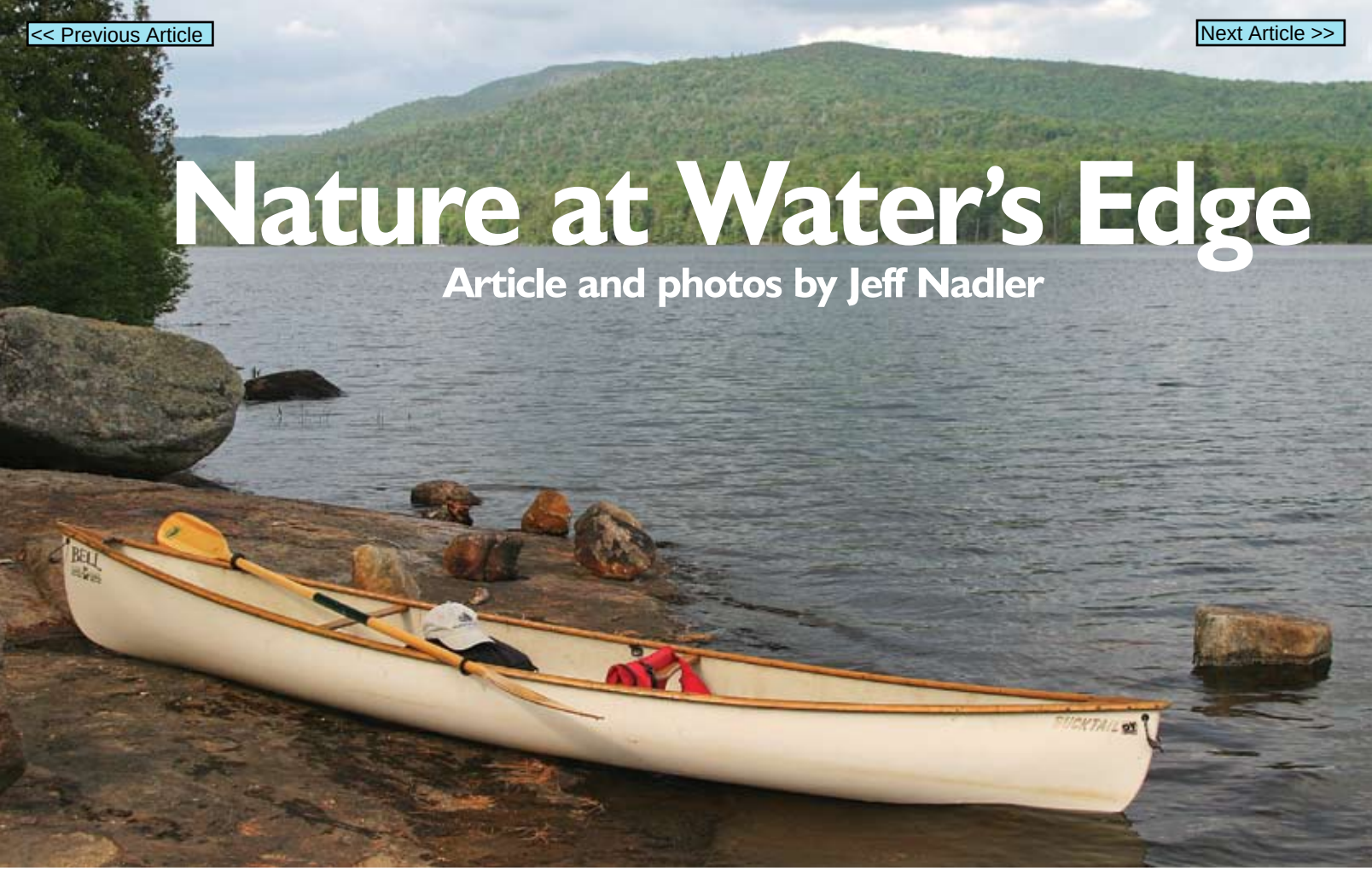

Nature at Water's Edge

Article and photos by Jeff Nadler

Paddling a kayak or canoe is a perfect way to explore habitats where land and water meet—and photograph fauna and flora found there.

Natural life is especially abundant where land and water meet—along wetlands, creeks, rivers, and shorelines. Paddling a kayak or canoe is a perfect way to explore these habitats and photograph fauna and flora found there. You may encounter beaver, muskrat, frogs, turtles, and a variety of bird species. Fascinating wetland plants, shoreline flowering shrubs and wildflowers make enticing nature photo subjects. Perhaps you'll come upon a white-tailed deer, red fox, or even a moose. When approached by a silently floating boat, wildlife often seems unbothered and does not immediately flee.

Kayak or Canoe?

Any way to get on the water is fine, but kayaks (or solo canoes designed with kayak-type seating) offer numerous advantages for nature photography. A kayak's lower seating offers better stability, less wind effect, a lower shooting angle for more attractive eye-level compositions of creatures along the water, and better seating comfort. Lower seating position also reduces a person's profile to potentially nervous wildlife. With more spacious cockpits and a shorter length than touring and sea kayaks, recreational kayaks sacrifice some speed and efficiency in travel. However, they offer a more stable, maneuverable, and roomier watercraft from which to use a camera.

