



## TopKayaker.Net's Guide To Kayak Destinations

### The Lakes Around the Land Between the Lakes

by Ralph Heimlich - all photos courtesy of the author, Greg Welker & Jenny Plummer-Welker

**It seemed a bit odd for a group of sea kayakers from the Chesapeake Bay to travel nearly 800 miles inland in early Spring to paddle, but six intrepid Chesapeake Paddlers Association members signed up for an exploratory 6-day trip on the waters of Barkley and Kentucky Lakes, in western Tennessee and Kentucky. For the last few years we had journeyed to Florida in April to get a head start on the paddling season, but in April of 2012 we sought something completely different.**

Historically, the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers drained areas of Kentucky, Tennessee and northern Alabama, flowing northward to join the Ohio River, thence draining down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico. A narrow neck of land separated the Tennessee and Cumberland at Grand Rivers in Kentucky. Between 1938 and 1944, the Tennessee Valley Authority constructed the Kentucky Dam, flooding the Tennessee River Valley for 184 miles southward, creating Kentucky Lake. In 1959, construction began on companion Barkley Dam on the Cumberland River, flooding that valley 118 miles, nearly to Nashville. A 1.75 mile canal was cut through at Grand Rivers, joining the two lakes and creating a huge peninsula between them.

One of the first National Recreation Areas, it was designated by President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and initially placed under the administration of the Tennessee Valley Authority. It is now administered by the U.S. Forest Service. Together, Kentucky Lake and Lake Barkley form the largest body of water between the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico, with over 210,000 acres of water, encompassing more than 170,000 acres of recreational lands known as the Land Between the Lakes. The peninsula is about 65 miles long and between 10 and 15 miles wide, making for a huge expanse of land devoted to recreation.

- **Shuttle & Launch:**



We (*Greg and Jenny Plummer-Welker, Suzanne Farace and Steven Jahncke, Dick Rock and I*) drove in 3 cars 765 miles out to I-81, then across Tennessee via I-40, north from Nashville on I-24 to LBL. One party camped at Piney Point campground and got up early to get us all the back country passes (\$20 each) we would need. The other two cars rendezvoused in Clarksville, TN, at a motel and drove the remaining 30 miles to LBL on Sunday morning.

We assembled at Gatlin Point boat ramp, in the SE corner of the LBL and went through the grueling process of cramming all the stuff we would need for a week into those little boats. When we were nearly finished, the three cars were taken on a shuttle up the Trace (the road running up the middle of LBL) to leave two cars at the Fenton boat ramp right alongside the Egner Ferry Bridge, which had been smashed by a wayward freighter in January, taking out one of the spans (*see [huffingtonpost.com](http://huffingtonpost.com)* ). This was the take out for one party on Friday, and would be the staging area for a second shuttle if we extended the trip.

Arriving back at Gatlin Point, we left one car, finished suiting out for the paddle and got into our boats. We opted for a mixture of dry suits, full farmer john wetsuits and shorty wet suits because while the water temps were into the mid 60's, we weren't sure what the weather would do to us. After talking with some locals, we appreciated that April is pretty early to do this trip, but we lucked out with a spring that was 2 to 3 weeks ahead of normal. The trees were fully leafed out and we were enjoying early May weather. The heavy, fully loaded kayaks (and 1 Kruger Sea Wind C1) were a bit sluggish as we paddled away from Gatlin Point and threaded between silty islands on the Lake Barkley shore. (*Photo: Greg, Dick and Steven*)





- **Leave No Trace & Other Adventures**

Because of the shuttle, we'd planned a half-day paddling on Sunday. With a fairly strong (10-15 mph) wind at our backs, we made good time paddling north on Barkley Lake. I even got a chance to use my downwind sail to good effect.



We had originally thought to camp on one of the islands, but decided to shortcut and make our first stop at Neville Bay. LBL offers a mix of back country camping (about anywhere you can find a flat place), back country campgrounds (drive-in sites, but varying water, showers, toilets, and other amenities), and full-service campgrounds. Neville Bay has a back country campground with a pit toilet, but no water. We opted for a back country site on the shoreline short of the campground, but several of us paddled over to sit the throne and look around.

