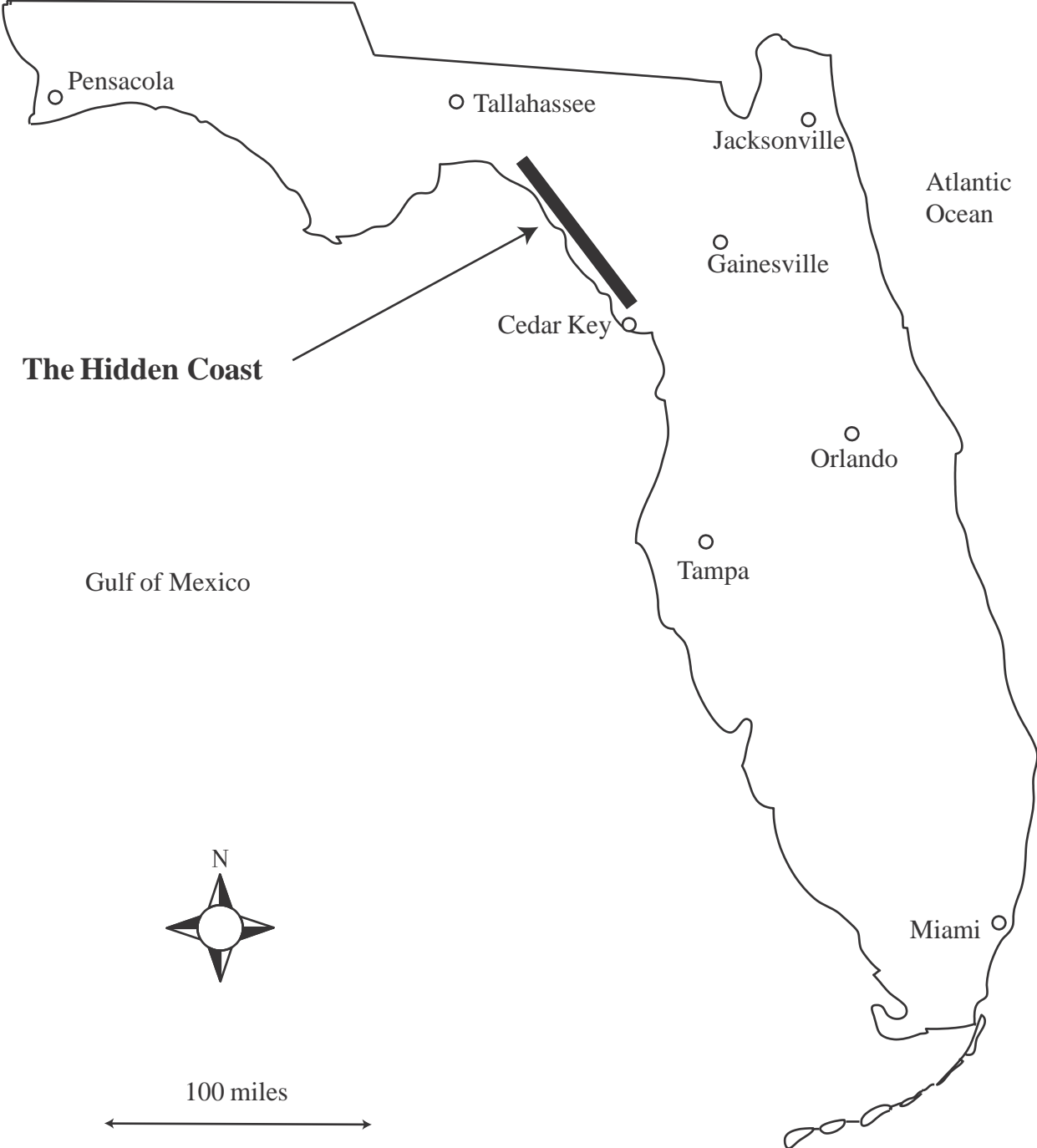


A scenic view of a dirt path leading to the ocean, framed by palm trees and coastal vegetation. The path is narrow and appears to be made of sand and small stones. The ocean is visible in the distance under a clear blue sky. The foreground is dominated by the trunk and fronds of a palm tree on the left and other coastal plants on the right.

Sea Kayak Day Paddles on Florida's Hidden Coast

Nick and Sandra Crowhurst

Map of Florida, showing its Hidden Coast



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Nick and Sandra Crowhurst

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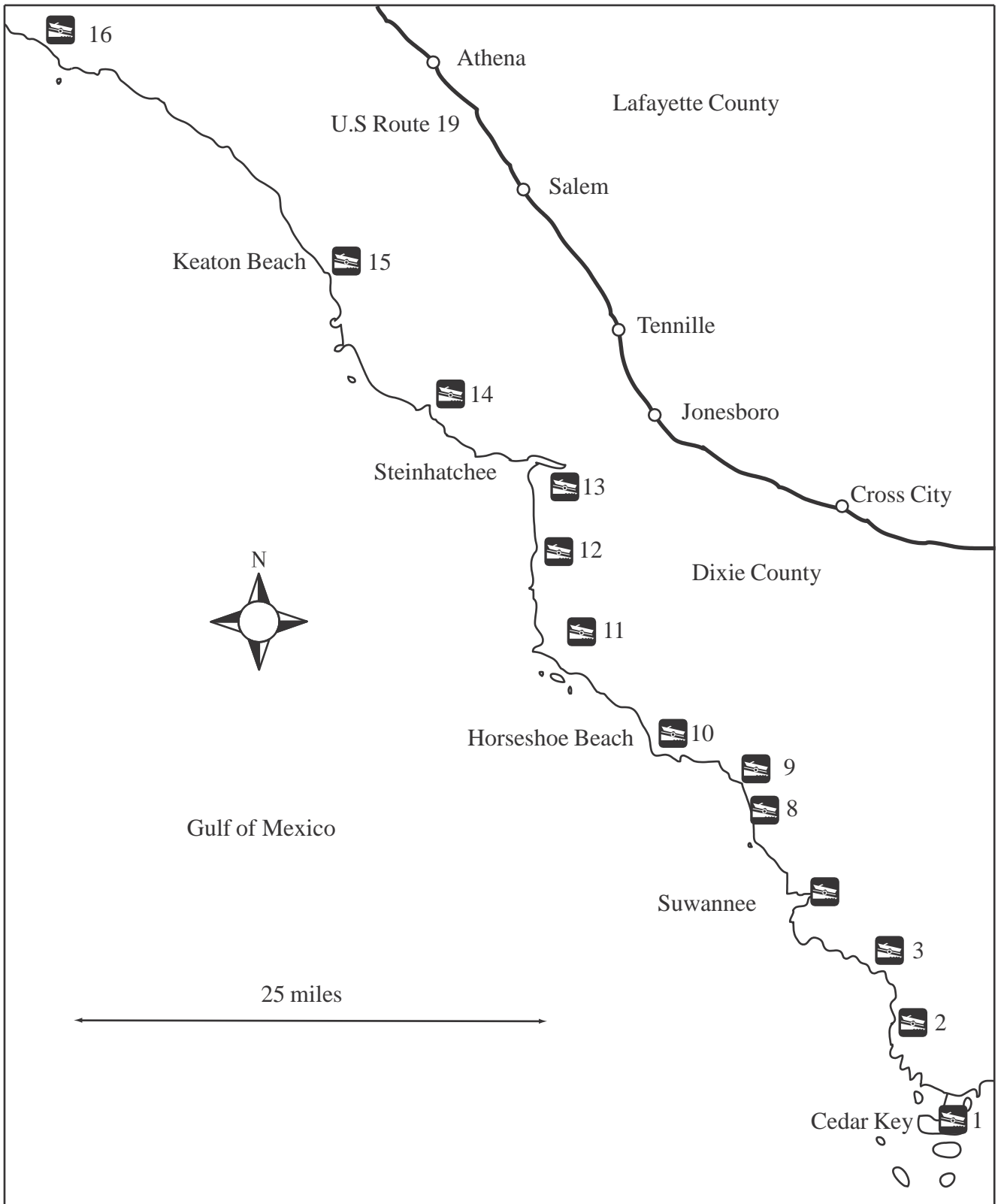
Downloads and further information at <http://hidencoast.blogspot.com>

Photographs and drawings by the authors unless otherwise indicated.

Second edition 2013, incorporating changes to routes 7 and 8.

To our son,
Christopher

Launch points with trip numbers



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About this book

Why this book?

We had paddled the rivers and springs of this area for three winters without realizing the great potential for sea kayaking day trips on the coast. How could this be? Well, the area is remote, and deserves its local name, The Hidden Coast. There is no sand beach along the coast. There is no road along the coast, and minor dead-end roads to the Gulf occur only every ten miles or so, leading to quiet backwater areas or small settlements. There are no hotels. There are no obvious good destinations to add interest to day paddles. We started to explore, and were amazed at the jewels we found. In the last seven winters exploring this area on day trips, we have yet to meet another sea kayaker. There was no book to recommend sea kayak day paddles. That's why we have produced this book.

The authors

We are adventurers from England who are in our fifth decade of hiking, rock climbing, sailboat racing, and kayaking together. We have spent the last ten winters kayaking in Florida, and spending time with the U.S part of our family. If you see a very red Dodge Ram three quarter ton truck with a couple of kayaks on a rack, towing a very cool Airstream travel trailer, it might just be us.

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been written without the continuing friendship, hospitality and kindness of Randy and Kim Slaughter, of Wilcox, Gilchrist County. Randy was paddling this coast forty years ago, fishing and hunting with his young pals, and his immense local knowledge has guided us for the past ten years. Thank you, Randy.

We have received much help, encouragement and friendship from fellow paddlers in the USA, including:

Frank and Irene Prozac, Jack and Nanci LaMarre, Dan and Bonnie Brinson, Dave "Diesel" Cummins, Larry Charness, Bill and Anne Zeller, Dave Hillis, Caroline Plante (also for the back cover photograph), Jack and Rose Kucsera, Laura Beatty, John Fehling, Liz Sparks of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and Jacqueline and Christopher Crowhurst. We thank you all. We acknowledge our affectionate debt to J. Hubert "Grinder" Walker (RIP), inspiring teacher of geography at Caterham School, UK, who taught the great value of sketch maps which clearly display only the essential information. This book displays eighteen such maps.

Using the book

This book, our gift to the paddling community, celebrates our fifty years of kayaking. It is available as a free download from the Internet. Instructions for this, and for downloading the waypoints to your GPS, are at <http://hiddencoast.blogspot.com>

The book is designed for spiral binding, so as to open out flat to facilitate photocopying. Our aim is that the charts and trip information will be photocopied or printed for personal, non-commercial use, laminated or printed on waterproof paper, and carried on deck while at sea.

Chart symbols

Waypoint (WP) 

Launch site 

Road 

Kayak track 

Introduction

The eighty five mile section of “Florida’s Hidden Coast” between Cedar Key in the south and the Aucilla River in the north is a magical playground for the sea kayaker. Its charm lies in its remoteness, its peacefulness, its wildlife, the intimacy of its creeks, and the subtle beauty of its seascapes. The shallow sea borders a marshy, creek-laden area, which then gives way to a tree line, further inshore.

This is a “low energy” coastline, and the ocean swell, tidal races, and surf of many sea-kayaking areas will not, in our seven winters’ experience here, be found on this coast. However, this coast presents its own challenges. The water can be less than a foot deep when miles offshore, making paddling difficult or impossible. Even moderate breezes can quickly raise a short steep chop, sufficient to capsize the inexperienced. Shelter from strong winds is scarce. The featureless band of marshland makes accurate navigation both vital and challenging, particularly when searching for creek entrances. The direction and rate of tidal currents will not be found on charts or in the NOAA Coastal Pilot book for the area. The abundance of alligators can occasionally be intimidating to visitors, especially near Suwannee. The level of experience and skills necessary to kayak safely on this coast should not be underestimated.

The Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail traverses this coast, and there is a series of wild campsites associated with the trail. The trail, the campsites, and the excellent water-resistant book which describes them, are products of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. (FWC). The trail may currently only be paddled from north to south, and only for the period between September 1st and June 30th. A free permit is required. Campsites must be booked between 6 months and two weeks in advance, and only the entire trail, or three prescribed sub-sections, may be booked. Details of how to obtain the book and permit are in the Appendix to this book at page 41. The trail and book are great assets for sea kayakers.

In contrast, the purpose of this book is to supply information to visiting sea kayakers who may wish to explore the coast and creeks of the Hidden Coast on day trips, rather than paddling the camping trail. Day-paddling trips usually involve traveling to and from the launch site, and loading and unloading the kayaks, so, with limited time, the trips have been kept to a maximum length of sixteen miles. The average trip length is nine miles. The start and finish points of each trip are the same, thereby avoiding shuttles. The routes have also been selected so that each has an interesting destination, such as an island or beach, on which to rest or eat lunch. The destinations can only be accessed by water. The same destination is sometimes reached from two different launch points, so as to familiarize the visitor with the various access points to the Gulf. We have paddled many other day trips on this coast, but we have selected the sixteen best for this publication. We describe each trip as we experienced it, mistakes included, rather than presuming to prescribe how and when others should travel. We describe our equipment, our navigation methods and decisions, but make no claim for their excellence.

Navigation

Magnetic Declination

The declination, otherwise known as variation, on this coast was 4 degrees and 34 minutes in April 2007, increasing 4 minutes annually. For practical navigation in 2008 we add 5 degrees to the true compass courses in this book. The NOAA calculator for declination is at:

<http://www.ngdc.noaa.gov/seg/geomag/jsp/struts/calcDeclination>

Magnetic Deviation

We have found that deviation errors of the hand-bearing compass can be caused by wrist watches, GPS sets, cameras and a strobe light on a PFD. On one occasion, in the 10,000 Islands area of the Everglades, a fifteen degree deviation error of the steering deck compass was caused by one steel tent peg in a bag of alloy pegs, stored in the central compartment under the compass. This was discovered by a routine check of the deck compass against the hand-bearing compass on the first leg of the route.

Charts

The NOAA charts for this area are numbers 11405, 11407 and 11408.

Distances

In this book we measure distances in statute miles, rather than nautical miles. This is on the unscientific basis that our normal cruising speed in calm windless conditions is 4.0 mph, and we would rather see this on the GPS than 3.5 knots, and 16 miles traveled, rather than 14 nautical miles. We use a mile scale drawn on the chart with the marked side of our Silva hand bearing compass. Any “nautical mile” latitude scale on a chart would often be folded out of sight on deck. The distances given in the trip descriptions are the paddling distances round any necessary bends in the course, not the straight line distances shown by GPS.

GPS

(WGS 84 Datum, waypoints in degrees and decimal minutes from <http://hiddencoast.blogspot.com>)

GPS navigation, as a supplement to traditional visual and compass work, is particularly useful on this coast. For example:

1. Without GPS, or intimate local knowledge, it is difficult to find creek entrances in the featureless expanses of coastal marsh.
2. Without GPS, cross course drift is difficult to assess against a featureless horizon or coast. Even without a destination waypoint, cross course drift may be assessed by GPS back bearings of a previous waypoint.
3. Progress as affected by wind and tidal flows may be assessed without needing a reference point on the featureless coast. Eddy currents can be identified.
4. Clumps of trees on the horizon may appear to be separate islands. On closer approach, these can be seen to be features on a continuous line of low coast. Compass navigation in a choppy sea can be an approximate procedure, and the accuracy of GPS can clear up these ambiguities. For example, viewed from the north from two miles, Bowlegs Point appears as a set of islands, easily confused with the Pepperfish keys, which are invisible from that point.

Trip Planning

Emergencies

In the event of an emergency, a Mayday call on VHF channel 16 is the obvious first choice. However, we have never received a reply to any VHF channel 16 transmission on this coast, other than during pre-arranged radio checks with nearby boaters. We have spent entire days without spotting another vessel, let alone one with an operating VHF set. (Channel 9 is used locally for routine traffic after contact on channel 16). In theory, the US Coast Guard may be called on Channel 16, but the low range from a kayak makes success improbable. An alternative is to use a cell phone to call emergency 911, and ask to be patched through to the Coast Guard. However, cell phone coverage is patchy on this coast. Self-reliance is important here, but there are scenarios where self-reliance is insufficient. For example, a nearby powerboat may be sinking, or on fire. There may be a serious medical emergency. For these reasons we have recently purchased a Personal Locator Beacon. (PLB)

Float Plan

On this remote coast, we file a float plan with a friend for each trip. A specimen float plan is at www.seakayakermag.com

Weather

The excellent NOAA weather channels on the VHF set are:

KWN38 Morriston, on 162.55 MHz for central and northern sections of this coast.

WWF38 Inverness 162.40 MHz for the southern section.

The hurricane season is from 1st June to 30th November, and April onwards can be hot and buggy. We therefore paddle this coast between 1st December and 31st March. During this period the weather is usually a series of cold fronts, perhaps occurring once each week. Each cold front is usually followed by a period of warm and calm weather. Wind information is available at <http://windmapper.com>

We will not commence a coastal trip here if the NOAA forecast is for wind of 20 knots or more. Winds above this level create a steep short chop in these shallow waters.

Nesting birds

The keys and beaches are often the resort of flocks of hundreds of sea birds. Disturbance to birds should particularly be avoided in the nesting season, 1st March to June 30th. Keeping a 300 foot distance from the flocks is a reasonable guideline. This coast is of great interest to bird watchers. Highlights for us have been sightings of bald eagles, loons, and osprey flying with large fish in their talons.

Atlas

To locate the sometimes remote launch sites we use the DeLorme Florida Atlas and Gazetteer. This atlas shows even the smallest dirt roads. Details are in the Appendix, page 41.

Trash

Even the most remote and beautiful places on this coast can suffer from small amounts of flotsam and jetsam. We carry a trash bag in the stern compartment, and aim to leave each beach cleaner than when we arrived.

