

Critter Corner

Horse or Human?

Powered-propulsion. On the lake. And, the case for kayaks.

Horse: When we first started vacationing on Keuka Lake 20+ years ago, we brought the requisite 20 foot ski boat with us and roared around the lake, pulling skiers, knee-boarders, and surf-boarders around in large circles far from shore. We took friends on middle of the lake tours, showing off the scenery and beautiful homes or lunching/dining at the nifty lake-side restaurants. We fished, trolling the depths, or rushing from one weed-filled bay to the other searching for bass and perch. Those one hundred and twenty horses harnessed in our outboard motor got us to lots of places in a hurry, but they also distanced us from most lake critters. Mostly, we either were trying to catch them (the fish) or avoid hitting them (the gulls and occasional duck). And, everything seemed so rushed.

Human & Kayak: We sold our ageing ski boat two years ago (starting to nickel & dime us to death), and last year we sold our hoist (no boat, no need). So all we could do was look at or swim in the lake. Or toss in a worm on the end of a line off the dock. Then I remembered the kayak my wife bought me as a Christmas gift a few years back, and dragged it up from the moldy depths of our basement.

The first foray was only a mile down the lake and back and there were a few sore muscles the next day. But as the trips grew longer, I began to really see things I'd never recognized before. Cruising slowly along close to shore, I noticed that those flat, brownish rocks lying on the edges of boat ramps, or on isolated stretches of beachfront that I had not paid much attention to from the ski boat were really large soft-shelled turtles that lumbered clumsily into the water when I got too close. Loons would suddenly pop up beside me as they surfaced from fishing. I'm still looking for my first shoreline mink, but I have come upon muskrats sculling along the shore. And I no longer need to use binoculars to identify that duck 200 yards out on the lake; I can just slowly paddle up to it for a closer, friendlier ID check. And fishing? I can actually paddle fast enough to troll with the kayak, although I prefer to cast a heavy lure (like a Swedish pimple) out 50 yards, let it sink for a minute or two and jig it as I retrieve it. The weed beds for bass and perch are still within reach, and the fishing is definitely more relaxed. Rod-holders and other fishing attachments are readily available for kayaks. And I don't have to worry about the escalating price of gas, or whether marina X is open today to gas-up.

After a few months of kayaking a few times a week (by then the trips were several miles in length), I noticed my shoulders broadening and my waist shrinking. My clothes weren't as tight. I no longer puffed and panted when walking up our steep and long driveway. And I'm still out there in November, when I have the lake completely to myself. Yesterday (middle of November) because I got so close to them, I identified two white-winged scoters, a migrating northern duck rarely seen on the Finger Lakes.

I grew up with canoes and the Scouts, but I also remember capsizing several times, and I never did like mashing my knees on the bottom to paddle or sitting up so high as to feel unbalanced.

Kayaks come in a variety of sizes and types, from the open-topped ones to closed-canopy ones that can accommodate "skirts" to keep out water when wave action is high, to blow-up ones that actually are quite nice. They come as single or two-seaters. There's a great website that explains the types and uses, take a look, it's www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/kayak.html. You can get a good new kayak for \$600 or less and when I went on-line with Craig's List there were tons of used ones for sale. And, you can rent them for a look-see before buying. **Give kayaking a try for reconnecting with critters and a slower, healthier pace on the lake.**