dam nearby for a bit of fishing. Fred and his son, Jody, a financial writer up for a visit from New York, were in a tandem kayak alongside us.

As part of the introductory lesson, Fred had us get into the kayaks while still on land and lean from side-to-side to get the sense of how far

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they would — and wouldn't — tip. Once my kayak was in the water, however, I struggled a bit with that tippy sensation as I got my bearings. The kayaking I'd previously done was in a big, tubby KeeWee, a craft whose wide, flat bottom meant practically nothing could tip it over. By contrast, the kayaks Fred provided for us were sleek, slender — like pencils.

As my husband went gliding happily away, I cowered a bit as Fred gently talked me down off my ledge of panic. The solution was an easy one, plus a rather Zenlike revelation for the rest of my life: I simply didn't have to try so hard. When I relaxed into the back of my padded seat and braced my feet against the foot pedals down inside the kayak, then made only gentle, smooth strokes with my paddle — as Fred had demonstrated back on land — the kayak slid along effortlessly and that tippy sensation disappeared as I found and settled into my own center of gravity.

Then it was instant heaven, a sensation like sitting right in the water itself (but without getting wet) and coasting right along.

You can get there from here

The setting around me was another world, and my kayak gave me admission to it in a way that few crafts can. One of kayaking's nicest assets is the quiet — not just the stillness of the water itself, but also the opportunity to go where there is utter absence of any sound other than those of the natural world. This gives you a better chance to spot wildlife both because the kayak allows you to physically get up close to wetland habitats, and also because you're not making any of the sounds

that usually announce your presence. You're like "one of the locals," says Fred.

A bonus with kayaks is that because they require little more than a few inches of water, they can take you to the quieter marshes, reaches and waterways where wildlife tends to be abundant. As you navigate your way through a surface



thick with pickerelweed and the pads of yellow pond lily, you may see osprey, eagle, great blue heron, beaver, muskrat, otter, white-tailed deer, moose, ruffed grouse, painted turtles, countless kinds of ducks and woodcock. On our trip, we spied osprey, turtles, ducks, muskrat and heron.

Danbury Bog and its environs were in fine form on that quiet, early September morning after Labor Day,

the foliage daubed with new autumn shades of apricot, ochre and the crimson of MacIntosh apples. You can paddle this bog for hours and see and hear nothing but plant and animal life, and that makes for a pretty wonderful breather.

While the time I spent kayaking wasn't physically taxing, it was steady, nonstressful exertion that seemed to use the majority of my muscle groups, even though I was sitting down. However, as Fred points out, kayaking's accessibility is its big draw. It's less about the demands of physical conditioning and fitness than it is about interest and curiosity, and he often books groups of nonathletic types trying the sport for the first time.

"People get excited about doing something unlike anything they've tried before, but which is also physically accessible for them. And there's just no way to describe the effect that being out in nature — and so close to it — has on them, like they're a part of it," he says.

"I've taken a group of nurses, and people in their 80s, even 90s. Teenagers have really liked it, too."

Lake, marsh or bog?

When you call Paddler's Retreat to select and book a tour in any number of Kearsarge/Lake Sunapee region locations, Fred typically makes arrangements either to pick you up or meet you at the site. He offers half- or full-day tours, and the latter usually

include a picnic lunch.

In addition to Danbury Bog, Grafton Pond is another popular destination, and one of the easiest and most beautiful paddling sites in the state, he says. Its more than 20 uninhabited islands, deep inlets and hidden marshes are home to scores of water birds. It also features dramatic granite outcroppings created during the last ice age.

North Sutton's Kezar Lake, home of Wadleigh State Park, is calm, and the abundant blueberry bushes on its big island make it a good pit stop, says Fred. "We hand out Tupperware, and folks can pick berries right from their kayaks."

Other settings include McDaniels Marsh, accessed in Springfield, which offers lovely wildflower blooms all summer, and Blackwater River, accessed in Andover.

Since kayaking is as much about relaxation and observation as exercise, Fred tends to lead kayakers to self-contained paddling sites and avoids having them portage from one body of water

to another. To enhance the experience, he recommends that paddlers bring sunscreen, sunglasses and a hat, and wear comfortable clothes, preferably made from synthetic materials rather than cotton, so that they'll wick moisture and dry more quickly if they get wet. I wore a bathing suit and sweat pants and shirt.

Be warned: try this activity and you'll likely want to do it again. That's probably why so many cars on New Hampshire roads these days have a kayak or two on the roof. Some of the very best moments in my kayak experience were the ones when I remembered that I could just stop and sit and imbibe nature from such a one-of-a-kind, front row seat.

"I want to help people get out there, away from everything," says Fred. "There are lots of spots around here where you can do that, and you don't have to go far to find them. That means you have even more time to enjoy them once you're there." **K**

LEARN MORE

Paddler's Retreat half-day trips are \$50 per person; full-day trips are \$75. All per-person rates include guide and instruction, and full-day trips include a picnic lunch. Group rates (three to six people) are \$140/half day and \$215/full day. Kayak rentals are also available. For more information, visit www.paddlersretreat.com or call Fred Shenn at (631) 327-3182. Tours are available May through October.

Phyllis Ederly Ring's articles have appeared in Christian Science Monitor, Ms., Sacramento Parent and Writers Digest. She previously taught English to kindergartners in China and planned programs for adults, children and youth at a Baha'i conference center in Maine. More information about her work can be found at www.phyllisring.com



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