Security of cars at launch sites

We have been leaving our truck at these launch sites for the past ten winters. There has never been a problem.

Campgrounds

Visitors should bear in mind that night temperatures occasionally drop below freezing during the winter months, and that there are only ten hours of daylight in December. The DeLorme Atlas lists commercial campgrounds, but there are County and State campgrounds on or near the coast, suitable for paddlers wishing to use a tent or RV as a base for day paddles. These include:

1. Shired Island. Electricity supply and picnic shelters. No reservations, no potable water, but a wonderful location and view. See Trip 8 for map.
2. Shell Mound. Electricity. No reservations. See Trip 2 for map.
3. Horseshoe Beach. Electricity. No reservations. See trip 10 for map.
4. Manatee Springs State Park, Fanning Springs. See the Appendix for reservation and other details.

Alligators

We describe in trip 5, page 18, the sighting of a giant alligator, and the concern it caused us.

There are only two other occasions on which alligators have caused us concern. On the first occasion we were passing along a creek that was about thirty feet wide. At one point there was a ten foot alligator on each bank, opposite one another. Not wishing to disturb them, we stopped paddling, and let the current drift us past. Just as we drew level with them there was a crash, and we were stopped dead in the water. A great fountain of water soaked us as an alligator leapt into the air, and then, fortunately for us, disappeared into the murk. We had obviously been so quiet that the alligator was unaware of our approach. We now keep paddling gently, so as to avoid a repetition of this incident. The second occasion was when we were traveling deep into Hog Island, Suwannee, via Harden Creek, exploring the possibility of crossing the interior of Hog Island by linking up with Moccasin Creek. The tide was fairly low, and the water in the creek was only about twenty feet wide. We turned a corner of the creek, and saw about twenty large alligators lined up on the mud banks on both sides, like a guard of honor. They all slid into the very shallow creek. At this point we realized that we were not top of the local food chain, that we were intruding into their home, and that we would rather be somewhere else. We haven't been back to this area, and have decided to leave the interior of Hog Island to these remarkable creatures. The rules we try to observe when alligators are around are:

1. Don't crowd them, so try to keep at least thirty feet away.
2. Don't get between one on land and its route to the water.
3. Don't get between a parent and its babies.
4. Don't allow a dog to get near them. Alligators love to eat dogs.
5. Don't swim in water where there are alligators.
6. Don't feed them.
7. Don't leave scraps of fish on the shore.

Bad weather alternative paddling

If sea conditions in the Gulf are unsuitable, the area has superb rivers and springs. The gems are the Santa Fe River, the upper Suwannee River, and Ichetucknee Springs. These are well described in "A Canoeing and Kayaking Guide to the Streams of Florida, Volume 1, North Central Peninsula and Panhandle" by Elizabeth F. Carter & John L. Pearce. (Details in the Appendix, page 41)

Tidal times, heights and currents

The flood tide comes up from the south. The high water time at the northern end of this section of coast (Rock Island) ranges from zero to over ninety minutes later than at Cedar Key, at the southern end. Tide times and heights of high and low water can be found at:

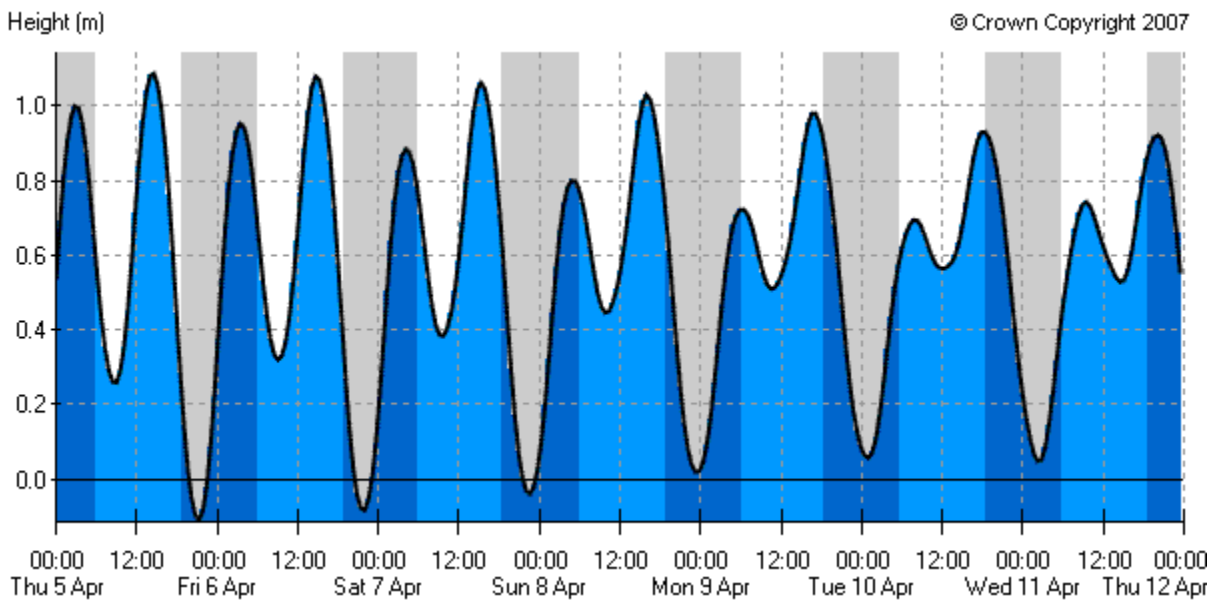
<http://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov>

<http://www.saltwatertides.com/dynamic.dir/floridagulfsites.html> gives data for Cedar Key, Suwannee River entrance, Pepperfish Keys, Steinhatchee River entrance (Deadman Bay), and Rock Islands.

<http://www.mobilegraphics.com:81/> gives excellent data and graphical output for many sites, including the Pepperfish Keys.

<http://easytide.ukho.gov.uk/Easytide> gives free information for the next seven days, including graphical output, for Deadman Bay (off Steinhatchee) and Cedar Key.

Here is an example of the Easytide graphical output for Deadman Bay for seven days beginning Thursday 5th April 2007: (The vertical axis, showing height, is in meters, where 1 meter = 3.28 feet)



The relevance of this graphical output for planning day trips is the great variation in the depths at low water throughout the seven days. It will be noted that the afternoon high tides are considerably higher than the morning high tides, and that the shape of the tidal curve on Thursday 5th is quite different from that of Thursday 12th. There is sometimes only a small dip between the two daytime high tides. This is particularly important when planning to return to a launch site up a shallow creek, or to cross a known shallow area on passage. For example, we would choose a day with a tidal curve like the 12th of April to launch from Cow Creek to visit North Pepperfish Key and Bowlegs Point. The tide is high for most of the day, and the return timing would not be critical. There is only a small dip for the midday low water. Tidal heights are reduced by offshore winds and high atmospheric pressure, and increased by onshore winds and low atmospheric pressure.

A careful study of these data has contributed greatly to our enjoyment of these trips.

Although the tidal height range of three to four feet is much less than that of many coasts, the gently shelving nature of the sea bed increases the importance of the tidal height. We have run aground one mile offshore, and have had to drag the kayak through quarter of a mile of shallows, before giving up, and re-tracing our course.

Tidal Currents.

There is no tidal current information in the NOAA charts or Pilot Book for this section of coast. The nearest NOAA data are for North Anclote Key, about seventy miles south of Cedar Key. This information can be obtained by typing "Anclote key" into the search box on the NOAA home web page. After discussion with NOAA staff, and comparison of the tidal current data with the times of high and low water at Anclote Key, we came to these conclusions for that location:

1. The flood stream along the coast is towards the north, and the ebb is towards the south.
2. The ebb and flood rates are approximately equal, ranging from 0.3 knots at neaps to 0.8 knots at springs.
3. Slack water along the coast occurs between 30 and 60 minutes before high and low water.
4. Wind-driven currents can mask tidal effects in these shallow waters.

It is difficult to assess accurately the rate of a current by using a GPS in a kayak affected by any wind. However, our experience is that these conclusions have relevance for the Big Bend coast, although the coastal tidal current rates are perhaps half of those at Anclote Key. Exceptions to this are fast tidal flows exceeding one knot in rivers, large creeks, shallow areas, and in places where the current is restricted by channels and islands, such as Cedar Key. A particular relevance of these data is when planning a trip from a launch site on a creek or river. If the creek is departed on the ebb, a voyage traveling south from the creek mouth to a destination will be able to benefit from the ebb. The return leg can benefit from the flood. Shuttle trips will benefit from traveling south to north with the flood tide, so that the destination can be reached near high water to minimize access problems. We prefer to deal with shallows at the start of a trip, rather than late in the day as the sun goes down.

When an island is close to the main coast, the area between the island and the coast will often fill from the north and south simultaneously, and will drain similarly on the ebb. We have noticed this particularly in the creeks off Shell Mound, and between the Pepperfish Keys and the mainland. It always seems strange to find the flood tide running strongly southwards. Careful planning can sometimes make use of this effect. For example, in trip 2, the last of the flood can assist the return through waypoints 9 and 10 to the launch site.

Equipment and supplies used on the day trips.

This list is included to emphasize to newcomers to sea kayaking the level of equipment we carry to facilitate self-sufficiency on this remote coast, rather than as a recommended list for experienced paddlers, who will have their own preferences.

Kayak and paddles: Current Designs Double Vision tandem kayak. Any spaces in the compartments are filled with inflated dry bags or buoyancy bags. Spray decks are Seals Tropical Tour. Bending Branch paddles with robust plastic blades to withstand the harsh oyster beds and shingle banks.

PFDs: Kokatat MsFit and Extrasport Retroglide. (Required by law to be readily accessible)
Contents of the PFD pockets: Lip salve with sun protection. Silva hand-bearing compass on lanyard. Garmin Etrex GPS on lanyard, spare batteries for GPS and camera in pill bottle. Plastic whistle attached by clip. Sony DSC-U60 waterproof camera on lanyard. McMurdo FastFind Plus Personal Locator Beacon. Strobe light on PFD.

Clothing: Warmers gloves, from REI. Long pants, quick drying. Wicking underwear from ExOfficio. Rash tops with long sleeves. Sun hats with neck protection, on a lanyard. Polaroid bifocal sunglasses on lanyard. Breathable shower proof paddling tops by Reed Chillcheater. Short rubber boots or water sports shoes. Swimming goggles for the bow paddler in steep head seas. Waterproof wristwatches. Bug screen head nets (not yet used).

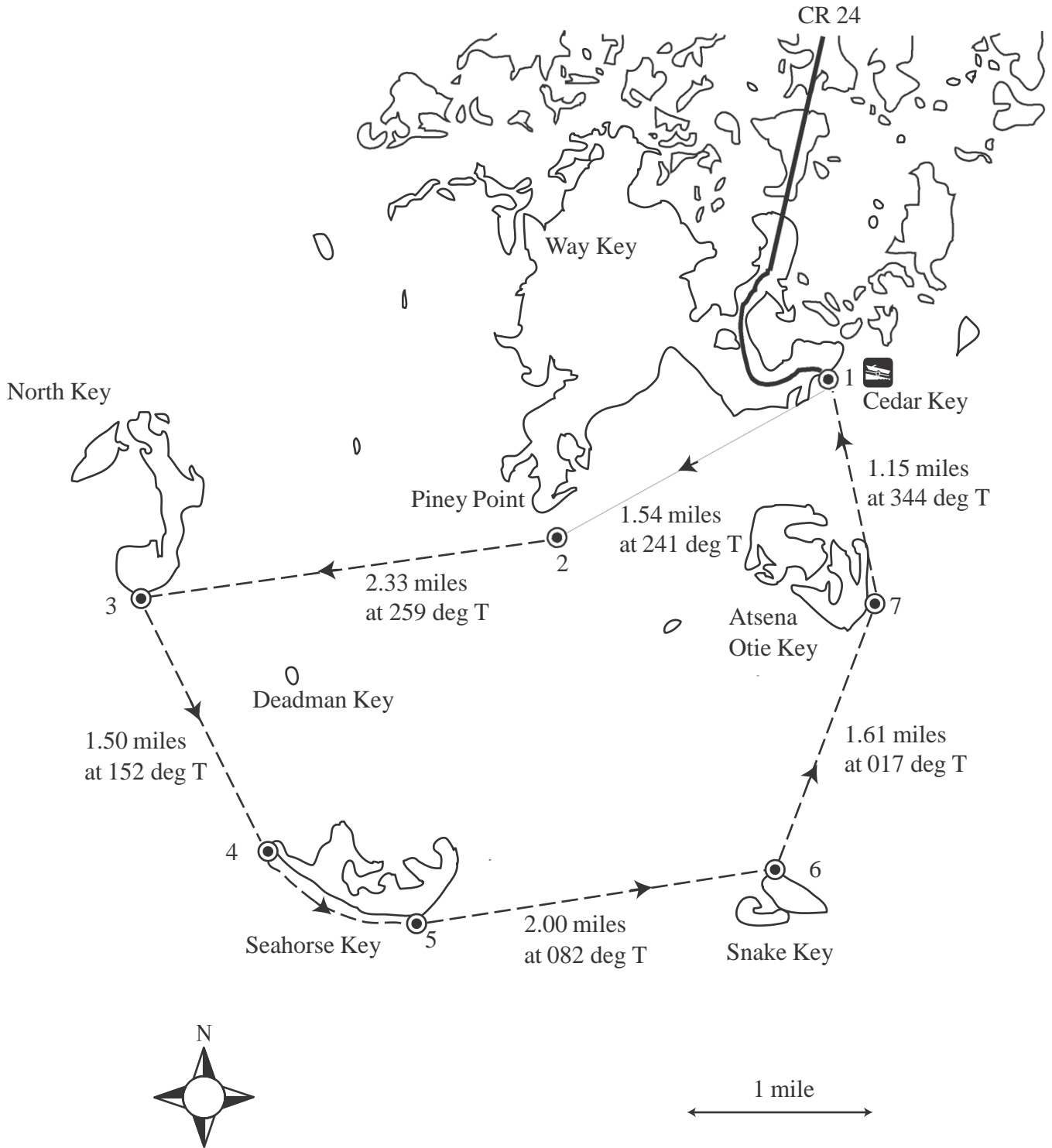
On deck: Spare split paddle on foredeck. Two portable plastic bilge pumps, on lanyards. Two Paddlefloat re-entry devices. Uniden waterproof VHF radio with NOAA weather channels, in a clear dry bag on a lanyard. Waterproof chart case. Steering compass. Tow line and karabiner. Waterproof writing tablet and pencil on lanyard.

In the cockpits: Water bottles. Energy bars. Bailers and sponges. Flares, night and day smoke. Clear dry-bags attached to rear of back-rest for personal articles. E.g. wallet, keys, paper tissues, passport, Deet bug spray, sun cream 50 SPF, lip balm, medications, small binoculars, head torches, signal mirror, cell phone, spare Etrex GPS loaded with the day's waypoints.

In watertight compartments and also in dry bags: Spare clothing and towel in a dry bag. Food and water. Matches and firelighters. First Aid kit. Space blanket for emergency use. Chemical light sticks. Repair kit with duct tape and hex wrenches for deck fittings, and Leatherman multi-tool. Plastic trowel for burying human waste. Tarp. Jetboil stove.

Usually, but not always, left on shore: Paddleboy Heavy Lifter kayak trolley, stainless steel, demountable, for launching and recovery.

The Islands off Cedar Key



Gulf of Mexico

1. The Islands off Cedar Key

Distance: 11.0 miles

Launch site: Cedar Key beach. Delorme Atlas page 69 (C3). At the stoplight on Route 19 at the south end of Chiefland, (page 70, A2), take County Roads 345, 330, 347, and 24, south 34 miles to a stop sign in Cedar Key. Turn left onto 2nd street, and the launch beach is on the right after 0.2 miles at City Park. There is ample parking. Launch at the right end of the beach, just outside the marked swimming zone.

GPS Waypoints:

WP1, N29 deg 08.190, W83 deg 01.770 then 1.54 miles at 241 deg T to
WP2, N29 deg 07.558, W83 deg 03.053 then 2.33 miles at 259 deg T to
WP3, N29 deg 07.171, W83 deg 05.315 then 1.50 miles at 152 deg T to
WP4, N29 deg 06.019, W83 deg 04.610 then 0.84 miles round the coast (116 deg T) to
WP5, N29 deg 05.720, W83 deg 03.902 then 2.00 miles at 082 deg T to
WP6, N29 deg 05.925, W83 deg 01.944 then 1.61 miles at 017 deg T to
WP7, N29 deg 07.236, W83 deg 01.460 then 1.15 miles at 344 deg T to WP1.

