

Annual Manual

Fitness and recreation

A kayak and some drive can lead you to a deserted beach

BY M.L. FISCHER

On hot summer days everyone flocks to the coast to escape the city and the heat. Unfortunately, you'll find most of the city is there, crowding the beaches and the parking. Imagine relaxing on a totally deserted beach at the mouth of Estero Americano, halfway between Dillon Beach and Bodega Bay.

There's a catch, however. You can't drive to it, and you probably can't even walk to it, unless perhaps at a very low tide. The only way in is to paddle for an hour and a half to two hours. Yet in the discovery of a place that becomes a gemstone of memory, getting there is often at least as wondrous as being there.

This is definitely the case with Estero Americano. The 4- to 5-mile paddle down the estero transports you to a California gone for 200 years, a sparsely populated rolling land of green and gold.

The launch spot is about a mile from Valley Ford, just off the road to Dillon Beach. Cross the bridge over the estero and turn left on Marsh Road. Immediately turn left again on a short piece of pavement that leads to the bank. Push your kayak or canoe into the water and go left.

Just after passing under the bridge there is a stretch of water populated with thousands of pale blue dragonflies. They dance in the air like fairies or like heat shimmers on a desert highway. With a little imagination they become a welcoming committee to a land of solitude.

Soon the estero widens, birds pick for food along the marsh grasses, cows graze lazily on the hills and the occasional ranch house can be seen atop a distant hill.

After about an hour there is a channel going off to the left at a 90 degree angle. It flows to a bluff, turns and appears to intersect the main channel in a quarter mile. This is the one deceiving place on the trip. The left fork is the main channel, as I discovered when I had to walk my kayak through the mud and climb over a barbed wire fence.

This left channel takes the paddler by Whale-Tail Rock, a very distinctive formation. From this rock to the next formation, the water is very shallow, so one must take care not to go aground.

The estero enters another steep-sided valley populated with egrets, herons, pelicans and gulls. As the canyon walls drop away, the beach appears a short way ahead.

Currently the estero doesn't flow to the sea. Perhaps if we have a stormy winter, it will again. When it does, it will be wise to take a tide table along.

A ranch house way up on the hill reminds the paddler that he isn't totally alone, as the beach gives the impression of being visited for the very first time. Approaching the beautiful rock formations on the south end of the beach causes the nesting birds to take up an angry cry against the invading aliens.

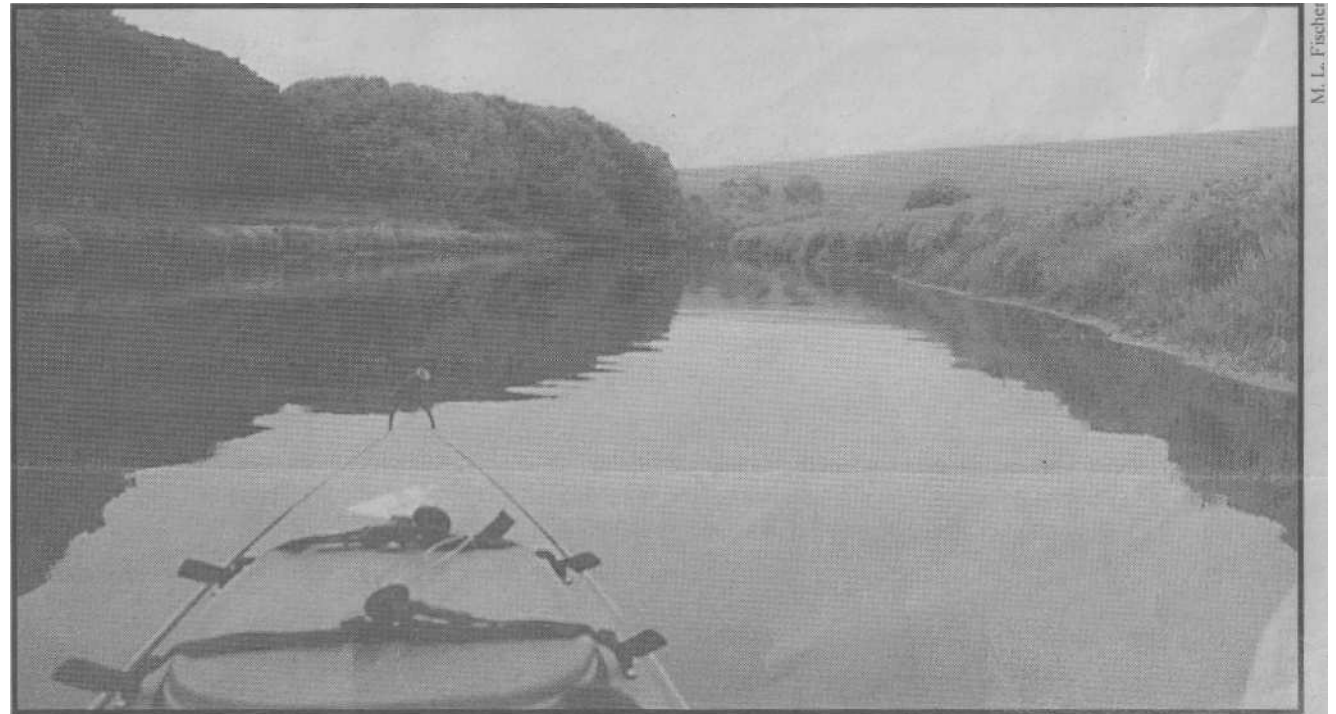
These rock formations, surrounding crystal clear tide pools, give way to another, smaller beach, more sea rocks, and on and on, perhaps all the way to Dillon Beach. I walked through a sea arch and into the water to see yet another beach and point. It looked possible to walk to Dillon Beach on a minus tide, but I've yet to try it.

I wandered those beaches alone for an hour or more. This was on a hot, sunny Saturday in mid June. I didn't see other people until halfway back to the car.

Approaching the shallows at Whale-Tail Rock, I watched two kayakers growing closer. In a brief conversation with the couple, I discovered that they were among a small group of regular paddlers on this slough. A half hour later I passed a couple in a canoe, desperately maneuvering to keep from going aground.

Returning through a blue haze of dragonflies to my car, it seemed odd to find the tiny parking area filled with three vehicles. I had been out of touch for five glorious hours, and it took a few minutes to readjust to civilization.

I vowed to return again, with more time to spend and a camera to record the beautifully empty open country and the quiet water.



This pristine and peaceful kayaker's eye view awaits if you're industrious enough to take a trip down Estero Americano.