When shopping for a kayak, it's best to test paddle first. You'll be happier if you splurge a bit on a lightweight paddle made of wood, fiberglass, or carbon. Avoid heavy, aluminum-shaft paddles. Select a comfortable personal flotation device so that you'll wear it at all times. Proper clothing, especially for the cooler water temperatures encountered in spring and fall, is a must. Even when air temperatures are mild, you must be prepared for an unexpected spill into chilly water.

The Camera

Today's compact point-and-shoot cameras, especially the water-resistant or waterproof models, are excellent for taking photos of scenery and people. For most

Iris

nature subjects, however, they are inferior to single lens reflex (SLR) cameras. Point-and-shoots suffer from noticeable shutter lag, a detriment when a subject or a pose may only be present for a fraction of a second. The camera's tiny sensors record undesirable digital "noise" (like film grain) at modestly high ISO settings. Yet higher settings are a tremendous benefit during early morning and late afternoon hours, when light is low and wildlife is active. The lenses on point-and-shoots are also considered "slow," meaning that a slower shutter speed is automatically set to gather enough light for proper exposure. Slow shutter speeds are not desirable when the camera is moving, on a boat in water. Although some point-and-shoots feature an impressive telephoto range, most lenses are incapable of magnifying wildlife or bird subjects as large as desired. SLR cameras are the best choice, even though they are bulkier and difficult to waterproof. Telephoto or zoom lenses of at least 300mm are favored for wildlife. Teleconverters of 1.4x are commonly used to increase magnification. For shots of plants, the same telephotos can be used to isolate subjects. Wide-angle zooms are effective to portray nature subjects in the environment. More expensive but very helpful for boat photography, two camera makers offer lenses with stabilization to reduce the effect of camera "shake."

Film or Digital?

Digital offers so many advantages that most nature photographers have adopted it as their preferred choice. One of the best features is the instant feedback you get on your technique. You can review your exposure, composition, and sharpness on screen, and shoot again if necessary. Today's digital SLRs are also fairly quiet. In low light, you can easily use 400 and even 800 ISO settings without the grainy look that equivalent films produce.

Loon

Female Common Merganser

Painted turtle

Keeping Gear Dry

A wide variety of "dry bags" and waterproof cases are available in which to stow your gear while paddling. However, waterproof housings to enclose an SLR when taking photos are expensive and bulky. Since SLRs are not waterproof, you do risk water damage from use in the field. You can minimize risk with some precautions. Always wear the camera or lens neck strap. Avoid taking your camera out when wind and waves get rough. Visit smaller and more intimate bodies of water and stay close to shore, where you are more likely to encounter nature subjects. Keep a small towel handy to wipe off any water that gets on your equipment.

Keep it Sharp

It is certainly more difficult to steady a camera on a boat than on land. To minimize a boat's movement, I seek out the calmest water I can find. That is usually the upwind shore. I often paddle into nooks and crannies; protected coves and channels where wildlife might be found. Early morning and late-day paddles often have the calmest conditions. I try to position my boat within shoreline vegetation or on a natural beach where the boat can rest. Some people use a monopod or small tripod within the cockpit. I prefer the ease of handholding, using my head and hands to solidly brace the camera. Use the highest shutter speed conditions allow. Increasing the camera ISO setting helps. If I am not worried about depth of field, I might use the widest aperture to force the fastest possible shutter speed.

Beaver

Exposure and Metering

Today's automated cameras handle exposure well, especially when your subject is set against a uniform background of blue sky, green vegetation, or dark water. When your subject is against a background of bright sky or water, the camera often underexposes your subject. An SLR camera has several ways to overcome this tendency, through use of a spot meter or by compensating to adjust exposure. Photographers with more experience switch to manual mode under these conditions.

You might think that bright sunny skies produce the best pictures. Actually, mid-day sun creates harsh shadows and washes out details on many nature subjects. Overcast skies can produce nice muted lighting on your subject; just keep it out of the photo or adjust for it. The nicest lighting is often just after sunrise and before sunset, coinciding with the time that wildlife is most active.

Know Your Subject

Much of the time, I go paddling with a camera, but without any special goal. Instead, I enjoy the element of surprise in discovering what lies around the next bend. At other times, I set out to find a certain subject, whether a kind of bird or shoreline wildflower in bloom. Time spent in advance learning about your subject's natural history, behavior, and habitat preference, will increase your chances of success. Field guides, nature books, and *Conservationist* articles can all add to your appreciation of nature, and to your success in recording your experiences with your camera on the water. For further reading, see *Conservationist* June 2003: "Hunting With A Camera."

Least sandpipers

Free-lance nature photographer **Jeff Nadler** specializes in birds. More of Jeff's work can be seen at **www.jnphoto.net**.

Moose

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