Tidal data reference point: Cedar Key

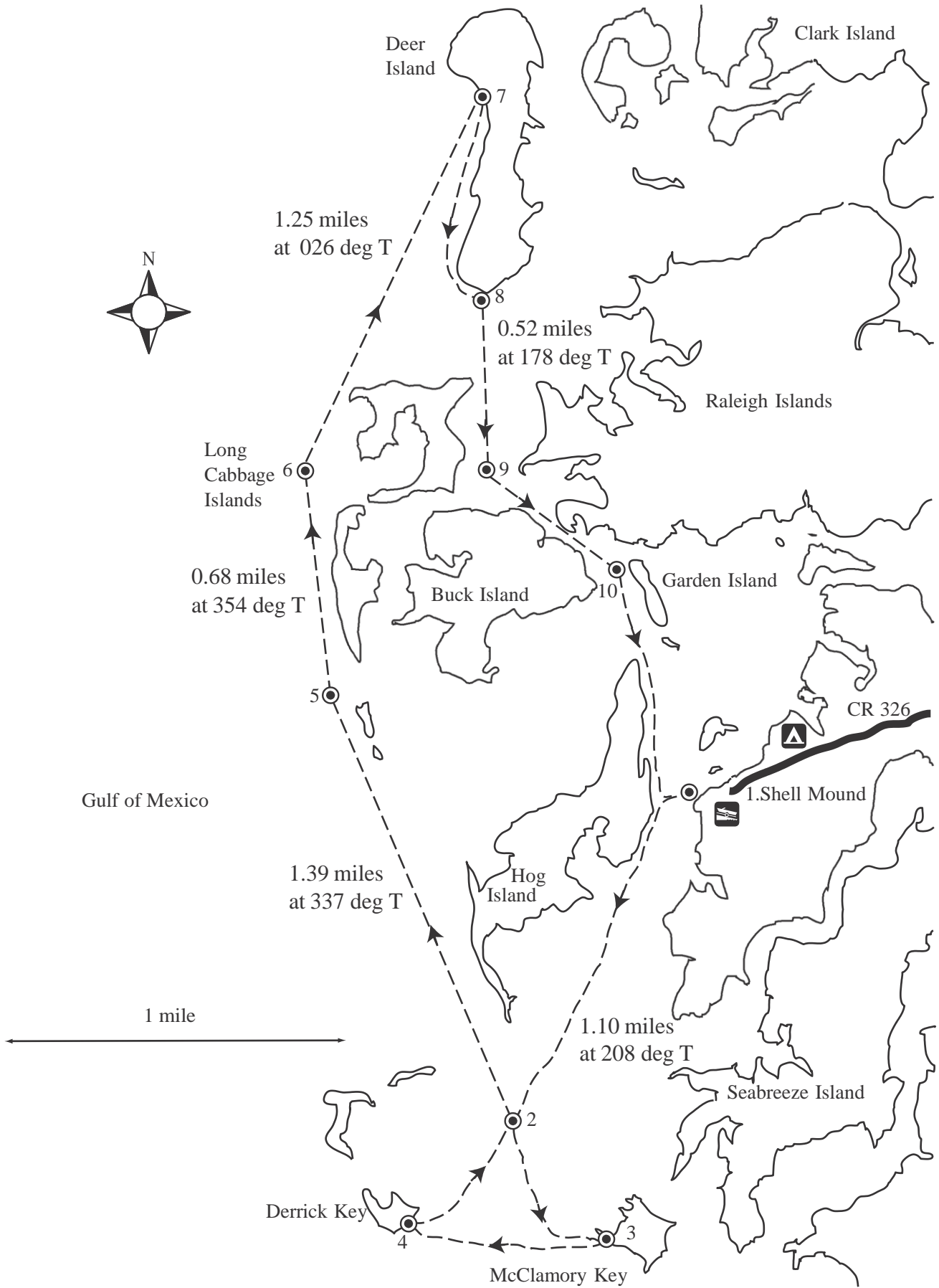
Trip Description: Cedar Key is an unspoiled gem of a small city, with interesting wooden buildings and magnificent scenery. It gives a glimpse of “Old Florida”, and makes a great center for a vacation. This trip differs from most others in this book, in that:

1. The launch point is in the center of a popular vacation city.
2. The main destinations are visible from near the launch point.
3. Tidal currents are strong at spring tides in the main channels, and these can affect the choice of destination.
4. There are no convoluted tidal creeks to negotiate before reaching the Gulf.
5. There is adequate depth of water throughout.

These factors do not occur in any of the other fifteen trips in this book. You have been warned! This is a sensitive area for wildlife. The interior of each of the islands except Atsena Otie Key is closed to public entry. All public access to Seahorse Key beaches is prohibited from March 1st to June 30th each year. This includes a 300 foot buffer round the island. Atsena Otie Key has a jetty on its west side, from which there is a nature trail.

Although our sketch chart shows a circular tour of the main islands, tidal and wind considerations may make it more pleasant to visit the various islands by a series of “out and back” day trips. We left the boat ramp two hours before high water, took the flood to the beaches on North Key (WP3) and Seahorse Key (between WPs 4 and 5), where we took a break, and then used the new ebb to visit the great beaches on Snake Key (WP6) and Atsena Otie Key (WP7). Highlights were an osprey carrying a fish near Deadman Key, a pair of dolphins between Seahorse and Snake, and bald eagles in their nest on Atsena Otie. This is a truly wonderful playground for the sea kayaker and naturalist, and we enjoyed a most memorable day.

Shell Mound to McClamory Key and Deer Island



2. Shell Mound to McClamory Key and Deer Island

Distance: 8.5 miles

Launch site: Shell Mound. Delorme Atlas page 69 (C3). At the stoplight on Route 19 at the south end of Chiefland, page 70, (A2), take County Roads 345, 330 and 347 south towards Cedar Key. Fourteen miles after Fowler's Bluff, County Road 326 leads east for three miles to a dead end at the gravel and mud launch point. There is ample parking. (Ignore the County campground and boat ramp signs to the right.)

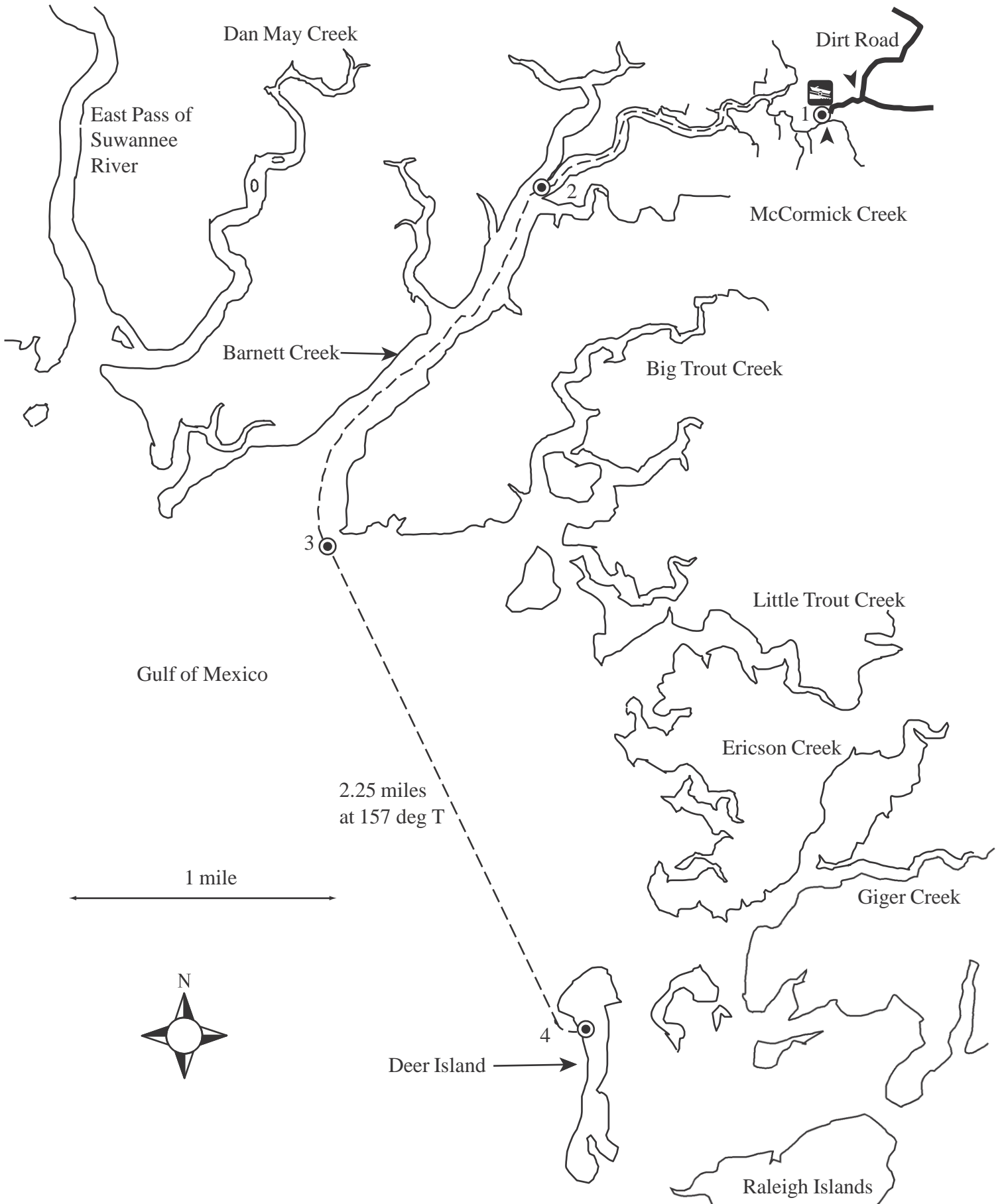
GPS Waypoints:

WP1, N29 deg 12.415, W83 deg 04.214, then 1.10 miles at 208 deg T to
WP2, N29 deg 11.567, W83 deg 04.726, then 0.48 miles at 143 deg T to
WP3, N29 deg 11.227, W83 deg 04.438, then 0.64 miles at 276 deg T to
WP4, N29 deg 11.283, W83 deg 05.067, then 0.46 miles at 047 deg T back to
WP2, then 1.39 miles at 337 deg T to
WP5, N29 deg 12.687, W83 deg 05.285, then 0.68 miles at 354 deg T to
WP6, N29 deg 13.277, W83 deg 05.365, then 1.25 miles at 026 deg T to
WP7, N29 deg 14.265, W83 deg 04.820, then 0.73 miles following the coast (180 deg T) to
WP8, N29 deg 13.720, W83 deg 04.820, then 0.52 miles at 178 deg T to
WP9, N29 deg 13.271, W83 deg 04.806, then 0.49 miles at 125 deg T to
WP10, N29 deg 13.022, W83 deg 04.408, then 0.72 miles at 164 deg T back to WP1.

Tidal data reference point: Cedar Key

Trip Description: If you only paddle one trip on the Hidden Coast, this would be a great choice. We commenced the route three hours before a predicted high water level of 3.6 feet. From the muddy launch site (WP1) we headed directly across the short distance to Hog Island, closely followed its coast round left to avoid the adverse tidal current, and then spotted a clear channel through an area of oyster bars at 195 degrees true to arrive at WP2. The tall wooden navigation poles sticking out of the water in this area mark the Derrick Key Gap through the Suwannee Reef. This gap is used by vessels aiming to enter the Suwannee River from the south. To reach McClamory Key (WP3) we curved seawards away from the direct route to avoid shallows, and were soon enjoying the crescent shaped beach on its south-eastern corner. We had planned a visit to the inviting sandy beach on Derrick Key (WP4); however, the island was home that day to a great flock of sea birds, so we kept 100 yards offshore. After admiring the birds through binoculars we set off on the 3.8 mile paddle north via WPs 2, 5, and 6 along a coast dotted with white sand beaches. The most inviting beach fronted a hardwood hammock at the northern end of the Hog Island coast. However, we pressed on, and were soon at the spectacular beach on wooded Deer Island (WP7). There is no finer destination on this coast. After lunch we returned by following the coast of Deer Island south and round to WP8, then south to a creek junction at WP9, where we threaded our way through a mass of gravel banks, aided by the last of the flood tide, and carried on to near Garden Island (WP10). From there we returned directly to the launch point. This trip has great scenery, beautiful beaches, much wildlife, and a fabulous island for a lunchtime break. We could ask for no more.

McCormick Creek to Deer Island



3 . McCormick Creek to Deer Island

Distance: 11.5 miles.

Launch site: McCormick Creek, DeLorme Atlas page 69, (B3). At the stoplight on Route 19 at the south end of Chiefland, page 70 (A2), take County Roads 345, 330 and 347 for 21.5 miles and then turn right onto a small road, the South Entrance Road to the scenic drive in the Lower Suwannee Wildlife Management District. The turning is 5.7 miles after the signed right turning to the “Refuge Office, Information and Birding Trail.” The turning is just before a left hand bend in the road, and the co-ordinates of the junction are: N 29 deg 17.784, W 83 deg 01.941 and the junction is marked by a sign for the “Great Florida Birding Trail”. This dirt road is followed east for 1.77 miles to the second road on the left, which is followed for a few yards to reach WP1, the small launch site on McCormick Creek. Parking for a couple of vehicles is possible on the right side of the road, just before the turning area near the creek.

GPS Waypoints:

WP1, N29 deg 17.482, W83 deg 03.745 then 1.69 miles to
WP2, N29 deg 17.207, W83 deg 04.903 then 1.75 miles to
WP3, N29 deg 15.969, W83 deg 05.807 then 2.25 miles at 157 deg T to
WP4, N29 deg 14.265, W83 deg 04.820

Tidal data reference point:

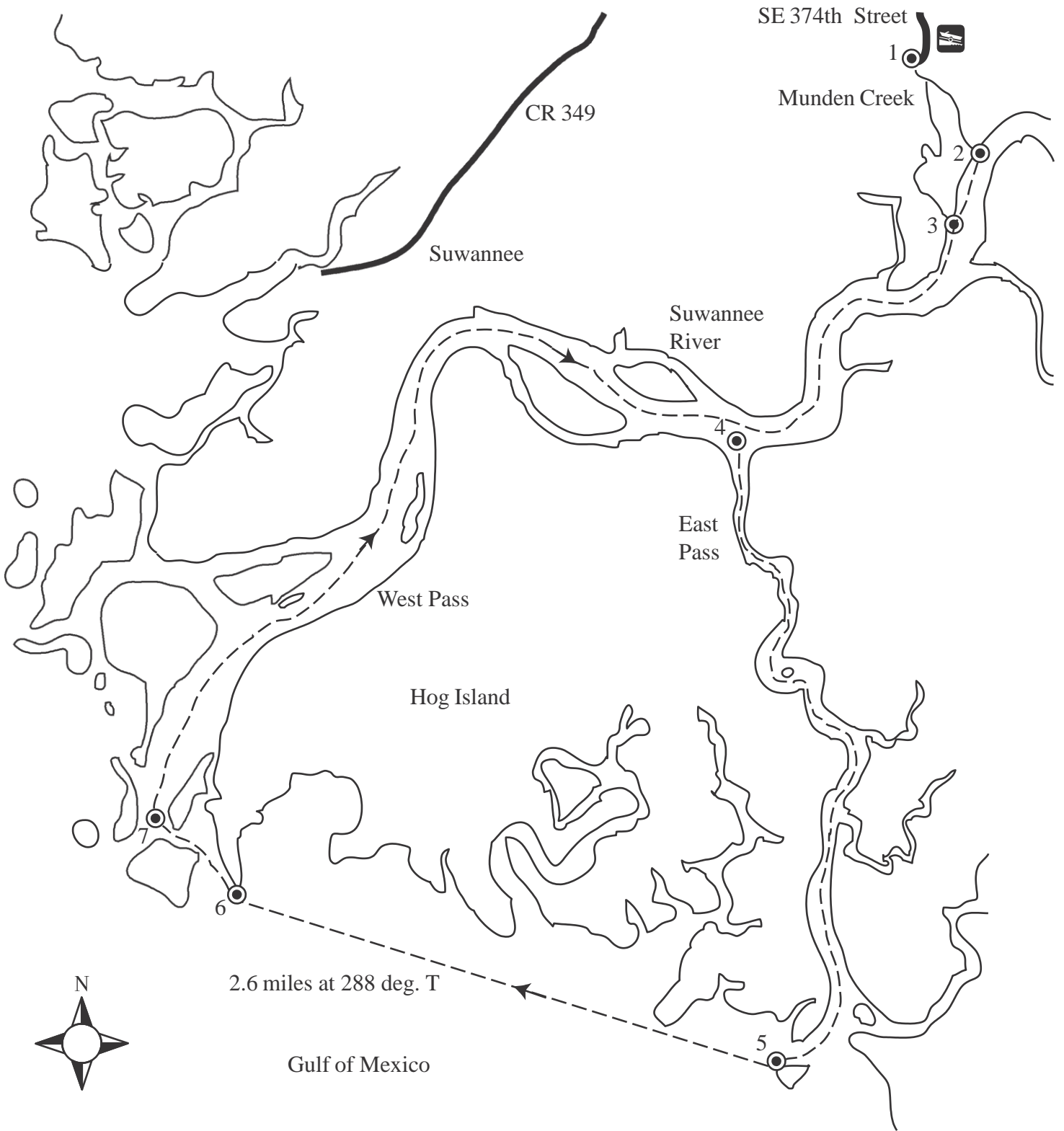
Suwannee River entrance.

Trip Description: This voyage was inspired by Google Earth’s stunning view of the complex waterways around Barnett and McCormick creeks. The intricacy and beauty of the creek system served not only as an inspiration, but also as a warning that careful navigation would be required on this route. Stranded overnight in a tiny dry creek with only alligators for company is not a happy scenario.

We left the isolated launch site at low water, just to see if it was possible to navigate the creek at that level. It was. McCormick Creek is particularly tortuous for the first half mile, with several junctions, so we marked multiple waypoints and used a marker ribbon at one critical junction. We were careful to look aft frequently, in order to remember the route for our return. An occasional alligator eyed us from the mud banks. By contrast, Barnett Creek (reached at WP2) is wide and straight, and another twenty minutes paddling took us to the Gulf at WP3, 3.44 miles from the launch site. Deer Island, our destination, was visible 2.25 miles away at 157 degrees true. This crossing can be hard work if the frequent south-east wind is blowing hard. The effort is worthwhile, as the beach landing (WP4) on the Gulf side of Deer Island is superb. We know of no better destination on this coast. The white sand beach, the trees for shade, and the uninterrupted view to the horizon are magical.

The return trip was without incident, and the strong flood tide took us from the Gulf (WP3) to the launch point in fifty minutes.

Round Hog Island from Munden Creek



1 mile

4 . Round Hog Island from Munden Creek.

