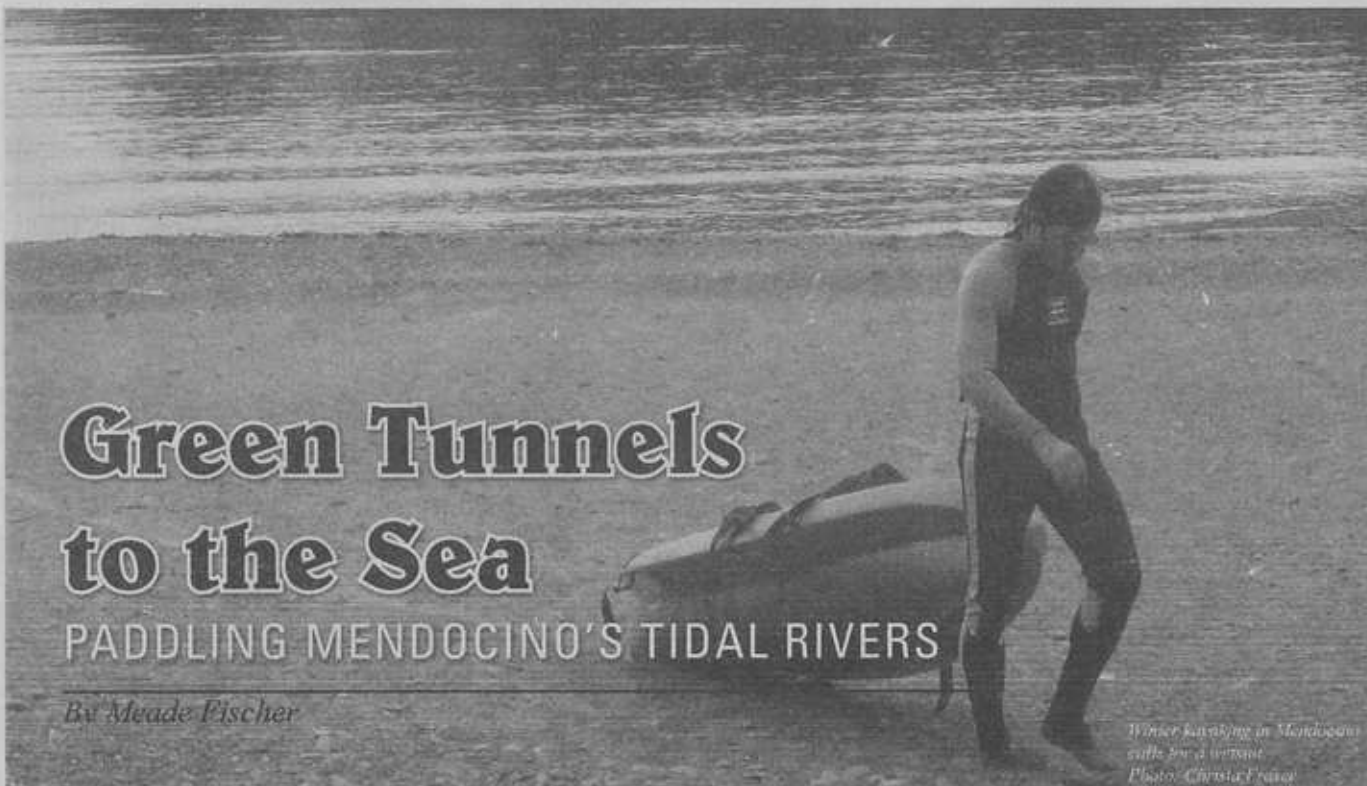


Green Tunnels to the Sea

PADDLING MENDOCINO'S TIDAL RIVERS

By Meade Fischer



Winter kayaking in Mendocino calls for a wetsuit. Photo: Christi Prosser

“... A deep forest leans over and is reflected on the water, creating a sensation of paddling through a green tunnel, a verdant worm hole to a primitive time.”



Year-round kayakers have a lot to paddle Mendocino's rivers. Photo: Meade Fischer

For the adventurous paddler, the Mendocino coast offers, in a 20-mile stretch, one of the most varied paddling experiences on the West Coast. This rugged stretch of California holds close to a dozen sheltered coves, seemingly endless rock gardens, arches, sea caves, and four of the state's remaining tidal rivers.

While the Mendocino coast is famous for providing a paddler's playground of stunning coves, sea caves and rock gardens, kayaking in the ocean can be inhospitable, if not foolhardy, during the winter. Large swells and crashing waves frequently pound the coastline making paddling a dicey proposition at best. Fortunately, the tidal rivers in the area offer a perfect protected alternative for kayakers. But don't forget your rain gear.

Barring inclement weather—Mendocino is known for being cold and wet—the Navarro, Albion, Big and Noyo rivers (from south to north) are places of beauty, solitude, and easy passage. Each of them offers at least a four-mile trip through beautiful forested valleys.

