



SOLO PADDLE

by **chuck graham**

FIELD REPORT

For three days I bask in San Miguel Island's natural wonders. My reward for successfully kayaking the back sides of its eastern siblings: Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa.

I scour its windswept native flora for pygmy mammoth remains, count thousands of raucous pinnipeds at craggy Point Bennett, hike out to a ghostly caliche forest, photograph the endemic and captive-bred island fox and, from afar, I inspect ancient Chumash Indian middens.

Normally, winds from the northwest howl off Point Conception, blitzing the treeless expanse, but not during these three days. Balmy weather prevails, and I'm fortunate to be on the rugged island alone.

On my fourth morning I continue my solo circumnavigation of the northern chain. As luck would have it, the wind gods frown upon me. Cold, vicious 25-knot northwesterlies wail down coast. With the wind at my back, I paddle for the channel. Once away from the protection of San Miguel, wind and

swell increase, while the cross chop doesn't allow for any rhythm. Paddling becomes a chore.

Only three miles to Sandy Point on Santa Rosa, but I can barely see my destination while bobbing in frothy whitecaps and negotiating unpredictable wind waves. Every few paddles I glance over my shoulder hoping not to see a three-foot-high dorsal fin bearing down on me, mistaking my kayak for a lean elephant seal.

Now, a mile and a half of blue separates me from Rosa, smack-dab in the middle of the San Miguel Passage, when a wave capsizes my kayak. A lack of concentration, a misjudgment with my rudder or mere consequence – it all happens so fast. Wind and current strew precious gear away from me, sometimes lost in the cobalt blue troughs. My legs dangle as I right my sit-on-top kayak, leaving me wondering what lies beneath.

Several minutes pass while I fetch my paddle a few frantic swim strokes away, then the dry bags holding my sleeping bag and camera gear. After securing my equipment, I hunker down and power through the last stretch to Santa Rosa. Backs of waves heave on the desolate beach I intend to land on, their roars penetrate the powerful winds. I choose to paddle on, hugging the coast in the sanctity of the dense kelp beds, which force the unrelenting waves to lay down.

I tie off to a thick stalk atop the kelp bed canopy and survey my gear. Only 18 more miles to go for the day. Watch the horizon, count the headlands, each stroke closer to the serenity of my next deserted cove.

Chuck Graham is a lifeguard, a kayak guide at the Channel Islands National Park, and a freelance writer and photographer from Carpinteria, California. Throughout his travels, it's been the unique Channel Islands he enjoys exploring the most.

photo: CHUCK GRAHAM