Distance: 15.5 miles

Launch site: Munden Camp. DeLorme Atlas page 69 (B2). From the stop light on US 19 at Old Town in Dixie County, Page 64 (D1), County Road 349 leads south west for 20.3 miles to N29 deg 20.778, W83 deg 06.366 Here a left turn is taken (SE 371st Street), and then a right (SE 374th Street), where the launch point is soon reached, 0.4 miles from the junction with CR 349. There is ample parking for vehicles.

GPS Waypoints:

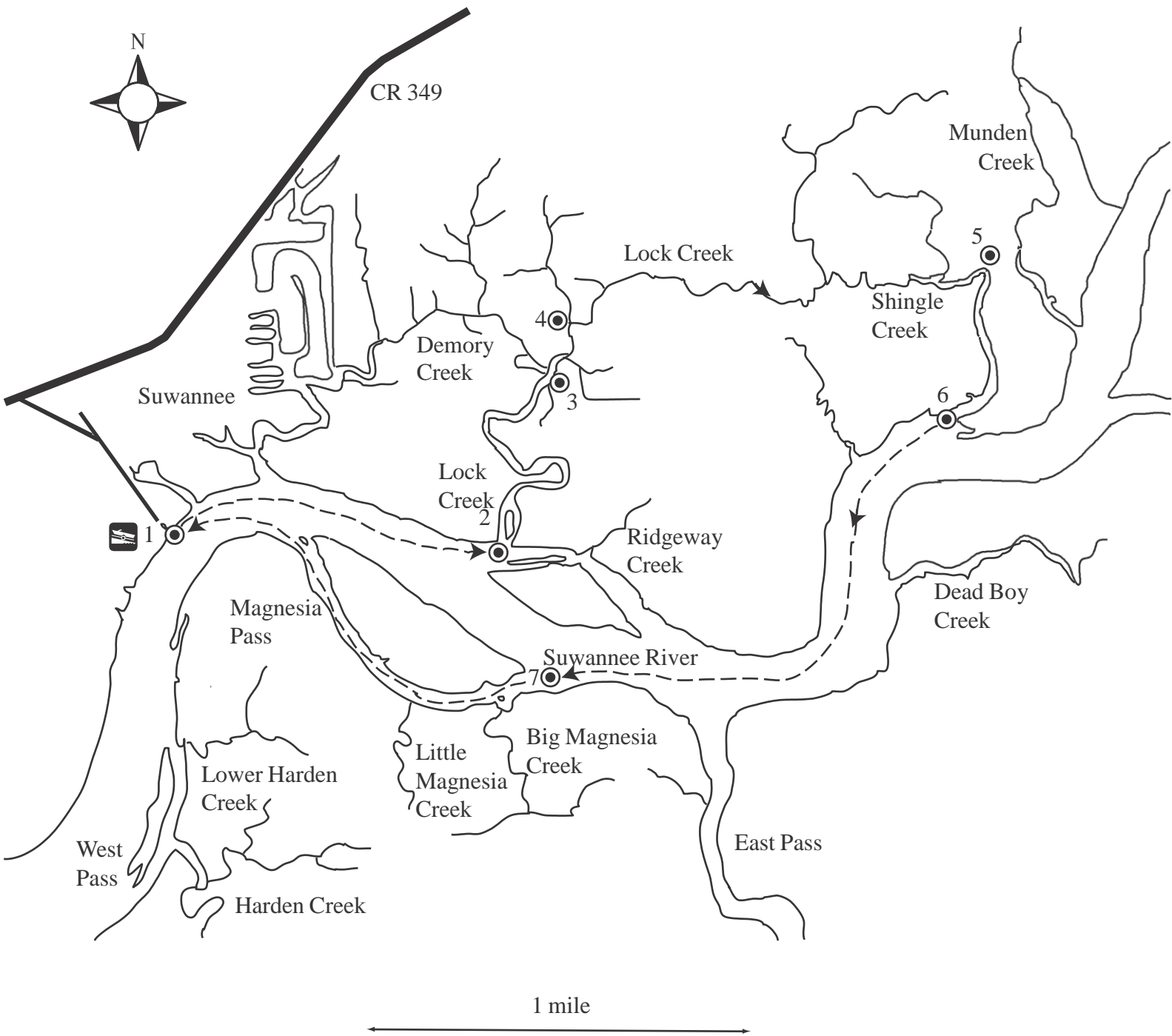
WP1, N29 deg 20.448, W83 deg 06.369, then 0.59 miles to
WP2, N29 deg 20.121, W83 deg 06.071, then 0.34 miles to
WP3, N29 deg 19.843, W83 deg 06.182, then 1.66 miles to
WP4, N29 deg 18.975, W83 deg 07.169, then 3.45 miles to
WP5, N29 deg 16.500, W83 deg 06.985, then 2.60 miles at 288 deg T to
WP6, N29 deg 17.177, W83 deg 09.436, then 0.50 miles to
WP7, N29 deg 17.479, W83 deg 09.794, then 5.44 miles to
WP3, then 0.95 miles to WP1.

Tidal data reference point:

Suwannee River entrance.

Trip Description: The Suwannee River meets the Gulf of Mexico at the town of Suwannee, but four miles from the Gulf the river splits in two. The East and West Passes, as these two channels are known, enter the Gulf at points three miles apart, and the creek-ridden delta between the passes is known as Hog Island. (Not to be confused with the Hog Island off Shell Mound). This route, the circumnavigation of Hog Island, jumps off the chart and begs to be paddled. It requires careful timing with the tide, as the river and tidal flows can be strong. We launched at Munden Camp, WP1, one hour after low water at Suwannee River entrance, and headed left down Munden Creek. We shortly came to a right turn, where the true creek winds its way to the Suwannee. We followed the canalized creek straight ahead, and soon reached the Suwannee River at WP2. The exit of the true creek is one third of a mile downstream at WP3. The river flow was still overcoming the young flood tide, and we turned south, reaching the entrance to the East Pass, WP4, in about half an hour. The river flow in the East Pass was strongly in our favor. Half way down the pass, at a major left hand bend, we noted a small island with a tidal sand bar exposed on its southern tip. It was too early for lunch, and the flow was favorable, so we pressed on, enjoying the sight of ospreys on their nests on the western bank. As we entered the Gulf, we saw that there was a small island close ahead and to the right. We headed between it and the mainland, and spied a long sandbar, WP5, stretching fifty yards to the south from the island. This was taken as our lunch spot, albeit briefly, as the flood tide was rapidly covering the sandbar. After lunch we headed west towards the West Pass entrance to the Suwannee River. We headed on a course of 288 degrees true, leading after 2.6 miles to a small pass giving access to the West Pass. There was little significant tidal current on this offshore leg. The water was shallow, less than one foot, on the approach to the pass, and, at lower water levels, we would have traveled on 280 degrees true to pass outside the islands to enter the West Pass directly. This was our original plan, but the small pass looked inviting. On entering the West Pass, the flood tide was pouring in, having overwhelmed the river flow, and we followed the Suwannee back to WP3, where we turned into Munden Creek “proper”, and followed this past several alligators to the launch site. Magic!

Lock Creek and Shingle Creek, Suwannee



5 . Lock Creek and Shingle Creek, Suwannee

Distance: 6.8 miles

Launch site: Suwannee boat ramp. DeLorme Atlas page 69 (B2). From the stop light on US 19 at Old Town in Dixie County, Page 64 (D1), County Road 349 leads south west for 23 miles to a dead end at the town of Suwannee. About 400 yards from the dead end, turn left onto Big Bradford Road, South East 205th Street. Follow this for a couple of hundred yards, bearing right at a junction, and the launch site is on the left. The boat ramp is on a small creek which leads to the Suwannee River after fifty yards. There is parking for a few vehicles by the grass verge on the right.

GPS Waypoints:

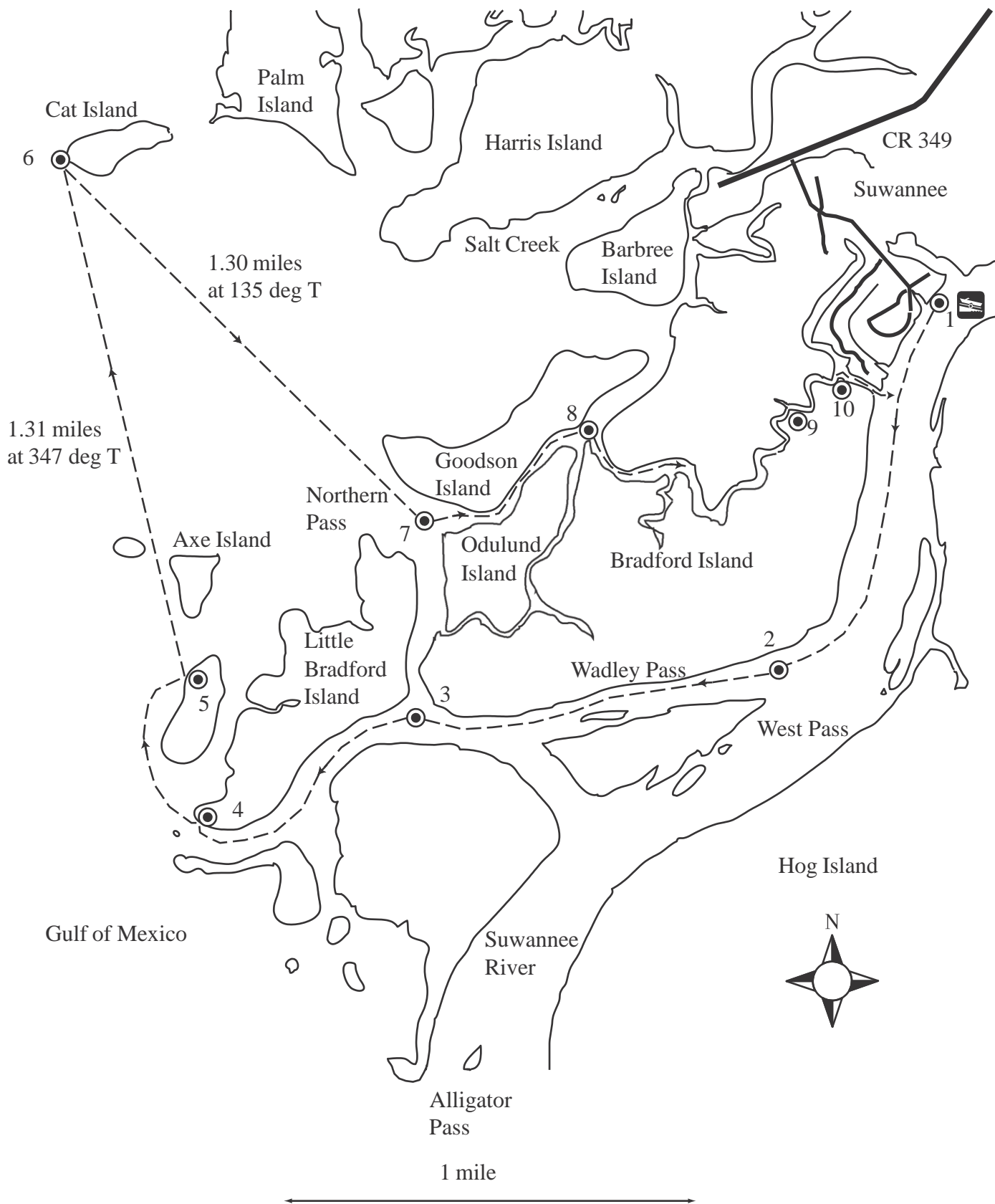
WP1, N29 deg 19.371, W83 deg 08.592 then 0.92 miles to
WP2, N29 deg 19.341, W83 deg 07.722 then 0.90 miles to
WP3, N29 deg 19.749, W83 deg 07.591 then 0.21 miles to
WP4, N29 deg 19.866, W83 deg 07.534 then 1.42 miles to
WP5, N29 deg 19.992, W83 deg 06.436 then 0.47 miles to
WP6, N29 deg 19.641, W83 deg 06.540 then 1.59 miles to
WP7, N29 deg 19.039, W83 deg 07.645 then 1.23 miles back to WP1

Tidal data reference point:

Suwannee River entrance.

Trip Description: If the wind is blowing too hard for your planned coastal trip, or you just want to visit some primitive creeks to view the alligators and other wildlife, this could be just the trip. We left the launch site, WP1, an hour before high water, aiming for a favorable current throughout the circular trip. On reaching the Suwannee, we turned left, and took the tide upriver to WP2, the junction with Lock Creek. We followed this to WP3, where Demory Creek leads off left, back towards the town of Suwannee. We found this creek to be blocked by numerous deadfall trees, and, not wishing to haul our 100 pound tandem through the swamp, we returned to Lock Creek, and followed it for 0.21 miles to WP4, where Lock Creek, our route, takes a right turn, and a subsidiary creek is straight ahead. After another 1.42 miles there is a very sharp right hand bend at WP5, where Lock Creek turns to the south. On the north bank of this bend there was the largest alligator we have seen. The reference books state that these creatures achieve a maximum length of 18 feet, but this one hadn't read the books. It certainly dwarfed our eighteen and a half foot kayak, and its legs looked like those of a rhinoceros. It slid into the water. We fled. We have seen many hundreds of alligators in our years of paddling in Florida, but none was close to this one. We later reported the sighting to the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge office on the road to Cedar Key. It was a relief to head south for another half a mile to meet the Suwannee River again at WP6. (If the flood is still running you might wish to turn left, and explore Munden Creek, whose entrance is 0.6 miles upriver. We have always spied several alligators here.) We then took the first of the ebb tide back to the launch point, with a diversion through Magnesia Pass, WP7.

Suwannee to Little Bradford Island and Cat Island



6. Suwannee to Little Bradford Island and Cat Island

Distance: 7.9 miles

Launch site: Suwannee boat ramp. DeLorme Atlas page 69 (B2). From the stop light on US 19 at Old Town in Dixie County, Page 64 (D1), County Road 349 leads south west for 23 miles to a dead end at the town of Suwannee. About 400 yards from the dead end, turn left onto Big Bradford Road, South East 205th Street. Follow this for a couple of hundred yards, bearing right at a junction, and the launch site is on the left after about 100 yards. The boat ramp is on a small creek which leads to the Suwannee River after fifty yards. There is parking for a few vehicles on the grass verge on the right.

GPS Waypoints:

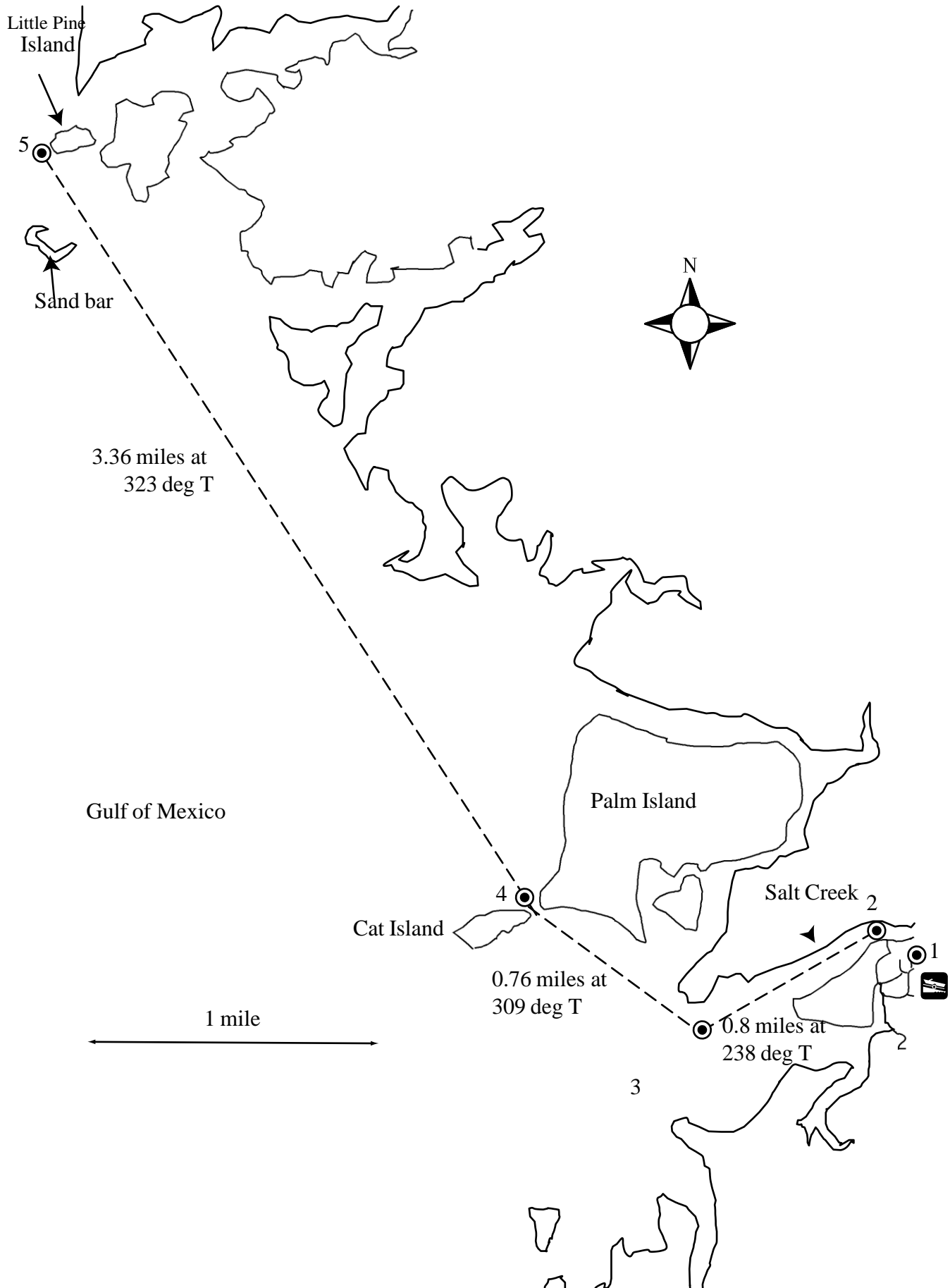
WP1, N29 deg 19.403, W83 deg 08.626 then 1.03 miles to
WP2, N29 deg 18.582, W83 deg 08.984 then 0.89 miles to
WP3, N29 deg 18.488, W83 deg 09.861 then 0.73 miles to
WP4, N29 deg 18.281, W83 deg 10.419 then 0.47 miles to
WP5, N29 deg 18.591, W83 deg 10.426 then 1.31 miles at 347 deg T to
WP6, N29 deg 19.702, W83 deg 10.734 then 1.30 miles at 135 deg T to
WP7, N29 deg 18.922, W83 deg 09.847 then 0.50 miles to
WP8, N29 deg 19.113, W83 deg 09.448 then 0.90 miles to
WP9, N29 deg 19.164, W83 deg 08.917 then 0.29 miles to
WP10, N29 deg 19.252, W83 deg 08.814 then 0.43 miles back to WP1

Tidal data reference point:

Suwannee River entrance.