We had planned a very conscientious "Leave No Trace" camping regimen, but had not counted on the power of water. Our campsite (and almost everywhere else on the shore) was littered with an assortment of jetsam washed ashore in one high water event or other. It felt a bit weird to pack out our trash, but be totally overwhelmed in trying to restore the camping area to pristine natural condition, and we didn't try for long. While much of the area is undeveloped and has a "wild" feel to it, you will find it hard to escape the trash left by the water, and by other users.



After setting up camp, relaxing, enjoying dinner and tapping our "wineskins", we had a brief campfire before the incoming rain sent us to bed. The rain was very well behaved (although the wind did pick up a bit) and ended shortly before dawn. We ate a quick breakfast, broke camp and packed out the boats to be on the water shortly after 9 am.

On the second day of our trip, we began to enjoy the great variety of waterfowl and other birds that this side of LBL attracts. Wood ducks popped up around nearly every bend and Canada geese and Great Blue heron were nearly as ubiquitous. We did not expect some of the more "marine" birds, however, including common and least tern, cormorants, gulls, and a huge flock of white pelicans.

The two dams are drawn down in the winter for flood control, and in April they are brought back to full pool depth (359 feet at the dam), so water levels increased every day of our trip.

On the shore between the "permanent" shoreline and the current waterline was a blaze of brilliant yellow flowers that we later learned were Butterweed (*Packera glabella*) a form of aster. The undergrowth ashore was lush, with no lack of moisture, and all the trees had leafed out completely.



After trying one of the narrower channels and running short of water (get out and pull the boat), we moved toward the main channel.

Unlike many smaller reservoirs, Barkley and Kentucky Lakes are important navigation resources and the main channels are buoyed and lighted, and traversed by long strings of barges (1/4 mile worth) pushed by chugging tugs.

While somewhat apprehensive about these heavily laden transports, we soon found that they threw very little wake or wash (unless in a confined

channel), but still gave them a wide berth because of their inability to manoeuvre. At several places along the way, we came on tugs and barges tied to the shore or special mooring stations, apparently waiting for oncoming traffic.

Our second day had the wind still generally behind us, but from the quarter, so constant effort was needed to keep the boats tracking straight, especially in areas where there was a long fetch.



After lunch on a mid-channel island, we paddled near our destination in mid-afternoon.

Devil's Elbow is named for a wicked 90 degree turn (for the tugs) in the channel. We expected to find a full-service campground, but were disappointed to barely find a place to camp at all.

After poking into several coves, we finally found a place to land at a nearly destroyed concrete boat ramp. We later learned that many blow downs had doomed the campground and it was being abandoned until it could be restored.

While there are bears in LBL, we went to some effort to hang our food bags each night mostly to frustrate the raccoons. On this night, we hung our bags in a tree directly over the dirt road leading to the ramp, so it was a good thing traffic was light. We lit a campfire on the beach (some fishermen or hunters had cut and split an abundance of dry oak just for us) and watched the stars wheel around a

pleasingly dark sky until exhaustion led us to our beds.

Even though the bridge had been severed on the western end of LBL, traffic roared across the Route 68 bridge through the night (detouring north to catch another bridge), even as owls called and answered from the woods under a thin crescent moon.

Next morning was a bit cooler and gray, but we breakfasted, packed and got on the water. We paddled out under the Route 68 bridge, tempting fate by passing under a huge log stuck in the bridge struts. (Photo: Ralph tempting fate at the Henry R. Lawrence Memorial Bridge)



We kept hoping for more sunshine, but paddled most of the day under gray skies. Finally, we made our landfall at Cravens Bay campground and decided to use one of the more developed sites. We landed in a small cove with two campsites (pads, fire rings, porta potty, but no water) and set up.

I walked down the road and found the camp overseer, and paid him \$9 each for the two sites. I also found a washroom with flush toilets (no shower), water, and a dumpster. Lots of pickups, RVs, trailers and fishermen inhabited the rest of the sites.



Just before dusk, the sun finally broke out and gilded the eastern shore outside Cravens Bay, and then darkness fell. I had packed a small (6") dutch oven and trotted it out this night to do a little dried apple cobbler to complement Suzanne's lentil stew. It turned out very well and was appreciated by all, although portions were small. We sat awhile around the fire and walked to the beach to star gaze in the inky sky.



