

## Berryessa offers free guided kayak tours, and more

By Glenn Brank

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LAKE BERRYESSA – Pope Creek came up on the kayak radar only because a paddling pal used to go bass fishing there years ago. He wanted to recall fond memories of the trophies he took home – some nice T-bone steaks.

But that’s a minor detail. This turned out to be a perfect spring kayaking destination – beautiful weather, gorgeous wildflowers, and a tranquil paddle, much like an Easter weekend at [Lake Englebright](#) in 2011. Very quiet on this feeder creek at Lake Berryessa, though power boaters and jet skiers are already dusting off their gear.



Kayakers break for picnic along Pope Creek on a spring afternoon



Lupine in abundance paddling up the creek from Lake Berryessa



Looking out on Berryessa from the mouth of Pope Creek

Still, some good paddling opportunities lie ahead in the tributaries and in Berryessa itself, said a very helpful park ranger. Best of all, she noted plans for free, guided kayak tours this summer. T-bone steaks? Free kayak tours? Face it, you’re hooked, time to reel you in.

Our Pope Creek venture took us around the western shore on Knoxville Road. It’s a narrow, winding, scenic byway through green pastures and under oak canopies shrouded in Spanish moss. A scenic spring drive to complement the kayaking.



Free parking, but the downside was a steep path

# RECLAMATION

*Managing Water in the West*

Pope Creek Bridge is a ten-minute drive past the Oak Shores day use area. Huge boulders flank the graffiti-tattooed bridge. The north end features a large, open parking lot and no fee. The downside – literally – is a dirt path that descends about 80 yards and winds under the bridge to the shoreline. With three of us doing sherpa duty carrying boats, not too bad a hike.



Poppies soften a rocky hillside...



...while lupine struggle to keep blooms above rising water

Once on the water, we had the broad creek virtually to ourselves. A gentle breeze fanned our backs as we followed the rocky hillside and glided along pastel fields of

lupine and poppies. A couple of blue herons squawked and flapped ahead as we headed upstream about 2.5 miles before reaching the first shallows, just beyond a beautiful, deep pool nestled into rocky hillside. And one small landing beach. Lunchtime!

And time to chew over the T-bone fishing story. In his youth, my pal hiked into the canyon to fish for largemouth bass. He hauled the lunkers to a certain ethnic market where the proprietor eagerly swapped live bigmouth for beef, not exactly legal but very tasty. Of course, he is older and wiser now (my pal, not the fish) and he long ago gave up any fishy business. But he hangs around with NorCal Yak, so his character remains somewhat questionable.



Another mega-boulder just inside the mouth of Pope Creek

A few days after our pleasant, five-mile-roundtrip paddle, NorCal Yak contacted Lake Berryessa Park Ranger Victoria Bevolden to talk about more kayaking options. Late in March, as a test run, Berryessa had announced a free guided kayak tour. To Bevolden's surprise, about 90 paddlers signed up and a second shift had to be added. Then bad weather rolled in that day, and only a dozen showed up, "so it worked out perfectly," she said with a laugh.

Based on that response, Bevolden said more guided kayak tours will be conducted this summer after the rangers add seasonal staff. Plus, kayaker groups may begin contacting Bevolden now to arrange their own tours – again, no charge. And there's ample free parking. (Details in "launch lines".) It's a sharp contrast to our state park system, which is raising fees and struggling to keep many parks open.

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Ranger Bevolden and Capone

Lake Berryessa is owned by the federal Bureau of Reclamation and managed for flood control and drinking water. But it's also developed an excellent nature program for school classes and the public.

And there's a lot for people to see. Every year, the park staff adopts a "serpent ambassador" – a gopher snake named "Capone" last year – plus hikers and paddlers often spot bald eagles, golden eagles, osprey, geese and other wildlife.

In fact, said Bevolden, the Pope Creek area where we paddled has mountain lion sightings. T-bones did not come up in our conversation, as I was unsure about the statute of limitations for transporting bass across state lines.

During our visit, the lake level was down about ten feet from optimal levels, and the water is expected to begin dropping to summer levels soon. Bevolden encouraged kayakers not to let that – or power boat traffic – discourage them from visiting. But as the weather warms, she recommends paddling early in the day, and on weekdays if possible.

She also sent NorCal Yak a [kayaker map](#) and the following narrative:

"Among the areas highlighted on the map, Pope Creek and Putah Creek are great places to explore," said Bevolden. "They get kayakers off the main body of the lake and are navigable quite a long way upstream. Eticuera Creek at the far north tip of the lake is also another good option. There's a large 'lagoon' type of area that is fun to explore, and the creek goes another two miles or so. Once the water drops, this is the first area that ceases to be navigable so it is a good early-season option.

"Oak Shores is open every day of the year from 7 a.m. until sunset. It has free parking and two concrete hand launch ramps to the water, and people can pretty much launch anywhere they're willing to carry their boat. That no-wake zone is definitely helpful to cut down on the boating speed, if not the number of boats...there's a non-motorized zone just north of Oak Shores near Big and Small Islands," so it's a prime paddling area, she said. (See map.)

## LAUNCH LINES

Guided kayak tours are not limited to clubs – others may arrange tours as well. You must provide your own boats and gear, and the optimal group size is about a dozen paddlers, but smaller and larger groups can be accommodated. Aim to set your date a month in advance. Call Ranger Bevolden at 707-966-2111, ext. 113, or email [vbevolden@usbr.gov](mailto:vbevolden@usbr.gov), and allow a few days for a response due to limited staffing.

In addition to launch ramps, the Oak Shores day use area offers an expansive picnic area, restrooms and paved parking, all free. However, vehicles with trailers must park at a pullout across the road.

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Check Lake Berryessa's excellent [Web site](#) for summer programs and other info on organized, ranger-led tours to be announced.

Lake Berryessa has two primitive campgrounds and one full service campground. A third primitive campground may be open by Memorial Day. [Details here.](#)

Approaching from the east, it may take a good 45 minutes to drive from the spillway around to the Oak Shores and Pope Creek Bridge areas on winding Knox Road. It's a popular route for bicyclists and motorcycle groups. So slow down, enjoy the view, and watch out for the other guy.

For more information go to: <http://www.norcalyak.com/2012/04/berryessa-offers-free-guided-kayak.html>



**Join a ranger-led kayak tour from 6-8 p.m. Friday, July 13. Bring your own boat. Reservations are required, please contact Ranger Victoria Bevolden, 707-966-2111 x 113, or email her at: [vbevolden@usbr.gov](mailto:vbevolden@usbr.gov)**