Trip Description: We left the boat ramp (WP1) 45 minutes before low water, and took the last of the ebb down the Suwannee, bearing right at WP2 to take the Wadley Pass to WP3, the junction with the North Pass, and then on to have lunch on an excellent white sand beach at the western end of a conspicuous shell mound, WP4, on Little Bradford Island. Then, oh my, we were in sea kayak heaven. Once in the past eleven winters we saw a huge sturgeon leaping in the Suwannee. This time it was a ten foot long bottle-nose dolphin that excited us with its leaps and rushes to chase its prey in the shallows. The Suwannee Reef was visible on the horizon to the west. From the top of the shell mound there was a spectacular view of Cat Island and its white beaches to the north. We paddled north to WP5, where we found a most beautiful beach under classic palm trees. It just doesn't get any better than this. Cat Island, WP6, was visible from here through a gap between Axe Island and a smaller island, and 20 minutes later we were exploring the beaches on both sides of the west end of Cat Island. We then set a course of 135 degrees true to reach the entrance to the North Pass, WP7, where we headed left with the flood tide into the creek system behind Goodson Island. We took three rights: at WP8 at a power pole, WP9 at a creek junction, and WP10 at a T junction with a canal. We soon arrived at the Suwannee, turned left, and a few minutes later we were back at the boat ramp. This was a truly wonderful trip.

Salt Creek to Little Pine Island



7. Salt Creek to Little Pine Island

Distance: 10.8 miles

Launch site: Suwannee Community Center, DeLorme Atlas page 69 (B2). From the stop light on US19 at Old Town in Dixie County, Page 64 (D1), County Road 349 leads south west for 23 miles to a dead end at the town of Suwannee. The Community Center is on the left, about 100 yards before the dead end. There is parking in the grounds, with access to a floating pontoon on a creek. Local enquiries indicated that we were welcome to use the pontoon and parking.

GPS Waypoints:

WP1, N29 deg 19.647, W83 deg 09.027, then through creeks for 0.47 miles to
WP2, N29 deg 19.705, W83 deg 09.165 then 0.80 miles at 238 deg T to
WP3, N29 deg 19.350, W83 deg 09.842 then 0.76 miles at 309 deg T to
WP4, N29 deg 19.764, W83 deg 10.433 then 3.36 miles at 323 deg T to
WP5, N29 deg 22.268, W83 deg 12.134

Tidal data reference point:

Suwannee River entrance.

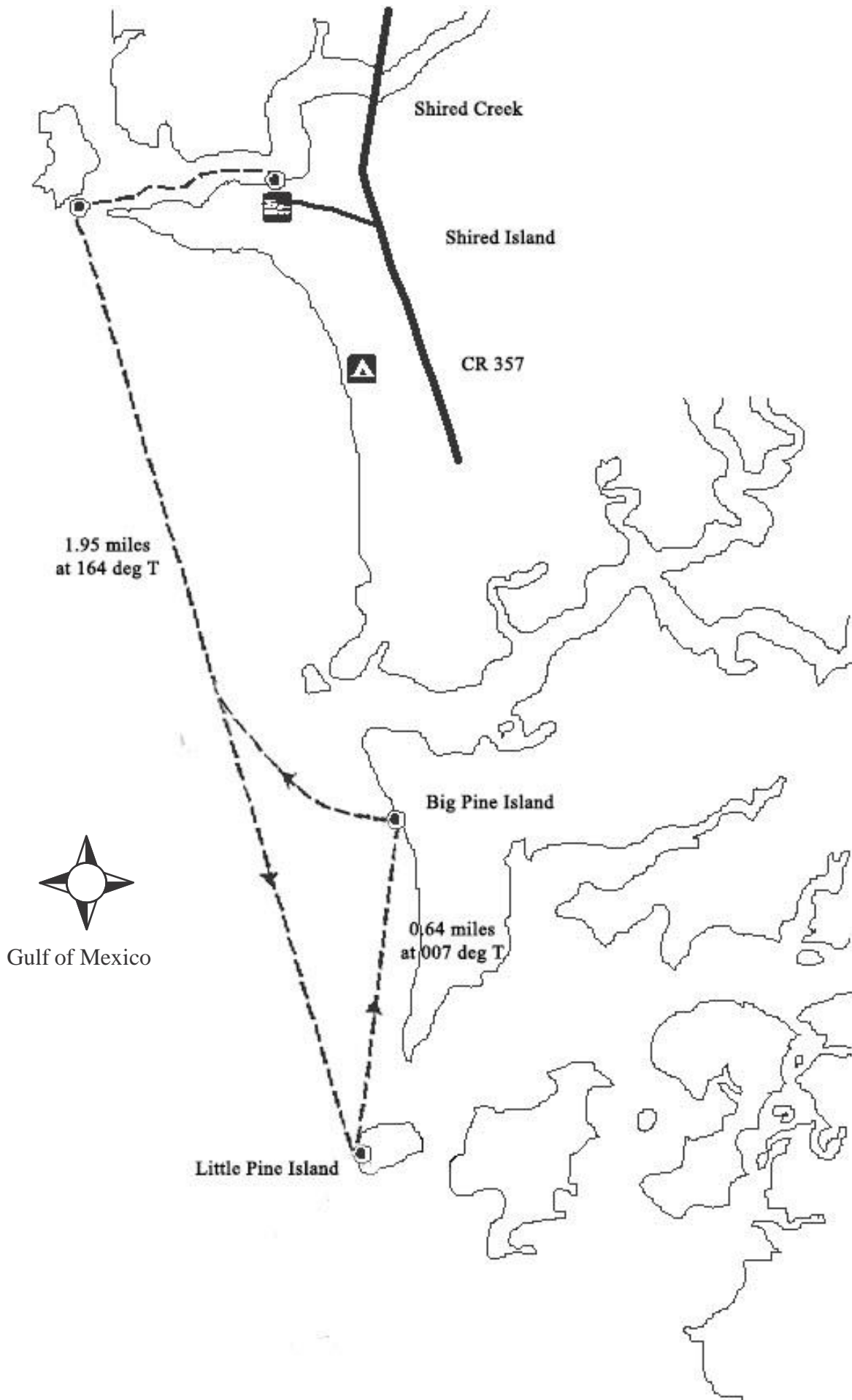
Trip Description: Each time we head out from Salt Creek we remember with sadness the two schoolboys who died of hypothermia when attempting this route a few years ago. They were in a canoe and, in an offshore wind and gathering darkness, they became separated from their school party. This coast can bite.

Little Pine Island, the destination for this trip, realizes the sea kayaker's dream of an idyllic sub-tropical landing. There is a sandy beach on the west side, backed by palm trees, and the whole is small enough to give the true feel of an island. This is a gem.

We started this trip two hours before high water. At the Community Center floating pontoon (WP1) we headed right, paddled round a right hand bend and followed the main creek on 245 degrees true to a T-junction, where we turned right (North), and then followed round a left bend across the front of a gray block of condominiums, quickly joining Salt Creek at red channel marker 28 (WP2). We followed the channel markers for 0.8 miles to WP3, where the gap between Cat and Palm Islands (WP4) bore 309 degrees true, 0.76 miles distant. We arrived at this shallow gap an hour and a half before high water, and found a least depth of about two feet. We have passed this way four times, and have always scraped through. At lower tides, voyagers may need to detour round the west end of Cat Island. After passing through this gap towards its south west side to avoid shallows, we carried on at 323 degrees true for another three miles towards Little Pine Island (WP5). About a mile before Little Pine Island we spotted a shimmering white area, fine on the port bow. Was this a mirage? Closer inspection revealed a sand bar, almost awash, and covered with sea birds. We stayed well clear. The landing beach on Little Pine Island is on its Gulf side. Enjoy!

We returned to Salt Creek by reversing our outward route.

Shired Island to Little Pine Island and Big Pine Island



8 . Shired Island to Little Pine Island and Big Pine Island

Distance: 4.1 miles

Launch site: Shired Island boat ramp. Delorme Atlas page 69 (A2). From a stop light at Cross City on Route 19, (page 63, C2), County Road 351 leads south for 7.6 miles to a left turn onto County Road 357. This is followed for 10.9 miles to a junction with a small road on the right, shortly after the bridge over Shired Creek. This is followed for 0.2 miles to the boat ramp. There is ample parking.

GPS Waypoints:

WP1, N29 deg 23.946, W83 deg 12.291

WP2, N29 deg 23.902, W83 deg 12.660 then 2.38 miles at 170 deg T to

WP3, N29 deg 22.268, W83 deg 12.134 then 0.64 miles at 007 deg T to

WP4, N29 deg 22.825, W83 deg 12.046, then 1.56 miles, curving back to WP2.

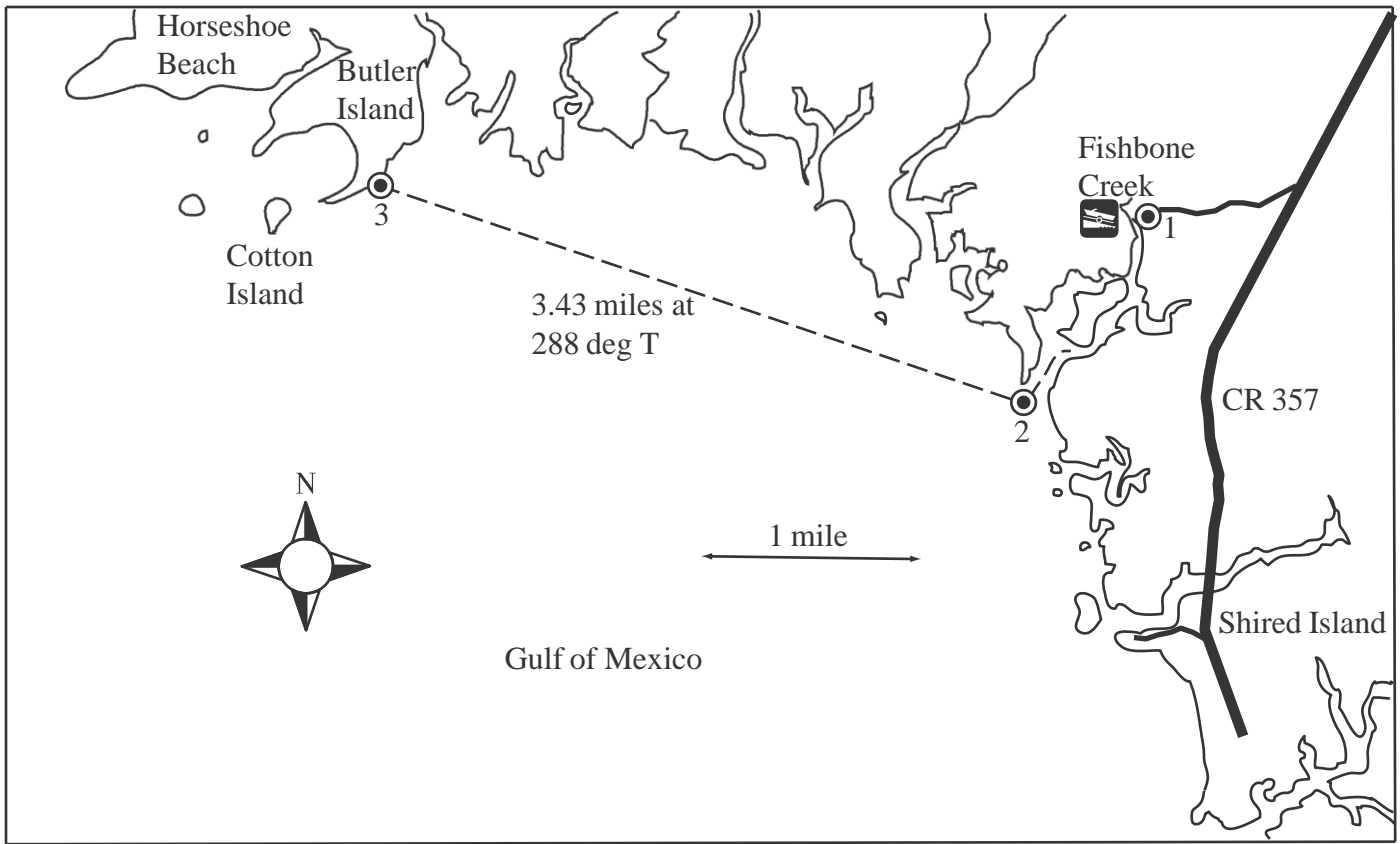
Tidal data reference point: Suwannee River entrance.

Trip Description: Little Pine Island is a perfect destination, with its beach and palm trees, so we feel justified in visiting it twice on trips in this book. On a previous occasion at the Shired Island boat ramp our navigator managed to trap a cloud of hungry no-see-ums under his spray deck, but on this occasion the launch was bug-free. We launched at low water, and scraped our way west down Shired Creek. The exit to the Gulf is blocked by an island and a group of sandbars, but we wiggled through these, and round to the south, to reach the creek exit (WP2), 0.42 miles from the boat ramp. From here, Little Pine Island, WP3, bears 170 degrees true, 2.38 miles distant. There is a shallow patch about half way, and we have always avoided this to seaward. Lunch on Little Pine Island was as pleasant as ever, and we then headed for Big Pine Island, WP4, 0.64 miles away on a bearing of 007 degrees true. There is a long sandy beach, and it makes a pleasant rest spot, but without the intimacy of Little Pine Island. On a direct line between this beach and the Shired Island creek entry at WP2 is a mass of shallows, and a long detour into the Gulf is necessary to avoid them. The GPS showed 1.56 miles on the return curved course. The return to the boat ramp was much simpler with the higher tide.

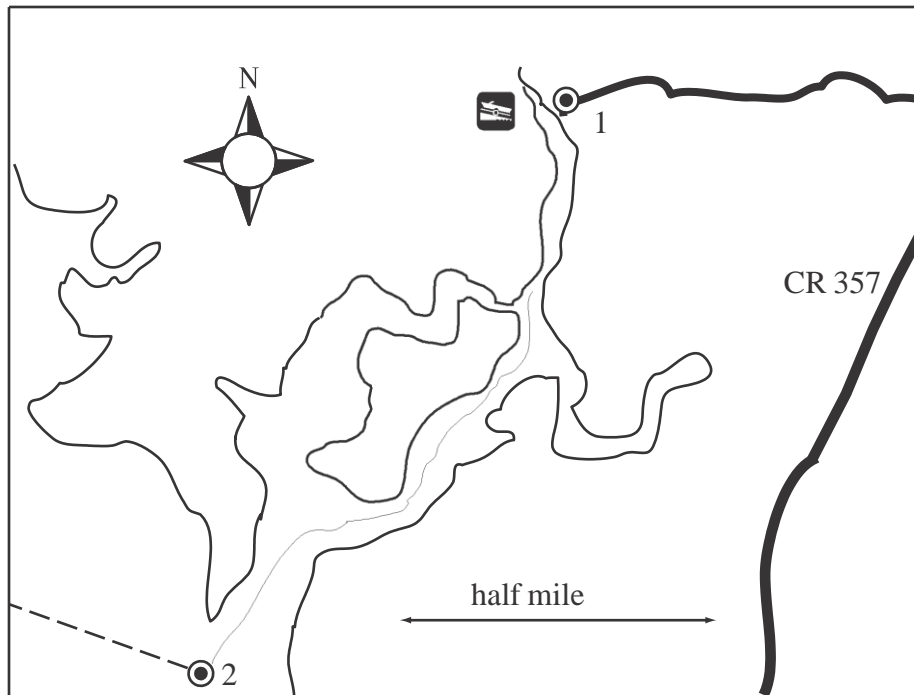
One alternative trip from Shired Island that we have enjoyed is to visit Fishbone Creek, whose entrance is only one mile to the north. We paddled this route on a stifling hot day, when our main activity was throwing water over each other to cool off. We explored a narrow side creek off Fishbone Creek, and realized that we had inadvertently trapped a shoal of mullet in the dead end of the creek. The mass of fish panicked, turned back towards us, and rushed for the exit. Fish crashed against the hull of the kayak, and threw themselves onto the mud on each side of the creek.

Another alternative we have enjoyed is to visit Butler Island from Shired Island. Both these alternatives can use the description and waypoints from trip 9, Fishbone Creek to Butler Island.

Fishbone Creek to Butler Island



Detail of Fishbone Creek



9. Fishbone Creek to Butler Island

Distance: 9.3 miles

Launch site: Fishbone Creek. Delorme Atlas page 69 (A2). From a stop light at Cross City on Route 19, (page 63, C2), County Road 351 leads south for 7.6 miles to a left turn onto County Road 357. This is followed for 8.4 miles to a junction with a small road on the right at N29 deg 25.896, W83 deg 11.633. This road is followed for 0.9 miles to the launch site. There is parking for a couple of vehicles.