The clear weather persisted, but cooler without the cloud cover. Today was our day to "turn the corner", hooking to the west around the northern end of the LBL and aiming to camp just short of the canal to Kentucky Lake.

More development sprouted on the far (eastern) shore, including the 1920's era Eddyville State Penitentiary.



Eagles and osprey soared above us, and the occasional forest hawk ranging out over the water. At lunch, we beached at Kuttawa Landing access, and watched a grossly overloaded jon boat pull away, taking some fairly grossly overloaded passengers with it.

I think we had more freeboard in our loaded kayaks. They thought my craft was strange, too, with the 8 cup percolator secured upright at the very stern on the back deck.



We passed the Marathon/Ashland oil terminal on the far (northern) shore, scarcely visible tucked into a cove, and paddled under brilliant blue skies with puffy white clouds overhead.



Barkley Dam came into view, a low gray slab on the horizon, and strings of barges pushed out from the canal, where high bridge towers and electronics masts marked the connection.

Finally, we came to Nickells Branch boat ramp and campground, and cast about for a campsite on an island just offshore. Jenny spooked a nervously nesting Canada goose, and we decided the point just beyond her nest would make a good campsite, so we beached



and set up, wondering if the feathered Madonna would reappear to warm her eggs. We also observed a woodpecker pair using their nest hole way up in a tree over our fire. By now, it was warm enough that a swim seemed like a good idea, so I marched directly into the water, luxuriating in the first wash (of a kind) since Sunday.

As we settled into "bird" island, the coyotes way over on the Bison and Elk prairie (part of LBL) set up a howling, yipping chorus, which set off a conversation amongst the owls on our island and the mainland. The "chug-chug-chugging" of barge strings coming through the canal and working up the channel against the current made a persistent counterpoint to the night creature's noises.

At dawn, our stirring alarmed the Mother Goose, who had returned to her eggs in the night. This was to be a lazy morning, so Jenny and I mixed up a batch of Crusteez pancake mix to which Suzanne contributed dried blueberries. Jenny cooked them up using her



nifty new nonstick pan (that fits in the back hatch of her North Shore Calypso), and I fried what remained of the Pinot Grigio salami from last night's spaghetti. MMMMM, good.

After striking camp and loading up the boats, we got underway for the canal. Having worried about the current (when the two reservoirs get differential amounts of rain the current in the canal can be swift as they equalize) and the wakes of barges ( the canal is only about 100-150 yards wide), we were pleasantly surprised to find ourselves nearly alone in the



canal. No barges, no wake, and just a slight current from Kentucky Lake into Barkley Lake. In 20 minutes, we were through the canal and paddling south on Kentucky Lake.

Where Barkley Lake seemed shallower, muddy, and choked with islands, marshes and excellent waterfowl habitat, Kentucky Lake's deeper, clear green waters bordered by limestone cliffs and gravelly, sandy beaches was wholly different in character.



We coasted south, observing narrow creek mouths overhung with beetling rocky cliffs of the Twin Lakes and Moss Creek Access areas. All of these are back country camping spots, but it is a bit more difficult to find good camping spots because of the cliffs. Paddling inshore to look more closely, we came on campers tenting on the beaches and fishing off the shore.

With no water source since Cravens Bay, we were looking for a refill. We ventured into a cove to get to the Hillman Ferry Campground and beached near the empty swim area. We found dumpsters for our trash, water, and toilets up the hill.

After a quick snack, we launched again and continued south. There are many pioneer cemeteries indicated on the map, in-holdings to preserve established or relocated cemeteries of those displaced to make the National Recreation Area. Because of the rocky cliffs, landing and climbing up to these sites would be difficult. At the mouth of Pisgah Bay, we found a constructed breakwater that was probably a barge basin for the historic Star Lime Works. We crossed the bay to a wide sand beach for our lunch on this warm and sunny day.

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Later in the afternoon, we approached our destination - Sugar Bay, and scouted out a campsite on a narrow point across from the campground. With no weather forecast, we pitched our camp in the breeze way along the point (except for Steven, who wandered off into the forest), had a nice gravelly cooking and dining area on the more sheltered side, and enjoyed the gravel beach on the Sugar Bay side.

