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## OUTDOORS | KAYAKING

### 'Nature girl' knows the Everglades

**Born and raised in Chokoloskee, captain Laura Lee French knows the Everglades almost better than she does herself.**



Manuel Baro / For the Miami Herald

Captain Laura Lee French pulls her kayak onto one of the Ten Thousand Islands.

CHOKOLOSKEE -- Paddling the Ten Thousand Islands with captain Laura Lee French is like seeing the Everglades for the first time -- even if you have been there scores of times.

French, 50, a U.S. Coast Guard-licensed captain and kayak guide/instructor, exudes an enthusiasm for her 1.5-million acre, watery playground that is at once childlike and worldly.

After kayaking with her and a group of five a couple of weeks ago, I will never look at the spiked tail of a horseshoe crab the same way again.

Frequently cited (whether correctly or incorrectly, no one knows) as the inspiration for the heroine in Carl Hiassen's new novel, *Nature Girl*, French is a definite outdoors character.

### **BORN IN THE GLADES**

Shunning computers, she scrawls the tide tables on her hand. To observe nesting birds up close, she doesn't hesitate to shimmy up a tree -- "but I won't climb if there's chicks or eggs." Curious about everything but her origins, she pores over biological reference books and scientific papers for obscure facts ranging from conch shells to cormorants.

Ask this smiling, loquacious blonde with Pippi Longstocking braids where she's from, and she's not really sure.

"I was found on Chokoloskee when I was a baby by a Montana rancher I called my 'Poppy,' and he raised me," she explains, adding she never tried to find out anything about her natural parents.

French and her Poppy spent winters in Chokoloskee and summers in Montana. After his death in the mid-1980s, his adopted daughter continued her annual north-south migration.

She used to work winters as an airboat tour guide until last year when she partnered with Chokoloskee Charters operator Charles Wright to run his kayak tour operation during the winter and spring months. She plans to head back to Montana in mid-May.

Recently, French guided our group on a six-mile round-trip paddle -- putting in at Smallwood's Store on Chokoloskee Island, heading across Chokoloskee Bay through Rabbit Key Pass and landing at Turtle Key.

"A nice paddle for novices in good condition," French explained.

To get there, we paddled in the lee of mangrove islands, each of which held an osprey nest. One of the birds began cheeping defensively at our approach.

"They mate for life and return to the same nest every year," French told us. "They have a four-foot wingspan, generally have two babies, and they're equal-opportunity parents. If the nest is damaged, they'll repair it. They're territorial, so there's generally one pair per mangrove island."

Passing through open water where mullet leapt here and there, someone wanted to know why the fish jump.

French said she has heard several plausible explanations: that the vegetarian species jumps to show the rest of the school where there's a food source; to rejoin the school if members become separated; that the fish's bird-like gizzard predisposes it to flight and . . .

"The explanation I like best is 'because they can!'" French laughed. "Who wouldn't want to fly if they can?"

Upon landing on Turtle Key, French immediately began an exploration of the beach, pointing out its various shell-covered inhabitants.

### **'BLING WORMS'**

"I have to show you my 'bling worms' -- that's what I call them," she said. "He hides in his burrow and excretes a glue and decorates himself with shells to camouflage himself."

"And this horseshoe crab -- his tail is not a weapon. If they land on their back, they use their tail to pole vault right-side up," she continued.

I think we all found ourselves stepping carefully on the beach that day, not wanting to harm or displace any of the captain's island friends.

En route back to Chokoloskee, we stopped by the osprey islands and briefly encountered a pair of dolphins lazily cruising the surface. I was reminded that, besides being good exercise, kayaking makes you go slowly enough to take in the marine environment quietly at its own level.

"There's such a need for this type of activity," French said. "People want to interact with the environment without

having an impact."

And interacting with the environment is always more fun with an enthusiastic ambassador at your side