GPS Waypoints

WP1, N29 deg 25.679, W83 deg 12.437

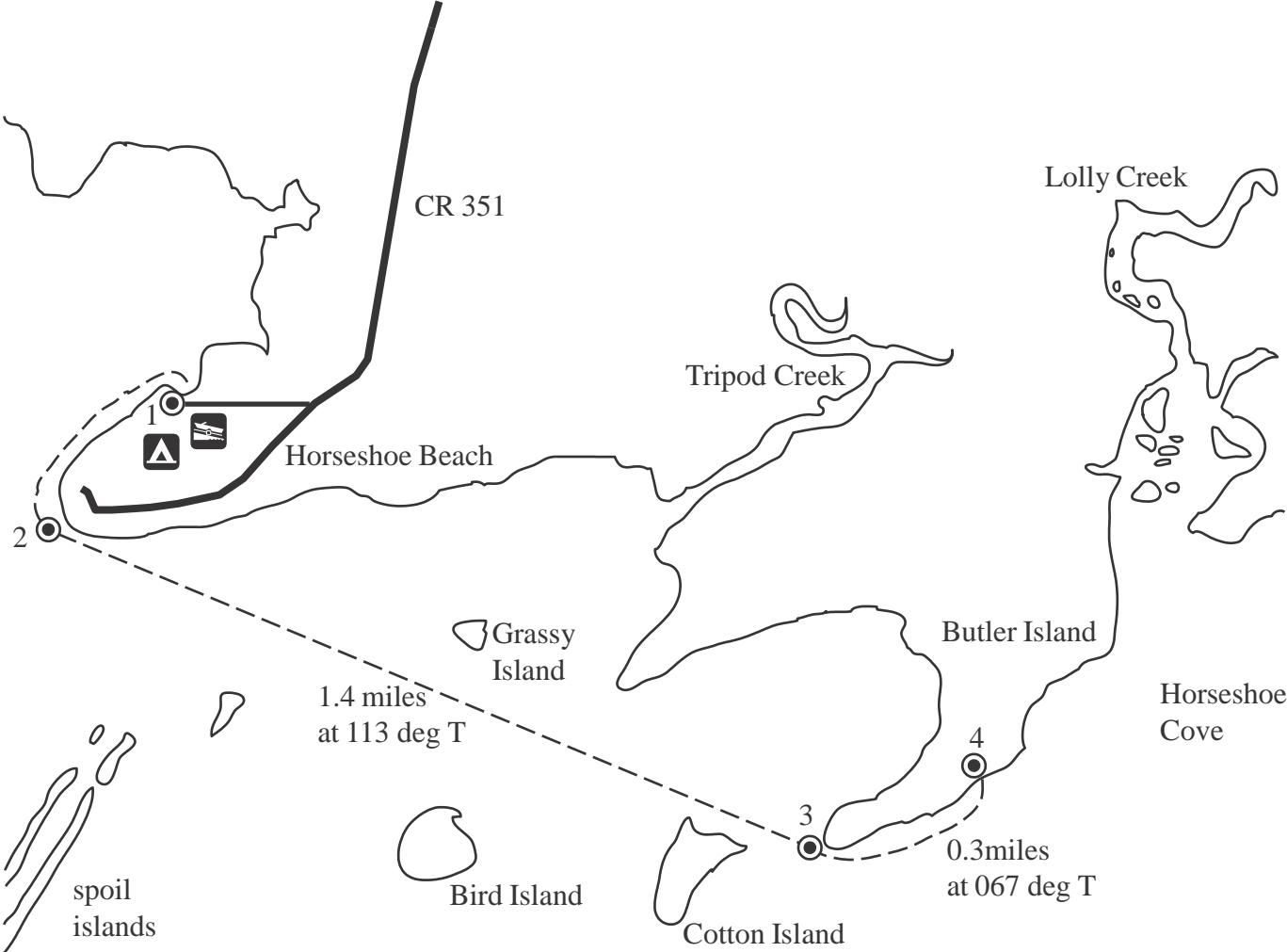
WP2, N29 deg 24.916, W83 deg 12.993 then 3.43 miles at 288 T to

WP3, N29 deg 25.843, W83 deg 16.246

Tidal data reference point: Suwannee River entrance.

Trip Description: This route combines an unspoiled and little used launch site with an idyllic destination. We left the creek-side launch site (WP1) at half flood tide, headed left, and then shortly swung right on an average heading of 225 degrees true down the creek to reach the Gulf at WP2 after 1.2 miles. Away to the north-west, the mainland ended at a headland, off which was a conspicuous island. It was tempting to assume this was Butler Island, but the compass insisted that our destination was further to the east, lost against the background of coastal vegetation. Inspection of the chart revealed that the conspicuous island was Cotton Island. We kept faith with the compass, and followed a course of 288 degrees true for 3.43 miles to arrive at Butler Island. (WP3) There are sandbars and shallows on this route, and diversions will be necessary, particularly within a quarter of a mile of Butler Island. The landing beach at WP3 is a campsite on the Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail, marked as such with a post and sign. After an idyllic lunch under the palm trees we headed back towards Fishbone Creek. The sea breeze had arrived, soon reaching fifteen miles per hour and creating a short steep quartering sea in the shallow water. We surfed along at seven miles per hour with the foredeck of the kayak frequently disappearing into the back of the wave ahead, while solid waves washed across the boat between the cockpits. It is sometimes tempting to paddle without spraydecks in the normal warm weather on this coast, but we resist that temptation. We were soon back at the launch site, after another of this coast's classic trips.

Horseshoe Beach to Butler Island



Gulf of Mexico

10. Horseshoe Beach to Butler Island

Distance: 4.4 miles

Launch site: Horseshoe Beach public boat ramp. Delorme Atlas page 69 (A1). From a stop light at Cross City on Route 19, (page 63, C2), County Road 351 leads south for 19.3 miles to the town of Horseshoe Beach. The turning to the boat ramp, parking and the County campground is 8th Avenue West. This turning is on the right, shortly before County Road 351 ends.

GPS Waypoints

WP1, N29 deg 26.421, W83 deg 17.531

WP2, N29 deg 26.215, W83 deg 17.755 then 1.4 miles at 113 deg T to

WP3, N29 deg 25.752, W83 deg 16.504 then 0.3 miles at 067 deg T to

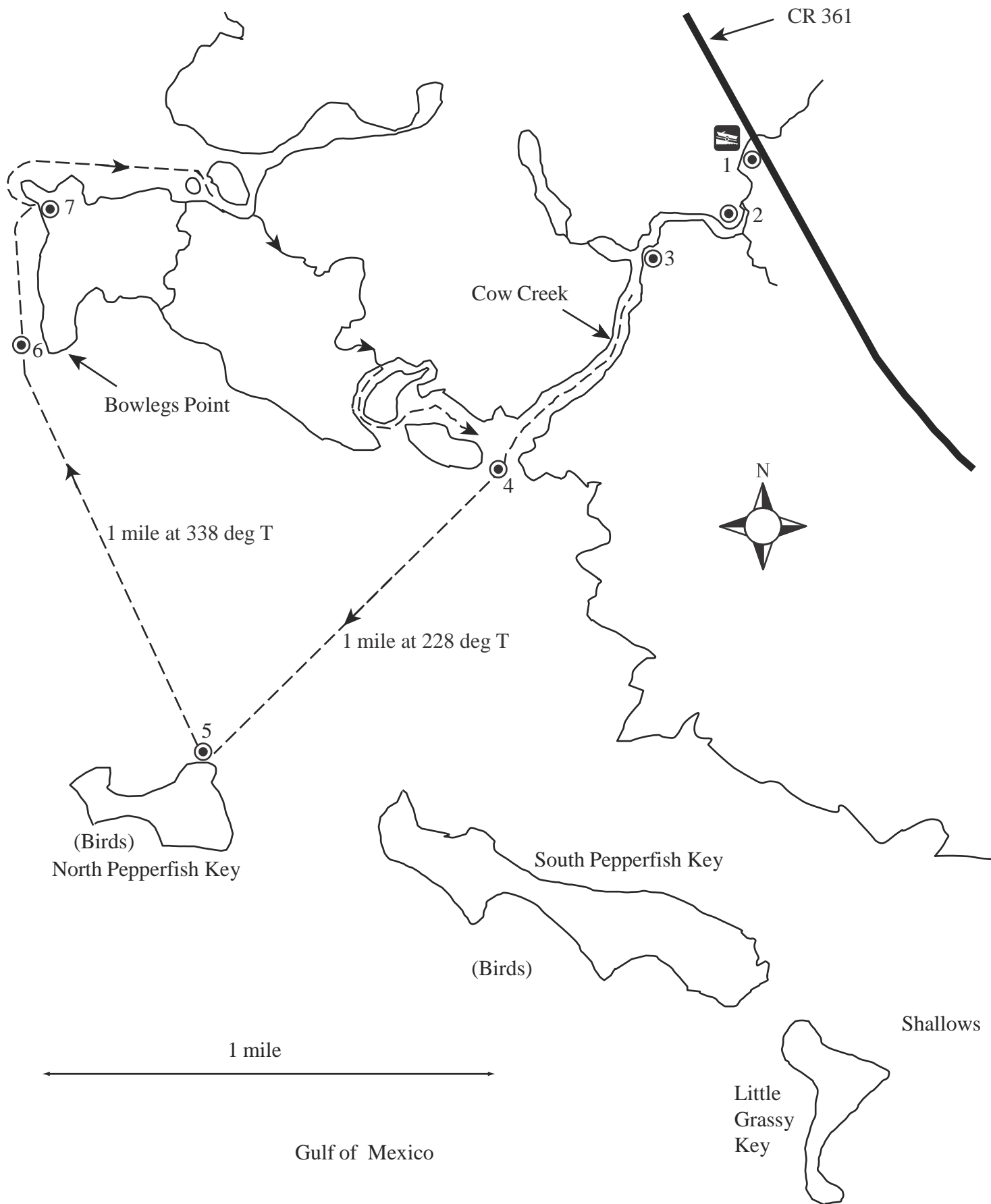
WP4, N29 deg 25.855, W83 deg 16.222

Tidal data reference point: Suwannee River entrance.

Trip Description: This is an ideal trip for introducing newcomers, and particularly young children, to the pleasures of sea kayaking. Butler Island, an idyllic picnic spot, is easily accessed by three quarters of an hour of gentle paddling from Horseshoe Beach in the right weather conditions. We recently took an Ukranian friend on this trip. Irene looked out through the palm trees and over the sand beach to the Gulf, and said “Yes, this is paradise.”

From the busy boat ramp (WP1) at the County campground we headed south-west, keeping the land close to port. This exit creek virtually dries at low water, so we left at half flood tide. When we reached Horseshoe Point (WP2), the gap between Butler and Cotton Islands, WP3, bore 113 degrees true, 1.4 miles distant. It was a relief to leave behind the air boats and power boats near the launch site, and head into the total contrast of the Gulf coast of Butler Island. This is followed from WP3 for 0.3 miles on a course of 067 degrees true to the destination, WP4. This is a campsite on the Big Bend Saltwater paddling trail. It was well chosen.

Cow Creek to North Pepperfish Key and Bowlegs Point



11. Cow Creek to North Pepperfish Key and Bowlegs Point

Distance: 6.3 miles

Launch site: Cow Creek. Delorme Atlas page 63 (D1). From Jonesboro on Route 19, page 63 (D1), follow State Road 358 west for 4.3 miles to Jena. Take County Road 361 south where the 358 swings right at Jena, and follow “the road to nowhere” for 10.5 miles to where the road passes over Cow Creek at WP1. This is shortly after an unpaved section and a left hand bend. There is ample parking.

GPS Waypoints:

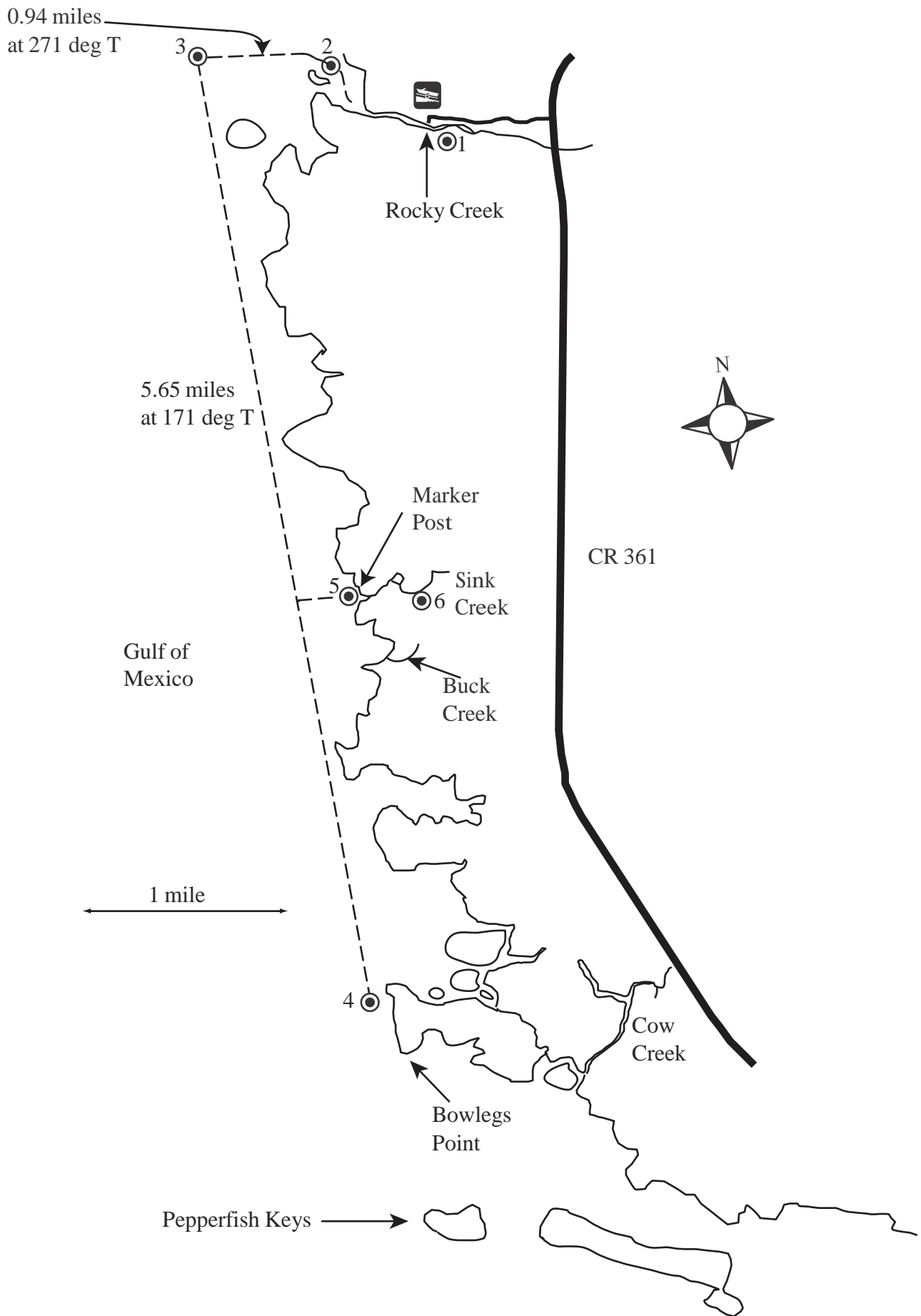
WP1, N29 deg 31.438, W83 deg 22.442 WP2, N29 deg 31.267, W83 deg 22.489
WP3, N29 deg 31.231, W83 deg 22.711 WP4, N29 deg 30.782, W83 deg 23.025
Then 1.0 mile at 228 deg T to WP5, N29 deg 30.251, W83 deg 23.696
Then 1.0 mile at 338 deg T to WP6, N29 deg 31.066, W83 deg 24.119
WP7, N29 deg 31.356, W83 deg 24.069

Tidal data reference point: Pepperfish keys, from www.saltwatertides.com

Trip Description: It was only on our fourth attempt that we eventually landed on North Pepperfish Key. On our first attempt, from Rocky Creek, we ran out of energy, and turned back at Bowlegs Point. On our second, from Horseshoe Beach, we ran out of water in the shallow approaches to South Pepperfish Key. On our third, from Cow Creek, we ran out of “tide time” after visiting the southeastern tip of South Pepperfish Key. When we finally reached the north shore of North Pepperfish Key we found it to be a disappointing destination for sea kayakers. There is no attractive beach, and no trees for shade. The sand beaches on the very shallow south shores of both Pepperfish Keys are home to huge flocks of sea birds, and we left the birds in peace. The more interesting section of this trip for kayakers is the exploration of the creeks inland of Bowlegs Point that lead back to Cow Creek and the launch site. Tidal height is critical for this round trip. Cow creek has a permanent flow from the surrounding land. Each time we have been there we have placed a marker on the mud at the edge of the stream, and waited for the tide to rise from seaward. On our last visit this did not occur until two hours before high water, probably because of high atmospheric pressure and persistent offshore winds. When the water first starts to rise, it is possible to paddle out to the Gulf with only a couple of oyster bars requiring the stern paddler to dismount, and pull the kayak through. At low water it is possible to reach the Gulf with considerable shallow wading and pulling the kayak.