NAVARRO RIVER: The Impulse Paddle



Navarro River Mouth. Photo: Christi Prosser

Highway 128 out of Cloverdale is the most direct route to reach the Navarro from the south. In the last 11 miles before Highway 128 reaches Highway 1, the road cuts through a beautiful redwood forest paralleling the Navarro River.

While not my favorite Mendocino river, due to the adjacent highway, the Navarro is a convenient, impulse paddle. Just inland from Highway 1 along the 128, there are several places to pull off and unload the kayak right

next to the river bank. Another option is to go south over the Highway 1 bridge and turn right on the first road, which ends at Navarro River State Park. You can launch from the wide beach by the river mouth. (There are also campsites available.)

In addition to the option of taking a relaxing paddle up river through the forest, the small lagoon at the mouth offers a tempting peek at the Pacific Ocean. One sunny, calm day, impulse called me down river toward the ocean. (There is no cove at the Navarro inlet but an interesting jumble of rocks juts out north of the mouth. Only paddle past the lagoon if the currents and waves are mild.) Once beyond the lagoon, the narrow river mouth had a mild outgoing tide working, and I slid rapidly through the opening and lines of small waves, directly into the ocean.

ALBION RIVER: Impressions

There is something primal and compelling about looking down on the Albion River. The bridge towers above the river at its mouth. The river itself terminates at a steeply walled cove, which always seems gray and misty. The buoy on the rock in the middle of the cove sounds mournful against the foggy skies and the Albion itself is the color of the reflected forest.



Albion River Houseboat. Photo: Meade Fischer

There are a private campground and boat docks at the mouth where it costs just \$5 per car to park and launch (www.albionrivercampground.com, 707-937-0606). Campground parking is near enough to the launch ramp that you can almost drop your kayak into the water.

Within minutes of launching I'd passed the boat docks, the fog, and the busy upstream camping area. Silence descended like a tropical night, and I was alone with only the

half sunken remains of long abandoned boats to keep me company.

Rounding a bend, an odd two-story house loomed up in front of me. It was a houseboat to rival anything built during the golden days of Sausalito's floating shanty town. Farther up river were a couple of other odd dwellings. Two tiny buildings floated a few yards apart. One looked like an igloo and was apparently for storage. The other was just big enough for a single bed and a place to sit and read.

After these last few markers of human habitation, all other signs of civilization ended, save a 'no trespassing' sign a mile or so up river that is likely rarely observed.

Passing the upright bones of some long gone pier or dock, I saw the tender green of fresh life that had taken root in the rotting top of one of the old pilings, nature's statement about the ability of life to flourish in difficult places.

From here, the river narrowed and flowed more quickly, making me work to get over the shallow, fast moving water. Just when I thought I'd reached the end, it narrowed and deepened again and I paddled through a lush meadow that was nearly at arm's reach.

Finally, the river dead-ended in a thicket of dense brush. It was time to turn around and head back against the afternoon wind toward civilization.

BIG RIVER: Almost Wilderness

Just below the picturesque, pastel village of Mendocino, a different kind of river breathes in and out with the tides. Were it not for an old logging road, just out of sight, a paddler might mistake the Big River watershed for unadulterated wilderness.

To reach the put in, drive just south of Mendocino Village where Big River Road drops down. Just north of the bridge, a wide beach affords parking and launching. Strong tides flow swiftly past this beach, close to the river's junction with the sea. A short way up river, however, the current almost disappears. Open, marshy areas quickly give

way to a deep forest that leans over and is reflected on the water, creating a sensation of paddling through a green tunnel, a verdant worm hole to a primitive time. The silence is so profound that the dip and drip from each paddle stroke echoes.

Along the way there are small beaches where

ELKHORN SLOUGH: A TIDAL ALTERNATIVE DOWN SOUTH

For an excellent day of paddling south of the Bay Area, try Elkhorn Slough. Located halfway between Santa Cruz and Monterey via Highway 1, it's an easy hour or two drive from most locations in the Bay Area.

The slough is a fantastic spot for wildlife viewing, with large colonies of harbor seals, pelicans and other seabirds. It boasts miles of meandering fingerlet channels full of nesting shorebirds and a deep, wide main channel where seals and sea otters pop up regularly to eyeball visiting kayakers.

Protected from the swells of Monterey Bay, Elkhorn Slough offers an easy to intermediate day paddle. Paddlers can choose to paddle inland from the Moss Landing Harbor by putting in at the new boat ramps on the north side of the Highway 1 bridge or paddle toward the ocean by putting in at Kirby Park. Either way, check the weather and conditions so you don't get stuck paddling back to your car against both wind and tide.

If you don't want to sweat the logistics of bringing your own gear, you can rent gear or sign up for a guided tour by contacting Kayak Connection (www.kayakconnection.com, 831-724-5692) or Monterey Bay Kayaks (www.montereybaykayaks.com, 800-649-5357). Both outfits are located on the north side of the harbor entrance.