

# Swamp Girls

## Paddling in Paradise

Written by Sue Chapman

*M*yself, Sue Chapman and Linda Etchells have been known as the “Swamp Girls” since we started leading trips for kayakers in 1998. Then, in 2000 we hung a little sign that said, “kayak tours” outside our home along the beautiful Savannah River in historic Purrysburgh. The rest is history.

We have had the distinction of being the only women that own and operate a kayak business in South Carolina. As nature might imply, when you put women in charge of something like an outdoor sport, the attention to the comfort details has to come first. Add a touch of style with a delicious homemade picnic lunch, and you’ve got something that is really fun.

The Swamp Girls tour would evolve into a unique experience for the guests. Our adventure started by abandoning the usual routes for the ones less traveled. In the beginning, I marketed the tour to Sun City, running a trip every Friday. I was able to take the time with each individual and slowly nurture them on the beauty of our environment while teaching them the proper kayaking skills. This special attention gave us a return following almost every week.

As time went by and more people joined I was interested in developing a variety of destinations to keep things fresh and exciting... we’ve got water trails just about everywhere. But one of my favorite moments while summer

kayaking always includes a happy group swimming and enjoying homemade “swamp salsa” on the sandbar in the May River.

Expanding each year’s schedule to include four trips weekly we now serve the entire Low Country. Each Sunday, we have a “tag along” adventure kayak trip for residents who *own* their kayak gear and guests pay only \$10.00 to tag along. Those who are lucky enough to find us have a lot of options. Whether its to see the intercoastal waterways or the black water swamps.

Our growth has been steadily crafted with a spirit of cooperation from my diverse staff members. More than a dozen professional Swampgirls come from across county lines and Savannah. They love to help with our beginners and have earned what they consider an affectionate nickname, “the river guides with an attitude.” Some are grandmothers, but none of them need any help kayaking, even in the most arduous conditions.

In 2003 Heather Landry, Director for Friends of the Rivers, approached Swamp Girls Kayak Tours to help with the Kids in Kayaks Education Program. You can put kids in a kayak on the water and it immerses them into the environment like no other sport. This can be fun for small children as young as 6 and as you get older, it has a tendency to expand a child’s self esteem by teaching them confidence and coordination. For middle school kids and teens, a training session is provided to

introduce them to the techniques of Kayaking.

In August, Swamp Girls hosted students from Jasper High School at their Kayak Center. Heather Landry held a classroom session out on the water to identify native plant species and view reptiles in the wild. The students seem to understand the relationship between water and man. They were enjoying the recreation as well as appreciating it as a sustainable resource.

The May River dolphin always produce a feeling of wonder and amazement and can capture your heart forever. The latest installment of the program was held on the New River off Hwy. 46. Our trips include Spring Island's Chechessee Creek and our course the May River. Creeks on Hilton Head and Beaufort are also offered.

The New River trip, is a scenic 6 mile river adventure with narrow turns and thick vegetation. This seemed difficult to navigate at first, but once the kids got the hang of it, they were off like rockets. The kids brought their teachers along to see what the outdoor class room is all about and I was pleased we had enough equipment to handle everyone. Kate Albertson, the new Director for Education at the Low Country Institute was on the water and she got to see the

support each student gets from the Swamp Girls staff one on one.

Vicki Levy, staff photographer, includes a joyful portfolio of kayaking. This CD becomes a wonderful tool to use in the classroom. Heather and Kate are responsible for finding the funds to support this program in both counties. These brightly colored kayaks with animated paddlers, slipping through the marshes, helps to sell this idea. I would like to thank Vicki, who has committed her time and talented resources on behalf of the program.

Linda and I wish to also thank all the members of the community who volunteer to work with these kids and provide them a safe learning experience.

Everyone who works with this program receives a mountain of gratitude from those who participate. And that smile on a kid's face is our reward. If we can inspire them to see their environment healthy with wildlife, we know they will want to help preserve it.

Swamp Girls is open all year round, have a look at our website to see where we are kayaking today.

[www.swampgirls.com](http://www.swampgirls.com)

843-784-2249