We left the launch point (WP1), and after quarter of a mile came to a T-junction (WP2) where we turned right. We seemed to be heading away from the coast; however, the creek soon swung round to the south and, at WP3, a subsidiary creek came in from the right. We followed Cow Creek straight ahead on 196 degrees true, and half a mile later entered the Gulf at WP4. The direct route (228 degrees true, 1 mile) from WP4 to the small beach (WP5) on North Pepperfish Key passes over a shallow sand bar, so we deviated slightly to the east to avoid this. Bowlegs Point (WP6) bears 338 degrees true, one mile from WP5, and, after reaching Bowlegs Point, we followed the coast north for about 500 yards to a good sand beach and lunch spot (WP7). This gives access to a wooded area to the east, if shade is desired. From this beach we rounded the northern tip of the promontory and entered Bull Cove on a heading of 108 degrees true, which led to a small grassy island. We skirted this on the left, and then kept right of a larger island, thus entering a beautiful creek system of clear water and sand bottom. There were several junctions with subsidiary creeks, but, by keeping generally to the right, and following the main flooding tidal flow, we soon arrived at a wider waterway which led to Cow Creek, near its Gulf entrance. We returned up Cow Creek, arriving at the launch point at high water.

Rocky Creek to Bowlegs Point and Sink Creek



12. Rocky Creek to Bowlegs Point and Sink Creek

Distance: 15.0 miles

Launch site: Rocky Creek. Delorme Atlas page 62 (D3). From Jonesboro on Route 19, page 63 (C1), follow County Road 358 for 4.3 miles to Jena. Take County Road 361 south where the 358 swings right at Jena, and follow “the road to nowhere” for 5.3 miles to a right turn onto Lucy Lane at N29 deg 35.746, W83 deg 22.663. This is the second turn on the right before the road crosses Rocky Creek. Follow this road for three quarters of a mile to the launch point, where there is ample parking.

GPS Waypoints:

WP1, N29 deg 35.784, W83 deg 23.419

Then 0.94 miles at 271 deg T to

Then 5.65 miles at 171 deg T to

WP5, N29 deg 33.382, W83 deg 24.065

WP2, N29 deg 36.165, W83 deg 24.068

WP3, N29 deg 36.195, W83 deg 25.001

WP4, N29 deg 31.325, W83 deg 24.124

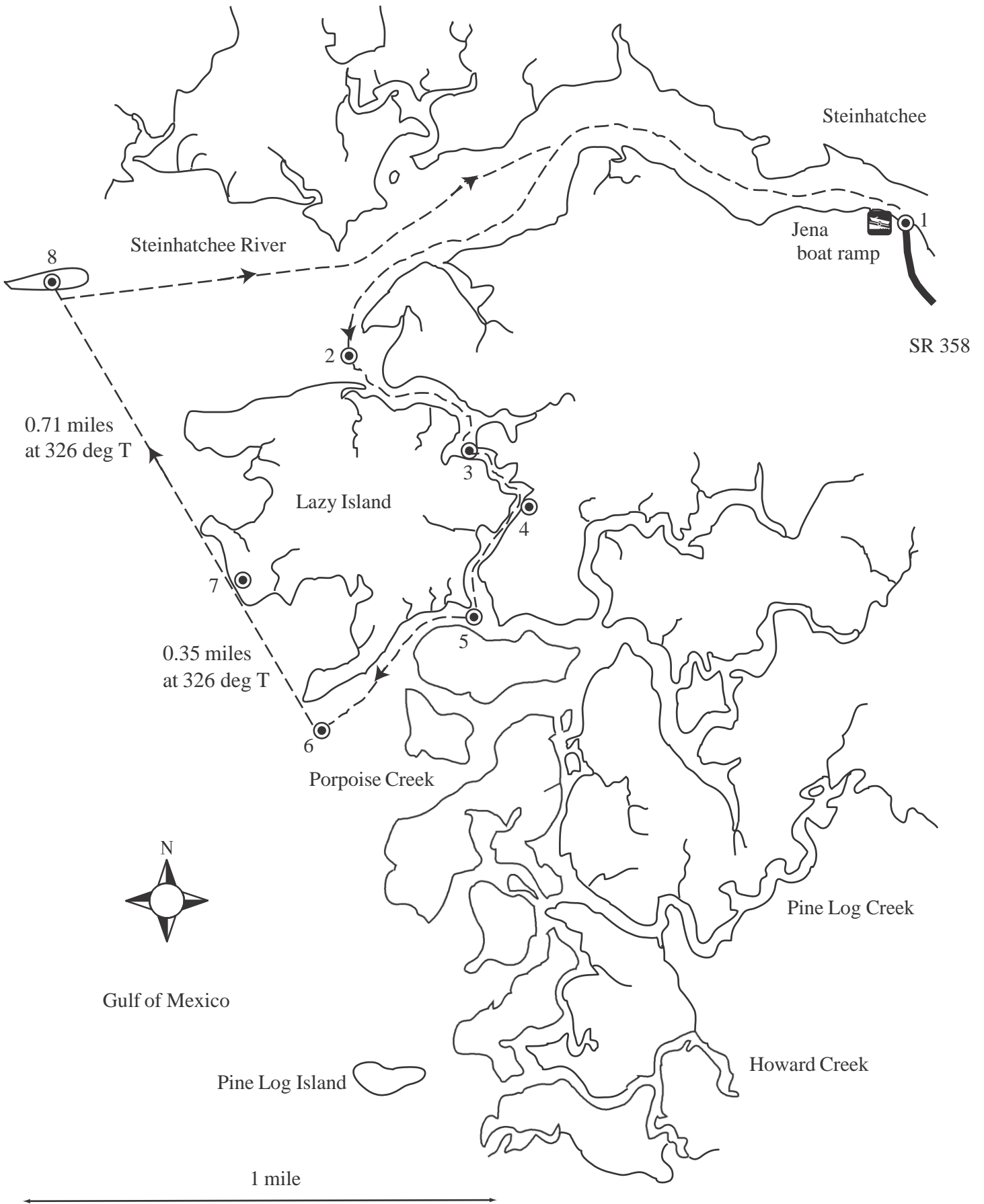
WP6, N29 deg 33.385, W83 deg 23.725

Tidal data reference point: Pepperfish keys, from www.saltwatertides.com

Trip Description: We had planned to make North Pepperfish Key our destination for this trip, but it was not to be. We now know that Bowlegs Point and Sink Creek are much better destinations for sea kayakers, and we enjoyed them both. Shortly after low water we headed right from the launch site, and after 0.6 miles came to a right bend in the main creek. A shallow creek leads straight ahead to the Gulf, but it was dry, and we swung right and then left with the main creek to arrive at the Gulf (WP2), 0.9 miles from the launch site. From here, WP3 bears 0.94 miles on a bearing of 271 degrees true, and this gives a safe line through the extensive shallows off the entrance to Rocky Creek. The course to North Pepperfish Key was 171 degrees true, and after an hour of steady paddling we could see an isolated piece of land ahead on the horizon, and slightly detached from the main coast line. Obviously this was North Pepperfish Key. Wrong! We paddled on through the midday sun of a hot day, and eventually our isolated piece of land merged into the coastline, and revealed itself to be Bowlegs Point. North Pepperfish Key shimmered in the distance, so, after two hours of steady paddling in the heat we decided to cut short the voyage at the sand beach near the north-west tip of Bowlegs Point, WP4, 5.65 miles from WP3. This is a good destination, with a pleasant beach, and there is access to a wooded area behind the beach if shade is desired. After lunch we left the Bowlegs beach, determined to reach the Sink Creek campsite on the Big Bend Saltwater Paddling trail. The trail booklet gave the GPS coordinates for this campsite, so, after 1.75 miles we passed a promontory, and headed in towards the campsite. This was a mistake which led us into the north-east corner of the bay into which Buck Creek flows, just south of Sink Creek. Fruitless exploration of small creeks in this corner failed to reach the tree-line, the obvious place for the campsite, so we exited the bay, cruised round to the next bay north, and saw a post marker in the distance. This post is now WP5. If we were to repeat this route we would follow the straight line course along the coast for 2.32 miles until WP5 was abeam, 0.5 miles distant, and only then head in towards it. From the post the creek leads inland for 0.5 miles, bearing right at an island, when the campsite is found on the right bank at the tree line. This is a pleasant spot to rest, and the creek can be explored further up to a spring. As it is some way inland from the sea, and sheltered, bug defenses may be required.

The return trip was uneventful, following the reciprocal course of 351 degrees true. As the tide had risen considerably we were able to cut the corner into Rocky Creek, after a tiring but rewarding day.

Round Lazy Island from Jena



13. Round Lazy Island from Jena

Distance: 6.0 miles, plus any exploration of the creeks to the south, and the spoil islands.

Launch site: Jena boat ramp on the Steinhatchee River. Delorme Atlas page 62 (C3). From Jonesboro on Route 19, page 63 (C1), follow State Road 358 west for 7.15 miles to the Jena boat ramp. There is a right bend at 4.6 miles where County Road 361 goes straight ahead. Bear right with the 358. Ignore the right turn to Steinhatchee, a further 1.8 miles along the highway. There is parking for several vehicles on each side of the road before the ramp, but it can be difficult to find a space at weekends or during fishing competitions.

GPS Waypoints:

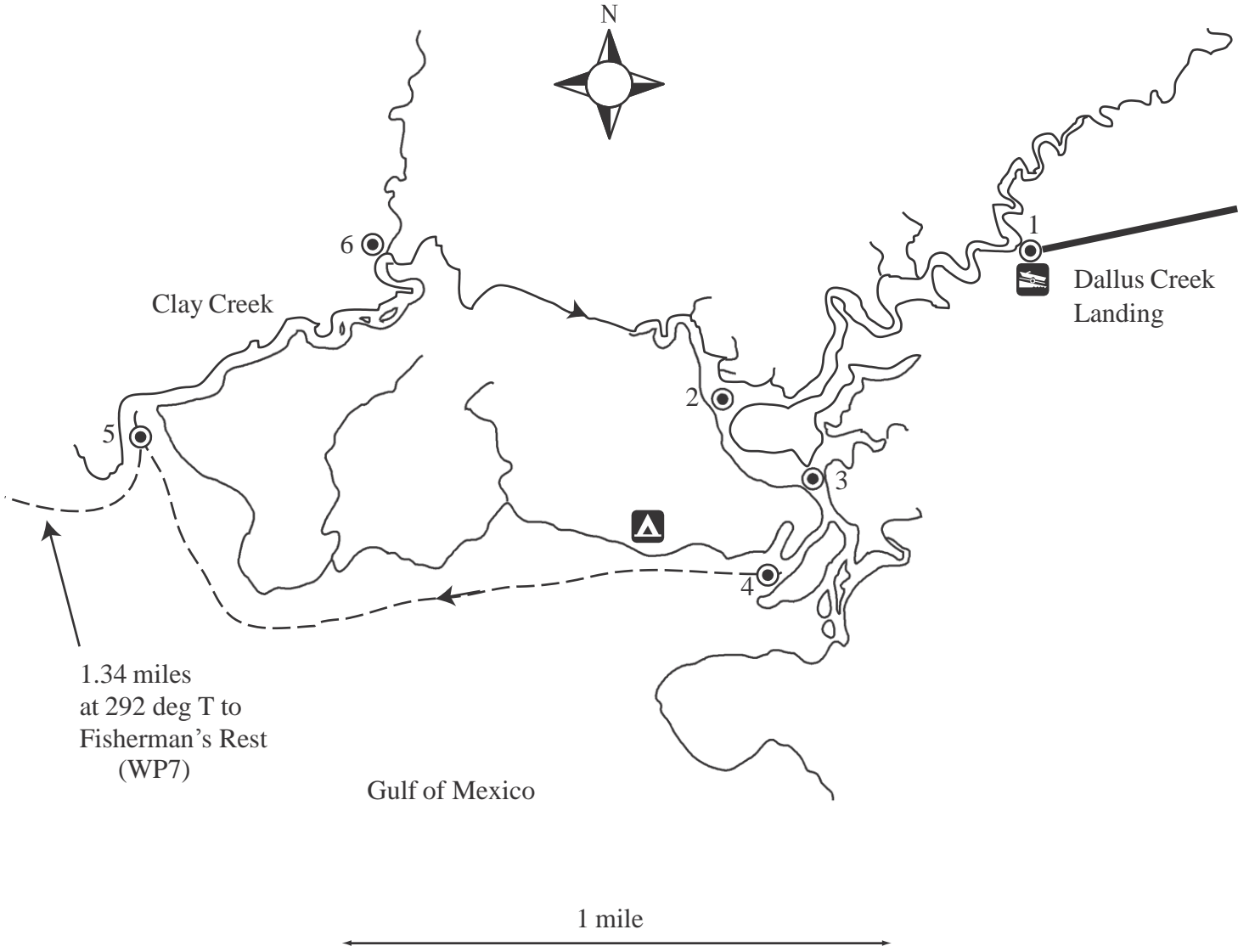
001 N29 deg 40.212, W83 deg 23.356 then 1.53 miles to
002 N29 deg 39.966, W83 deg 24.542 then 0.39 miles to
003 N29 deg 39.796, W83 deg 24.267 then 0.22 miles to
004 N29 deg 39.705, W83 deg 24.169 then 0.31 miles to
005 N29 deg 39.476, W83 deg 24.270 then 0.43 miles to
006 N29 deg 39.268, W83 deg 24.596 then 0.35 miles at 326 deg T to
007 N29 deg 39.524, W83 deg 24.775 then 0.71 miles at 326 deg T to
008 N29 deg 40.048, W83 deg 25.170 then 2.06 miles back to WP1

Tidal data reference point: Deadman Bay or Steinhatchee

Trip Description: It goes against the grain to paddle against the tide, but on this trip we decided to leave Jena boat ramp, WP1, three hours before high water, in order to hit the tidal creeks when they were full. The predicted high water level was 3.6 feet above chart datum. We kept close inshore to keep out of the fastest current, and we were only bucking a 0.5 mph current on average. After half an hour we arrived at WP2, where the creek behind Lazy Island was followed via WPs 3, 4 and 5 to arrive back at the Gulf at WP6. This is a good starting point for exploring Porpoise, Pine Log and Howard Creeks. The lonely creek behind Lazy Island is home to many oyster beds, and it was only just navigable at that state of tide. There was a one to two mph current with us until WP5. The spit of land extending out towards WP6 was just under water, and we needed to stand out fully to WP6 to outflank the shallows. We then set a course of 326 degrees true, and after 0.35 miles came to a small beach in front of a hardwood and palm hammock (WP7). This would make a good rest point, but we continued on the same course for another 0.71 miles to reach a small beach on a wooded spoil island at WP8. A series of spoil islands continues out seawards, and there are several beaches to visit. After a short rest we paddled back with the last of the flood tide to the boat ramp.

Another trip from this boat ramp, especially if conditions are too rough offshore, is to follow the Steinhatchee River upstream as far as you can, or as far as you wish. There are plenty of houses at first, but these soon give way to better scenery.

Dallus Creek to Fisherman's Rest (almost!)



14. Dallus Creek to Fisherman's Rest (almost!)

Distance: 8.5 miles if you get to Fisherman's Rest, 5.7 miles for just the creek circuit.

Launch site: Dallus Creek Landing. DeLorme Atlas page 62 (C3). From U.S Route 19 at Tennille, Page 63 (B1), take U.S Route 51 (County Road 490) south for 16.0 miles through the town of Steinhatchee, (where the road continues as County Road 361, though this is not signed.) to point N29 deg 44.044, W83 deg 27.036, where a left turn is made onto Dallus Creek Landing Road. The turning is marked with a sign for the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area, Dallus Creek Unit. This dirt road is followed for 2.8 miles to the launch site, where there is ample parking and a boat ramp.

