

# Beneath the fog, against the wind

A solo paddle around the northern Channel Islands

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I HAD BEEN LOOKING OVER MY SHOULDER for six hours, roughly 23 miles from Arlington Canyon on Santa Rosa Island, kayaking eastward and past the west end of Santa Cruz Island. Heaving seas propelled by gale force winds gusting to 50 knots churned up 7- to 11-foot wind waves that chased me down the frontside of the Channel Islands National Park.

There aren't many days that roll by on which I don't think about paddling around one of the most unique chains of islands in the world. That they're only 11 to 40 miles off the California mainland only enhances my fascination, beckoning me to for what lies around the next volcanic crag or idyllic cobbled cove.

Every time I see the windswept archipelago, my eyes strain across the shimmering Santa Barbara Channel. I'll ask myself, "Is it a good day to paddle across?" I'll assess the conditions on the mainland and try to imagine what it's like in what has come to be known as "the Galapagos Islands of the north." That teeming biodiversity is what spurs me on to paddle the islands. A majestic bald eagle creeping up to inspect a sleepy bull northern elephant seal, a peregrine falcon plucking a belted kingfisher on the fly and migrating gray whales cruising just beneath my kayak instantly come to mind.

## Last day of winter

I had a five-day window to paddle from Santa Cruz Island out to San Miguel Island and back. A large wind event was due in a couple of days, so the last day of winter was going to be a long one

for me. From a lobster fishermen's boat I eased into my 14-foot-long kayak packed with ample gear; the sheer face of Sandstone Point looming overhead.

The weather and the paddling conditions were ideal. It was hazy and warm, and I was aided by an early south swell and a light southeast wind that pushed me over several kelp canopies to the natural anchorages of Albert's and Coches Prietos. Rafts of California sea lions warmed themselves on the surface of the water; raising a flipper or two to thermoregulate. Squadrons of Brandt's cormorants stood at attention atop a sheer rock outcropping. When I paddled closer, a lone sea lion pup emerged amongst the velvety black feathers. How it climbed 20 feet of vertical bogged my mind. Skittish flotillas of migrating surf scoters ran on water; their wings rapidly flapping until they hummed in unison, natural wonders in abundance surrounding the largest island off the mainland.

After rounding Bowen Point, I easily identified Willows Anchorage. Those two sea stacks towering just offshore were hard to miss, especially with coreopsis blooming on top of each. South swell washed over the reef linking the two rock outcroppings. I rode a small wave between them and the island while Western gulls foraged in the barnacles, and then Gull Island appeared on the horizon.

In paddling trips around the Channel Islands, there are always certain points of interest I aim for to gauge how far I need to paddle. Gull Island is easily one of those. Located just off Punta Arena, the guano-covered islet isn't far from Morse Point, Pozo

Beach, Near and Kinton Points, other strategic points I've used, depending on my route to kayak across to Santa Cruz Channel and eventually to Santa Rosa Island.

When I sneaked between the rocks and waves at Morse Point, that southeast wind was a mere wisp as I gazed across the channel. When I'm tired of paddling and sitting in my boat, but the paddling conditions are decent, the conditions win out and I'll paddle on. The last day of winter allowed for more paddling. I inhaled an energy bar, peanut butter and honey on a rice cake, a gel and some water, and made the paddle to East Point in about 110 minutes.

The fluke of a whale was all that broke the surface of the channel. Aside from a cute pair of tiny Xantus' murrelets, the tranquil setting almost became boring until I heard the sound of surf cracking. I felt a burst of adrenaline and pushed through some stingy current before locating an empty beach to stretch stiff legs and chow down. It was only 3 p.m. and the weather conditions were stellar. I decided to continue west until an hour before dark.

Virtually every beach on the backside of Santa Rosa was occupied by northern elephant seals. Their rookeries on San Miguel are bursting at the seams, so overcrowding has forced elephant seals to seek new haul-out and pupping sites on neighboring Santa Rosa. The two islands are only three miles apart, and Santa Rosa has lots of great habitat on its many sandy beaches. Elephant seal pups are known as "weaners." After several weeks of nursing, their mothers abruptly abandon them, leaving them

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to form their own groups while they stay on shore for another three months. During that time they'll play in the surf and bask on beaches before making their first long migration to the frigid coastlines in southeast Alaska.

One mile before Johnson's Lee, strong north-west winds kicked in making that last stretch of paddling a real effort. With approximately 34 miles behind me, that burst from the northwest really slowed me to a crawl. I had kayaked much farther then I intended, however, and I felt that I had put myself in good position to reach San Miguel. My only doubt was that dark, cobalt-blue wind line on the western horizon, leaving me wondering throughout the night if I could make it. My only diversions were the many comical noises that emanated from hundreds of plump elephant seal pups, fat on their mothers rich milk.

First day of spring

I awoke to that still well-defined wind line. That first day of spring wasn't about to disappoint. I knew I was in for it, a small-craft advisory crackling on the radio. After rounding the ominous cliffs of South Point, I paddled into 15- to 25-knot northwest winds for approximately 16 miles to Sandy Point. The wind was icy cold but only affected my hands, which ached a little, and was easily forgotten every time I was hit by a bigger gust while concentrating on paddling in whipped-up seas.

