



Outdoors

UP THE CREEK

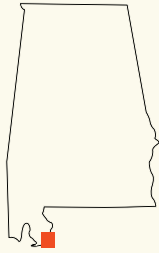
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ILLUSTRATIONS BY HATTIE CLARK

Even in winter, Alabama's Gulf Coast gives stand-up paddlers a lovely launchpad.

FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, I embarked on a fun, if indulgent, quest to paddleboard in all 50 states. I started when paddleboarding wasn't common in inland waterways, and I wanted to show people that, yes, you could do this anywhere. When people hear about this quest, they inevitably ask me which state was my favorite. They expect me to say, "Hawaii" or "Alaska." Yes, those were special. But when I'm forced to pick just one place, it's always Graham Creek Nature Preserve in Foley, Alabama.

When I first launched my project, I wasn't a confident paddler; I always went out with others, in case of emergency. My friend Chris, a former kayak outfitter, took me to Graham Creek many times over the years, any time I visited the beach. Foley is just 12 miles north of Gulf Shores, Alabama, which, of course, has water as far as the eye can see, from the Gulf of Mexico to lagoons and intercoastal waterways.

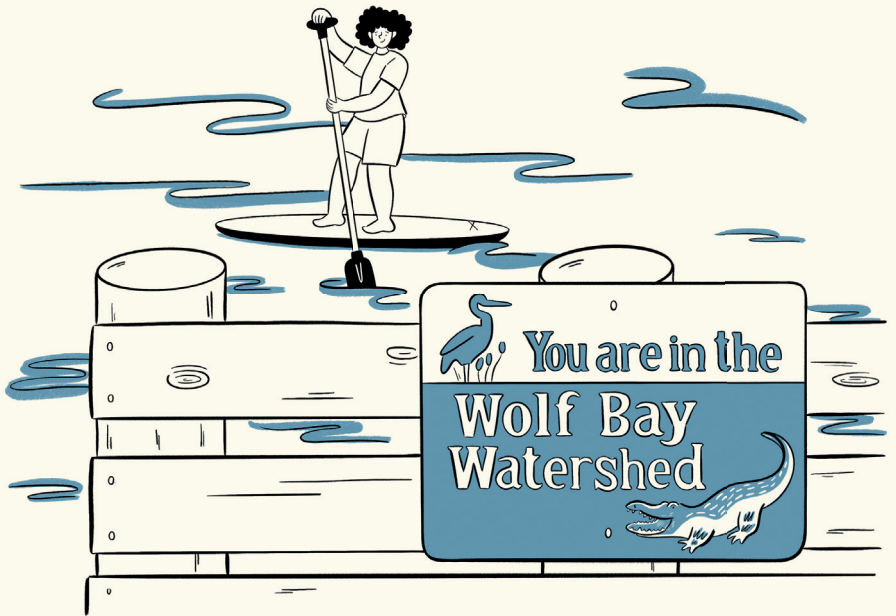
Graham Creek's topography makes it an ideal paddle in →



nearly any condition, even when wind on the Gulf creates more chop than I'd like. You launch from its wooded, parklike setting, and navigate through its winding creek, sheltered by pine and cypress trees and accompanied by fearless divebombing pelicans and the loud landing call of blue herons, sheltered from the gusts that kick up sand and white caps on the Gulf.

Chris and I had paddled at Graham Creek so many times, in so many conditions, I knew it was where I'd go for my first solo paddle. I knew its turns by heart—from the floating dock, left-right-straight-left-right. After about a mile of those twists and turns, the creek gradually widens, opening up and making its way into Wolf Bay, and from there, eventually to the Gulf. For its first several miles, it's hard, if not impossible, to get lost at Graham Creek.

Eventually, the tree canopy opens, and the marsh and riparian meadow show off wide, open views. There are some covetable backyard docks, the first houses you see on the paddle. For years one of the residents had a sculpture of a man sitting on a bench, which scared me even though I knew to expect it. There are osprey nests and, often, dolphins swimming in from the bay. Alabama has more navigable stream miles than other states and a bounty of freshwater biodiversity, and as I work my way from Graham Creek into Wolf Bay,



I get to see a lot of it, although it is just a fraction of what's hidden behind the reeds. The waterscape is a contrast to what the nearby white sand beaches and saltwater provide. Here, instead, you find the gift of a year-round opportunity to paddle, with shade in the heat of summer, a launch filled with vase-shaped pitcher plants in spring and waters temperate enough to paddle without a wetsuit come winter. There's something about the place that encourages reverence for nature.

Forty-nine states later, I did paddle with sea turtles in Hawaii and with sea otters and harbor seals in Alaska. I glided through maritime pine forests in Grand Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve in Mississippi, and in Connecticut I was serenaded by a lone bagpiper standing on the rocky shore. Somehow, Graham Creek is usually quiet—even the day I launched with a Boy Scout troop earning their kayak merit badge and tumbling out of their boats near the dock.

Many times, I've been lucky to be at that spot where the creek starts to widen into the bay, hearing only the rhythmic sound of my paddle blade entering the water. And then I hear an exhale of air. It's the dolphins I hear before I see them, as they swim under my board, through the clear water, and back up again, reminding me that I don't need a new destination to have an adventure.

POST PADDLE SWEET

I'm usually Team Chocolate for dessert, but the key lime milkshake at Stacey's Old Tyme Soda Fountain is my exception. Since 1929, Stacey's has served Foley, first as a pharmacy, now as an ice cream counter. Sidle up to the sign that reads "The Fizzsician" for my post-Graham Creek tradition of a bright green milkshake in a classic wavy glass.

DON'T BRING YOUR OWN

There are plenty of paddleboard rental shops—many which make deliveries—at the beach, including

Ike's Beach Service. If you're up for kayaking, there are self-service rental lockers with everything you need, including lifejackets and paddles, next to the dock near the Graham Creek parking lot, no hauling gear necessary.

SLEEP TIGHT

For even more wildlife views, book one of the lakeside cabins at Gulf State Park on the 500-acre, marsh-surrounded Lake Shelby in Gulf Shores. Gulf State Park offers full hook-up RV sites and more primitive camping sites as well.