Greg went swimming, at first barefoot, but then somewhat incongruously wearing his knee-high Chotas to guard against foot injury. On our last camping night, we enjoyed a nice supper and sat on the beach for a while watching the stars wheel overhead in a clear sky.

In the morning the wind was a strong 10-15 mph out of the West South West, our first really tough headwind. We loaded up and paddled out of Sugar Bay into the wind on a beautiful sunny day. The interrupted Egner Ferry bridge loomed larger and larger as we paddled south against the wind. We turned into Sevell's Branch for lunch, then launched into the wind for the final push. Gradually, we closed on the bridge, paddled through the gap and reluctantly turned into the Fenton access, nestled just south of the highway.

Momentary anxiety was eased as Greg and Suzanne's vehicles came into view. We beached, and the scramble to unload and pack the cars began. Greg and Jenny, who were heading to Mammoth Caves in the afternoon, began to pack their truck, while Suzanne drove me back down the Trace to retrieve my car left at Gatlin Point 5 days previously.



On today's drive, the wrangler had herded the Bison close to the fence and we could see them grazing and swimming in a small pond. After driving 30 some miles, both cars were back at Fenton and we could load up. Greg and Jenny, then Suzanne and Steven, and finally Dick and I loaded out and drove away from the Land Between the Lakes.



This was an exploratory trip since none of us (nor anyone from CPA) had been to LBL to paddle before. We decided on several points for a return trip:

1. Come later in the year—either in May or in the fall (October) since we had been fortunate not to have colder weather more typical of the area.
2. Camp in back country sites near, but not at, the established campgrounds and use those only for water, trash, and toilet services. With a back country permit, you can camp anywhere, so why be cheek by jowl with RVs and fishermen, and the back country sites are less trashy than regular campgrounds.
3. Set a slower pace, with more time to explore and land to see some of the other attractions of LBL. This would also give us some slack if bad weather forced us to stay in camp on a day or two.
4. Possibly go the luxury route—there are several liveries that rent large houseboats that we could Mother Ship from, carrying our kitchen, bathroom and clean sheets with us and day paddling.

We all agreed that the Lakes around the Land Between the Lakes are a beautiful and valuable paddling resource for those of us in the Mid-Atlantic. Go see for yourselves.

Here is our route and mileage (thanks to Greg Welker and his GPS):

#### Miles paddled and time paddled (including lunch):

4/15 6.3m (statute) 3.2 h  
 4/16 16.2m 6.5h  
 4/17 13.3m 3.5h  
 4/18 15.7m 6.2h  
 4/19 13.7m 5.7h  
 4/20 7.1m 3.5h

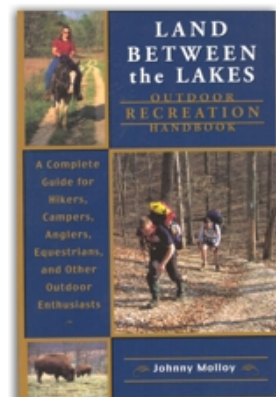
**72.3 miles, 28.6 hours**

#### RESOURCES:

- The best website for info: [Land Between The Lakes](#)
  - A book by Johnny Molloy, [Land Between the Lakes: Outdoor Recreation Handbook](#) is available here in TopKayaker's Book Dept or on at [this link on Amazon](#)
- He wrote an article for [Seakayaker Magazine](#) (which is how we found this area) in October 2006
- Ralph Heimlich's photos are online at this link on [PicasaWeb](#)
  - Greg Welker's photos at this link on [Flickr](#)
  - Jenny Plummer-Welker's photos are also here at [Flickr](#)

Related Article: [Keeping A "Ship's Log" For Kayakers](#) - Documenting Your Kayak Adventures To Re-Live & Learn

[The National Forest Service - Recreation.gov Website:](#)



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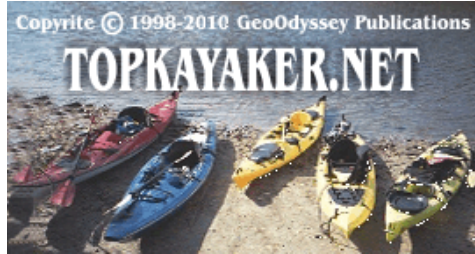


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