I paddled past a couple of sea urchin boats working near Bee Rock. I didn't envy the folks diving down into those frigid waters. For me, it was enough taking spray in the face mile after mile. I took 15 minutes to rest, eat and warm up about two miles west of Bee Rock. San Miguel wasn't far off but the winds and swell were on



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the increase.

At the tip of Sandy Point, the westernmost point on Santa Rosa, I headed across the San Miguel Passage. The passage was a mess with 6-foot wind waves, whitecaps easily visible three miles across to San Miguel. I was about a quarter-mile off Sandy Point, and pulled into a thick canopy of bladder kelp to assess my current sit-

uation. I already had taken on a lot of swell, and felt it wise to turn around and paddle east, down the front side of Santa Rosa. No regrets; San Miguel wasn't going anywhere.

Once I paddled past Granada Garanon, the seas died down, the sun was on my back and I was able to hug the shoreline. Carpets of wildflowers blanketed the many vibrant green

plateaus with gangly stocks of blue dicks, orange-to-gold poppies, goldfields and others.

It was so calm I was able to land at Arlington Canyon, the island home of Arlington Man. The site of the oldest human remains in North America (13,200 years old), it has always intrigued me that Arlington Man was skilled enough to build his own watercraft and paddle from the mainland out to the islands.

I've often wondered if it was calm the day he landed on that particular beach so many millenniums ago. Landing a kayak on the front side of Santa Rosa can be tricky. There are a lot of off-shore shoaling and reefs, so when there's any swell from the north-northwest, it doesn't take much swell on those shoals and reefs to break, with waves washing in hundreds of yards off the island.

Downwinder

The next morning, the weather radio was spot-on. Thirty- to 40-knot winds with gusts to 50, wind waves seven to 11 feet, with a brief lull from the wind, late morning, only to pick up again in the afternoon.

Brockway Point was all I was concerned about on the immediate horizon. It was all I could see kayaking into the sun and a dense haze of sea spray. I lost count how many times I came unglued from my kayak, waves consistently capping on my stern and port as I fought to find a rhythm in my paddling stroke. Despite the challenging conditions, I was moving fast, paddling more than a half-mile off the island to clear Brockway Point. Once there, things only got harder as I bore down on the massive cliffs surrounding Carrington Point. I had leashed my paddle to my kayak. It was one less thing to consider when I was swimming for my boat.

All that being said, I couldn't help but marvel at Carrington Point, its upper hillsides so green, ocean spray wafting up its cliff face as wave after wave smashed into it. Western gulls

swooped in the wind, and somehow, seeing sea lions playing in those turbulent seas eased some of my concerns.

My plan was to paddle to Bechers Bay to take a deep breath and regroup. That quickly changed once I neared Coati Point. Just a spindly, rocky finger pointing eastward, it appeared simple enough to paddle around. Paddling a quarter-mile off the island, I was surprised when a steep wave drained over a huge submerged rock a paddle length away on my port. Then 10 feet off my bow, the water began to boil. I was about to paddle onto an exposed reef.

Without hesitating, I spun my kayak around to my right just in time to take on two waves in rapid succession. I was paddling into that horrific northwesterly wind, and after the first wave I discovered I was towing a tangled ball of bladder kelp. I was able to cut free before the next wave washed over me. Amazingly, I never came out of my kayak. There would be no rest, just an energy bar and a few gulps of Hammer Gel to get me back across the sometimes treacherous Santa Cruz Channel. Half way across the channel, it did feel as if there was a lull in wind velocity, albeit briefly. I was aiming for West Point on Santa Cruz Island, its Mordor-like cliffs honeycombed in toothy sea grottos blasted by relentless waves.

I still had to clear the Potato Patch, one of the more menacing places surrounding the chain.

The going was slow and arduous. Currents from as far away as Alaska and Mexico collide here, creating roiling underwater eddies to pro-

duce amazing aberrations of nature. Powerful northwest currents constantly expand in the Potato Patch just west of Fraser Point. These currents force open ocean waves upward, but are inconsistent, creating sudden towering waves whenever velocity is ratcheted up.

There were a couple of tense moments while sitting at the apex of two large waves and looking down the steep trough behind me, wondering if the next wave broke on me, whether the distance between me and my kayak might be too great to recover. It never happened, though, merely crossing my mind in a white knuckle sort of way.

It's always a good feeling, reaching West Point, but in these types of conditions, I'm never out of the woods until I reach the first of many protected coves beginning at Hazards Anchorage. From West Point, it's roughly six miles of towering cliffs until Hazards is reached. Until then, there was no relief in sight. Painted Cave was inaccessible, big foam balls of white water closing off its entrance. It wasn't until I rounded the familiar protrusion of Profile Point and snuck inside Ruby Rock that I felt completely at ease.

The harbor seals had the right idea. Basking on cobbled shores with their helpless pups, they're out of the piercing winds and safe from predators. I just wanted to be out of the wind, my feet on solid ground. I attained both at Prisoners Harbor. Serene and quiet and only an island fox there to greet me, I couldn't ask for anything more.



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