GPS Waypoints:

WP1, N29 deg 43.303, W83 deg 29.195 then 1.00 mile to

WP2, N29 deg 43.060, W83 deg 29.749 then 0.25 miles to

WP3, N29 deg 42.932, W83 deg 29.580 then 0.25 miles to

WP4, N29 deg 42.762, W83 deg 29.669 then 1.30 miles to

WP5, N29 deg 42.937, W83 deg 30.792 then 0.91 miles to

WP6, N29 deg 43.292, W83 deg 30.356 then 0.94 miles back to

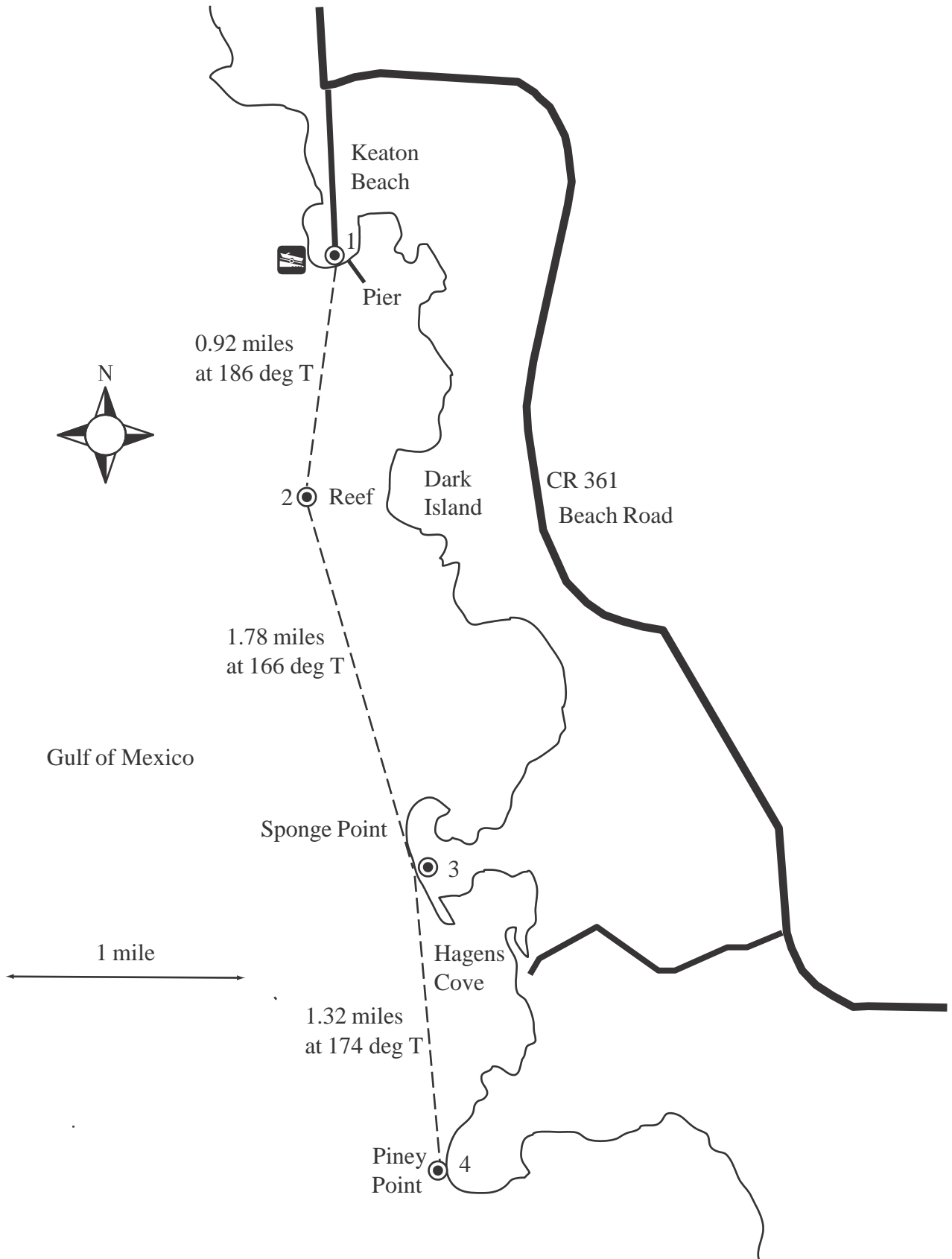
WP2, then 1.00 mile back to WP1

WP7, Fisherman's Rest, N29 deg 43.253, W83 deg 32.025, is 1.34 miles at 292 deg T from WP5

Tidal data reference point: Deadman Bay

Trip Description: Dallus Creek Landing and the nearby creeks are delightful. We knew that the nearby Fisherman's Rest headland had a good beach. We therefore decided to attempt a trip from Dallus Creek Landing to Fisherman's Rest, returning via Clay Creek. We launched (WP1) at two and a half hours before high water on a day with a predicted tidal height of 3.4 feet. At this time the water level had started to rise at the boat ramp. It took us 35 minutes to reach the Gulf at WP4. There was just enough water to paddle comfortably. If we had left any earlier, some wading and towing would have been necessary. At the Gulf we turned right, and headed along the shore, soon spotting the post and sign for the campsite on the Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail. We decided not to stop to explore, as we knew we would be short of "tide time" to complete the trip. We rounded a promontory and headed for WP5 to locate the entrance to Clay Creek for the return journey. This entrance is invisible at fifty yards distance. We then turned away towards the very prominent headland of Fisherman's Rest, WP7, 1.34 miles distant on a bearing of 292 deg T, and paddled off into a rising head wind. The navigator was nursing a torn rotator cuff, and awaiting surgery, so we were reduced to achieving just 3 miles per hour. We realized that we were running out of time to make it back through the creeks at high water, and we had not previously paddled Clay Creek. We reluctantly turned back, and entered a reassuringly wide and beautiful creek. It is important to note the right hand turn at WP6, after which the creek narrows down to five feet in places, and there are some extreme hairpin turns until the creek widens again shortly before the return to WP2. The last of the tide returned us to the Landing. Next time we will leave a little earlier, be prepared to wade and tow, and try once more for Fisherman's Rest.

Keaton Beach to Sponge Point and Piney Point



15. Keaton Beach to Sponge Point and Piney Point

Distance: 8.1 miles plus any exploration of Hagens Cove

Launch site: Keaton Beach. DeLorme Atlas page 62 (B2). On U.S Route 19 at Salem, page 62 (B3), find the junction with Fish Creek Road, marked by a large blue sign for the Salem Baptist Church. Follow Fish Creek Road (a dirt road) south west for 12.3 miles to its junction with County Road 361, where a right turn is made. Follow CR 361 for 3.8 miles to a stop sign in the town of Keaton Beach. Here a left turn leads straight to the firm sand launch beach with car parks on both sides at the end of the road. The left side is closer to the beach. If coming from the north, take CR361 from U.S 19, 6.5 miles south-east of Perry, at page 52 (D2). Keaton Beach is 17 miles from this junction.

GPS Waypoints:

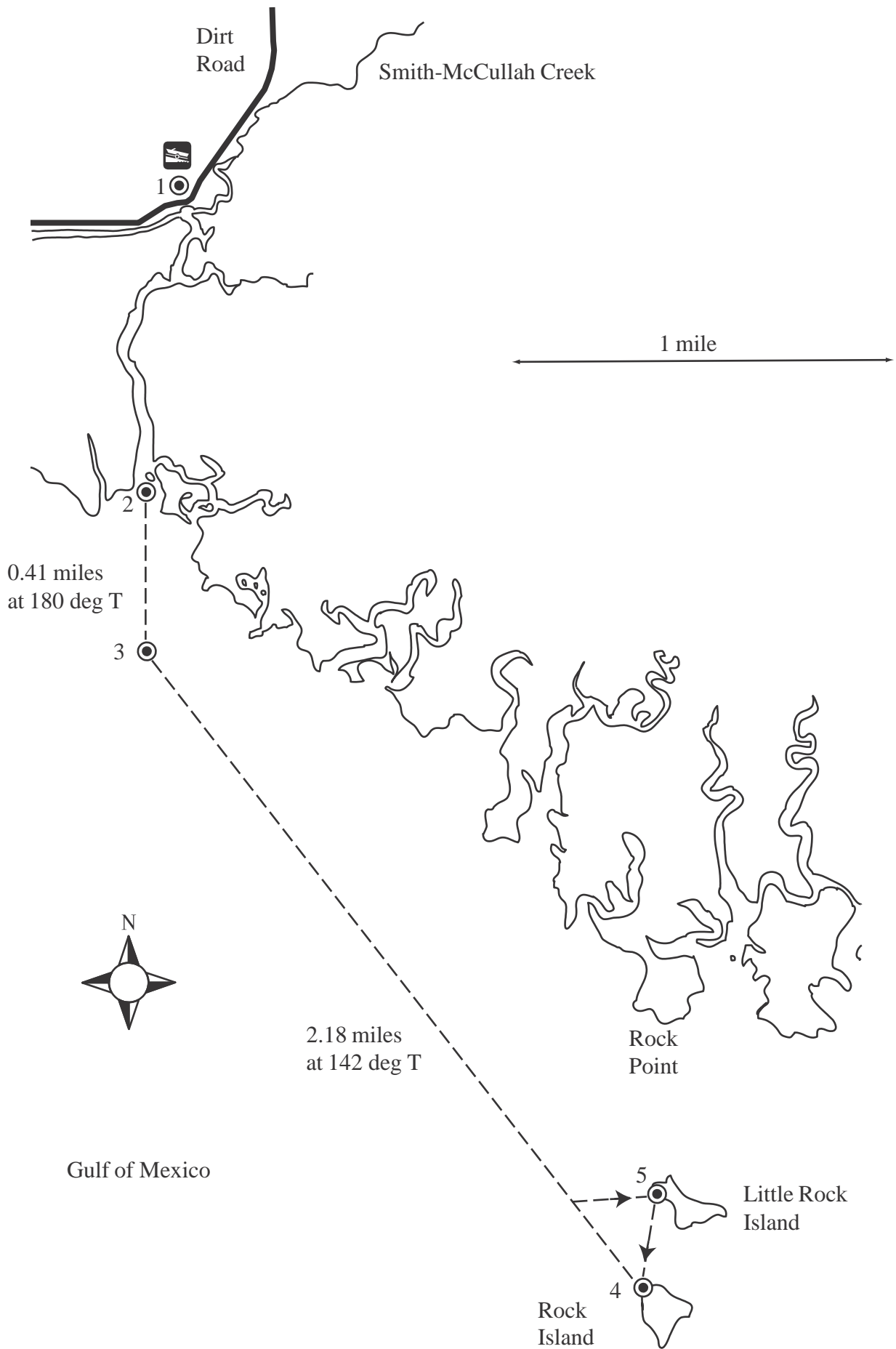
WP1, N29 deg 49.071, W83 deg 35.597 then 0.92 miles at 186 deg T to
WP2, N29 deg 48.272, W83 deg 35.686 then 1.78 miles at 166 deg T to
WP3, N29 deg 46.773, W83 deg 35.252 then 1.32 miles at 174 deg T to
WP4, N29 deg 45.629, W83 deg 35.150

Tidal data reference point: Deadman Bay

Trip Description: Keaton Beach is a delight. When standing on the beach, WP1, the trees on Piney Point were clearly visible to the south. However, the first surprise was that the direct route to Sponge and Piney Points was blocked by a rocky reef a mile distant. This reef extended about 600 yards out from the houses on Dark Island. We left at half flood tide on a predicted 3.2 foot high water above chart datum. The reef was still well above water. We therefore steered at 186 degrees true towards a post, WP2 marking the end of the reef, rather than the 173 degrees true on the direct route. Once this point was passed it was straightforward paddling to Sponge Point, WP3. However, we noticed that the flood tide was setting strongly towards the coast. Also, a ten mile per hour on shore breeze added to this effect, and we had to aim 20 degrees above the direct course to achieve our desired track. The water was wonderfully clear. Sponge Point has a campsite on the Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail, beautifully situated in the only hardwood hammock, just in from the sand beach. (This is where the front cover photo was taken.) From the campsite, Piney Point, WP4, is 1.32 miles across the mouth of Hagens Cove. After exploring the beaches around Piney Point, high water will permit a visit to the beach in center of Hagens Cove, with its picnic shelters and wildlife observation tower. On one visit to Hagens Cove we stayed until nightfall to watch an eclipse of the moon while lying flat on top of the observation tower. (This won't be repeated, as the tower now has a roof.)

We returned to Keaton Beach after a very enjoyable expedition.

Smith-McCullah Creek to the Rock Islands



16. Smith-McCullah Creek to the Rock Islands

Distance: 7.4 miles

Launch site: Smith-McCullah Creek. DeLorme Atlas page 51 (D3). At 16.5 miles east (by road) of the junction of U.S Route 98 and U.S Route 19 at Perry, page 52 (D2), locate a south turn onto a dirt road at N30 deg 08.603 W83 deg 50.289. This turn is marked by a sign for the Hickory Mound Impoundment, Big Bend Wildlife Management Area. Follow the dirt road south for 9.0 miles to a launch site on the left into Smith-McCullah Creek.

GPS Waypoints:

WP1, N30 deg 00.890, W83 deg 51.047 then 0.93 miles to
WP2, N30 deg 00.198, W83 deg 51.138 then 0.41 miles at 180 deg T to
WP3, N29 deg 59.839, W83 deg 51.134 then 2.18 miles at 142 deg T to
WP4, N29 deg 58.337, W83 deg 49.798 (Rock Island campsite)
WP5, N29 deg 58.568, W83 deg 49.785 (Little Rock Island beach)

Tidal data reference point: Rock Islands, from www.saltwatertides.com

Trip Description: Rock Island and Little Rock Island both have palm trees and small sand beaches suitable for landing a kayak. In addition, Rock Island has one of the campsites on the Big Bend Saltwater Paddling trail at its north-west tip. The islands are remote, and difficult to access, and this just adds to their attraction. We had to reach them. From the south-east, access would be possible from the Fenholloway River boat ramp, but we decided against that option because the river is polluted by effluent from a paper mill. We chose to attempt access from the north-west, via Smith-McCullah Creek. In order to find out just how early in the flood tide the creek was navigable, we launched 4 hours 20 minutes before a predicted high water of 3.2 feet above chart datum. There appeared to be about nine inches of outward flow from the surrounding marshes. From the muddy boat ramp, WP1, we headed across and right into the creek. Sharp right is a creek formed by the impoundment. We kept right at two junctions in the first 400 yards, and then faced much towing through soft bottomed shallows for the next half an hour. The worst of the shallows were at the mouth of the creek, WP2, where it entered the Gulf. We were clearly too early. As the entire trip, including visiting both islands and eating lunch, took less than three hours, it would be feasible to leave the boat ramp two and a half hours before a high water of similar height. This would eliminate most of the towing. The shallows extend out into the Gulf, so we had to travel south for 0.41 miles to WP3 before heading across to the islands, clearly visible 2.18 miles distant on a bearing of 142 degrees true. After enjoying the beach on Little Rock Island, WP5, and lunching at the campsite on Rock Island, WP4, we headed back to WP3. The entrance to the creek, WP2, is exceedingly difficult to spot, even from 100 yards away. As the creek had filled, the return trip up the creek was straightforward, aided by a strong tidal current.

The area around the launch site offers great opportunities for wildlife viewing, including bald eagles from October through May. Descriptive leaflets were available by the boat ramp, and at the Wildlife Management Area entrance, three miles back up the dirt road.

Appendix: Useful information for first-time visitors to the area.

Getting to the area from “far-away places with strange sounding names”

There is an airport at Gainesville, but a lower cost option in 2008 is to fly into Orlando and rent a car for the vacation period.

Where to stay

Those wishing to camp will enjoy Manatee Springs State Park with its beautiful scenery and hot showers. DeLorme Atlas page 64 (D1). It is a convenient central point for accessing all the trips in the book. Reservations are through www.ReserveAmerica.com or 1-800-326-3521.

Those wishing to stay at a motel will find several in Chiefland, DeLorme Atlas page 70 (A2). Chiefland is a good central point to access all the trips in this book.

Kayaking and camping store

Brasingtons, 2331 N.W. 13th Street, Gainesville, FL 32609. Tel. 1-888-438-4502

Useful books to buy before you arrive

“Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail”, published by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The related website for obtaining the book, permits and updates to the trail is at www.myfwc.com/recreation, or phone 850-488-5520.

For finding the launch points: “DeLorme Florida Atlas and Gazetteer”, ISBN 0-89933-318-4. This is frequently updated, and a new edition published, so the ISBN will change.

For river and spring trips as alternatives to those in this book: “A Canoe and Kayaking Guide to the Streams of Florida, Volume 1, North Central Peninsula and Panhandle” by Elizabeth F. Carter and John L. Pearce, published by Menasha Ridge Press, ISBN 0-98732-033-6.

For wildlife spotting: “The National Audubon Society Field Guide to Florida”, ISBN 0-679-44677-X

Internet access

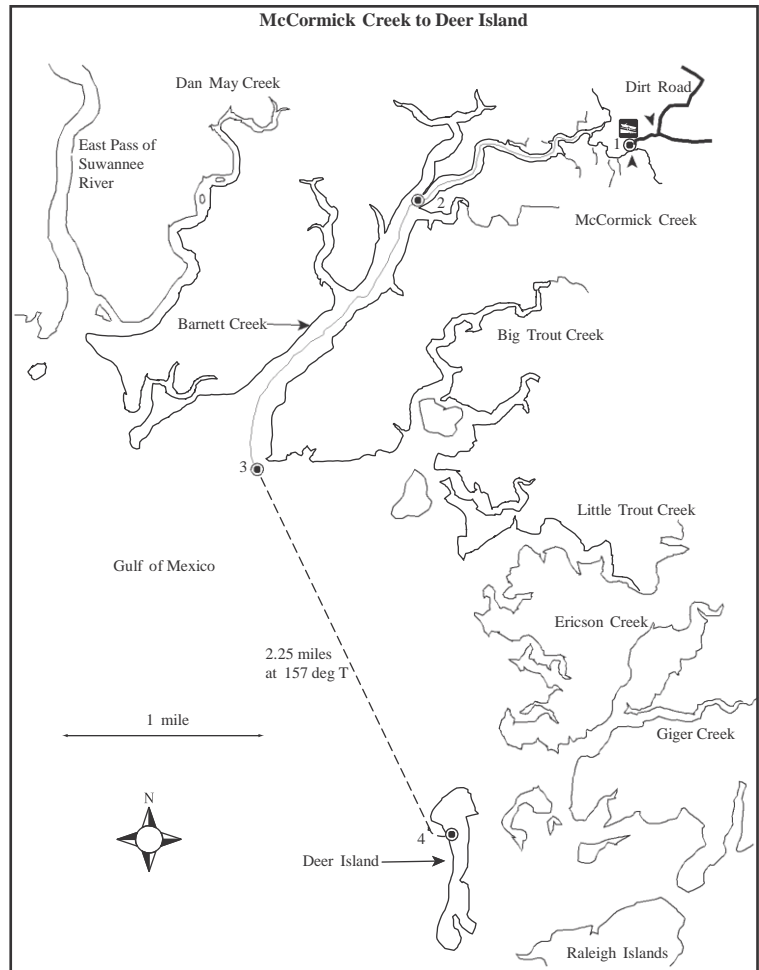
Public libraries offer free internet access, usually for 30 or 60 minute slots.

Choosing the right weeks to visit

Many of the trips in this book must be paddled in the hours around high water. A set of days with high water during the afternoon is ideal, particularly bearing mind the short winter days. www.saltwatertides.com will provide the required information.

Sea Kayak Day Paddles on Florida's Hidden Coast

The section of "Florida's Hidden Coast" between Cedar Key in the south and the Aucilla River in the north is a magical playground for the sea kayaker. Its charm lies in its remoteness, its peacefulness, its wildlife, the intimacy of its creeks, and the subtle beauty of its seascapes. This book describes sixteen day paddles on the Hidden Coast, with charts, and supplies information about tides, navigation, equipment and trip planning. All the waypoints may be downloaded from the Internet.



Nick and Sandra Crowhurst live in England, but have spent the past ten winters exploring the rivers, spring runs, creeks and coastal waters of Florida. This book is the fruit of some of that exploration.

