

Kayaking in the Crystal River Area Also Will Bring You Close to Magnificent Raptors and Seabirds

As you kayak through the Crystal River area, be sure to look up and not just ahead or else you'll miss seeing some wonderful birds.

Take the osprey, for example. Ospreys hang out near waterways (the better to catch their favorite prey: fish) and if you're truly lucky, you'll get a chance to see an osprey dive into the water relatively near your kayak.

Ospreys are gorgeous birds. They have a large, six-foot wingspan, and sport a dark "mask" over its face. You also may see two ospreys together. Osprey mate for life, so seeing two birds together means you're probably looking at a male and female. If so, look around the tops of trees and any other tall objects (light poles, etc.), as osprey prefers their nests high above the ground.

Keep a sharp eye out for cormorants. You'll recognize these medium-sized sea birds by the distinctive behavior they exhibit after fishing -- they spread their wings out for the sun to dry them.

Cormorants also have an interesting dive when they spot a fish in the water they wish to eat: Rather than dive-bombing from the sky as an osprey does, cormorants dive from the top of the water, sometimes doing a little half-jump right beforehand -- all the better to streamline their entry. If you should see a cormorant underwater, you'll see that it pushes itself with its feet rather than its wings.

Like the cormorant, anhinga spread their wings out to dry them. Anhingas, which sometimes are mistaken for cormorants, are great divers because their feathers aren't waterproof. Their feathers can become waterlogged, which doesn't make them very buoyant. Hence, the ease with which they dive.

Anhinga also put on a good show as they work to become airborne. All that water weight in their wings weighs them down, so they'll flap those wings vigorously as they "run" on the water.

Great blue herons and white herons abound around Crystal River. These stately birds love fish, but they're also known to eat shrimp, clams, small frogs, snakes and even small birds. You'll see the heron wading in shallow water and then suddenly move its head to the water as it spears its prey with its long, sharp beak.

Crystal River and its tributaries empty into the Gulf of Mexico. So be on the lookout for seabirds such as pelicans and seagulls.

Pelicans don't, of course, carry newborn infants in the pouch below their long beak. But one can certainly see where the idea came from -- the pelican **can** carry quite a lot in that "sack."

Their bill also acts as their fishing rod. Schools of pelican will fish together above the water, chasing small fish into shallow water before scooping them up with their beaks. Larger fish are caught by the tip and then flipped up and over into the air and into the bird's wide mouth.

Be careful eating your sandwich around seagulls: they have been known to steal food right from people's hands! These ubiquitous seabirds are well known for their raucous call. (Remember "Mine! Mine! Mine! From the flock of seagulls in *Finding Nemo*?). But they're also quite intelligent and comfortable around humans (see "steal food," above).