

# **“Feeding the Soul” Women Take to the River – By Margery Guest**

There are times when the only noise is the trickle of spring water emptying into the river or the rhythmic sound of our paddles as they ripple the water. We rest our paddles across our laps and float our hands in the water as we glide by abandoned orchards, now overgrown, and peer into sun-dappled woods. Or we push ourselves, work up a good stroke, and feel the muscles in our arms pull as we skim quickly with the current.

We’re kayaking the Au Sable, heading east into an early morning sun on a twenty-two-mile stretch of river above Alcona Dam near McKinley. Here you find some of the prettiest scenery in lower Michigan. Trees drape their leaves over the water and dots of light dance ahead of us. Beneath us are shallows where pale green grass waves in the current and deep holes where shadows hide the sandy bottom. Pollen from nearby trees floats in a thin film in slower parts of the current. We breathe deeply, smelling that indescribable aroma of sweet fern, hot sand, and pines.

## **We Belong to Nature**

There are moments, admittedly few, during our lives, when we consciously glimpse our relationship with nature. It’s almost a physical feeling. For me, it has always happened unexpectedly; I don’t think it can be willed. In that twilight, half-conscious state you sometimes slide into when you’re doing something outdoors that takes intense concentration, you become engaged enough with nature that you feel yourself blending in with it. You forget who you are and where you are. And, in truth, it doesn’t matter. All you know is that you are part of this wonderful whole. You feel it down to the core — you belong to nature. I realize during these moments that nature is as essential to me as any person in my life, and that, as in all relationships, it’s essential to value and nurture this relationship.

We all have this relationship with nature whether we’re aware of it or not. But in general, women seem to have a less-felt, more subdued sense of it than men. We know we’re part of nature, but it’s mostly in our heads. Since it’s such an acceptable part of male culture to hunt and fish, these two pastimes alone grant men many socially sanctioned opportunities to spend time with nature. For women, it’s different. Women take care of others. They tend not to take time for outdoor adventure to nurture themselves. All too often their stolen outing will be a shopping trip.

Another problem is that women depend upon men to protect them, and men often relish this role. In their role of protector, men can get between women and nature. I’m not talking here about the exceptionally independent and adventurous women —

these women have always existed but they are still not the norm. I'm talking here about ordinary women. Women like me.

## **Fear of Kayaking**

I've always liked canoeing. But if you are a woman and your canoeing partner is a man, three things will happen: you will sit in the front, you will take orders, and you will be less engaged in the entire process. The front is not the seat of control in a canoe; orders, no matter how subtly given, are still orders; and to be fully engaged with nature, you have to interact with it. You have to feel its power tugging at you. You have to make decisions in it, work with it, take risks with it.

Last year I went canoeing with my brother. I sat in front, he tried not to give orders, and we enjoyed the outing together. But while renting the canoe, I spotted a kayak. I'd always been a bit afraid of kayaks. Weren't they dangerous? Didn't you have to be prepared to roll over dramatically in them? This kayak was small, compact, made of molded plastic. It looked easy to control. It had a comfortable-looking seat in it, with a back. I even liked its name: River Otter. I asked Kevin Ornatowski, owner of Alcona Canoe Rental, about kayaking the river. Ornatowski knows that the way to get someone to try kayaking isn't to talk about it. "Before you put your canoe in today," he offered, "take a few minutes and paddle around in one of the kayaks. See how you like it."

Less than five minutes of paddling convinced me that, not only did I like it, and could I do it (surprise!) but I wanted to go down the river in one by myself and soon. When my brother and I returned from canoeing, I plunked down twenty dollars to reserve a kayak for the very next morning. On that trip, I discovered the joys of kayaking alone. That led to making a convert out of a close friend. Neither of us are great athletes or extraordinarily brave women. We each had kayaked only once. Now we would kayak for five hours in our separate Otters.

## **Comins Flats to the 4001 Bridge**

On a Thursday afternoon, we drove from Grand Rapids, home base, to the Springport Inn in Harrisville, Michigan, a Victorian bed and breakfast built during the Michigan lumbering era, where we spent the night. Early the next morning, we headed back west forty minutes to Alcona livery. Key to having the ultimate experience with nature is going early, when nature first awakens. Going on a Friday, rather than on the weekend, is beneficial for the same reason. We followed Ornatowski's sister, Valerie, to the 4001 Bridge, where we left our car and hopped into her van with the kayaks. We headed up river to Comins Flats. We brought a picnic lunch in a dry bag, binoculars, and a camera. We wore bathing suits under jeans to start, but the day was hot, 80 degrees and humidity-free, and we quickly shed the jeans.

With a four to six m.p.h. current, the power of the Au Sable is not to be underestimated. There's no white water, but the river is strong, and to paddle against it takes great effort. However, traveling down the river can take as little or as much effort as you're prepared to give.

The banks along this stretch of the river are level with the river, but occasionally there are high dunes. The shore is by turns woodsy, sandy, and marshy. We began with life jackets primly on but quickly turned them into back cushions.

We saw wildflowers along the banks — marsh marigolds and gaywings. We heard the wichity-wichity of the yellow-throat, the high-pitched trill of the white-throated sparrow, and the raucous call of the kingfisher. We chased a great blue heron down the river and spotted a baby otter skimming along just like us. We even surprised a deer drinking at the edge as we came around a bend.

## **Quiet Zone**

We are both talkers, so we arranged to split up for short periods and designated stretches of river as “no talking zones.” This way we could each experience the awesome quiet that only being on the river can give. In five hours, we passed one boat and two fishermen.

We marveled at the fact that once this was the only way to travel. A hundred and fifty years before us, women had undoubtedly traveled this river out of necessity, back in the days when women couldn't avoid encountering nature. Too soon, we spotted the 4001 Bridge and made our way underneath it, paddling to shore to drive back to Harrisville. On the drive back to the Springport Inn, we reflected on how wonderful and how necessary it is for women to do these things for themselves. “Why don't we do it more?” Valerie had offered her take on this question earlier: “Many women are simply afraid,” she said. “People in the city are used to being around a lot of people and having noise and activity surround them. It feels scary to go out and be with only nature and themselves. But there's much more to fear in the city than out here.” Later, as we loafed in the shade at the Springport Inn, we agreed it's not enough for women to do these things with their children as a learning experience for the kids, or with their husbands as an opportunity for marital closeness. Both of those have their place, but women need to have the experience by themselves for the nurturance of their own souls.

Now we felt relaxed and renewed. But tomorrow we would head back to our daily lives and responsibilities. Still, we'd kayaked a stretch of the Au Sable. We'd seen nature in its first-light glory. We'd given ourselves a gift. Proud and happy, we wondered: how long before we do this again?