

# Explore New England

CAPE COD

## SURFACE ATTENTION

GUIDES SHOW PADDLERS HOW TO KNOW ANOTHER WORLD

BY BRIAN MACQUARRIE | GLOBE STAFF

EASTHAM — “Let’s get ready to rock and roll!” Dick Hilmer exhorts his charges, who are gathered in a life-jacketed semicircle on the sun-blanketed shore of Nauset Marsh.

Rolling in a kayak is not high on the agenda of his afternoon customers, but Hilmer makes his kayaking tours akin to a rock concert. This is ecotourism with a rollicking edge, and Hilmer seeks to combine fun, education, and a body-friendly workout in the daily excursions of Explore Cape Cod, his kayaking company.

“I don’t teach kayaking. I teach balance,” Hilmer says, and he’s not talking only about staying upright in the slender boats. He’s also referring to an out-of-office appreciation of Cape Cod that comes from sitting in a slow-moving, low-riding, nature-compatible kayak.

“Just relax and enjoy the ride,” Hilmer reminds his paddlers-in-waiting.

That stress-free goal has helped make kayaking popular with Cape visitors. From Buzzards Bay to Nauset Marsh to the inlets of Wellfleet and Truro, kayak outfitters are catering to customers who want a view of an osprey nest instead of the action on a high-definition television.

“I think kayaking offers our visitors a unique way to explore Cape Cod that they hadn’t had before,” said Kristen Mitchell Hughes, vice president of marketing for the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce. “There’s such beautiful places to kayak around here.”

Options for kayakers are plentiful on the Cape, including guided tours, solo rentals, corporate and family outings, eco-tours, and lessons. Kayaks can be rented for one or two passengers, and the venues can range from riding ocean surf, to navigating rivers, to exploring secluded creeks.

Of course, many kayakers bring their own boats, launch them at a public beach or landing, and set off on a tour limited only by their whims and their watch. The Cape — prodded by fingers of saltwater and pocked by freshwater kettle holes — offers a rich variety of scenarios.

“There are coves to explore, there are marshes. On the back side of West Dennis Beach, there’s a beautiful area to go for a swim or a walk,” says Abi Smith, who, with her husband, Cliff, operates Bass River Cruises and Kayaks in West Dennis.

“More people want to be involved in active sports, and they’re just trying to get their exercise in a fun way. It’s a very green sport,” says Smith, whose company provides rentals but not guided tours. “A lot of families are involved. We’ve had people going out with very small children, even a 6-month-old. We’ve also had folks in their 70s and 80s.”

On Hilmer’s twice-daily tours, which last three or four hours, kayakers are guided around the maze of Nauset Marsh, located in the Cape Cod National Seashore, and Pleasant Bay, just above the elbow of the peninsula. The route can vary according to weather, wind, and currents, so Hilmer chooses from 14 launching sites in Eastham, Orleans, and Chatham.

“We analyze the conditions, and we launch where we give the paddler the best opportunity to have a great time,” says Hilmer, who runs the company with his wife, Linda.

The meteorological vagaries mean that kayakers with reserva-



tions are wise to carry a cellphone as launch time approaches.

On a recent afternoon, after a peppy primer on paddling technique, Hilmer sets an easy pace in Nauset Marsh as he leads eight kayakers along a quiet channel called Cable Creek. The marsh grass, clear water, bird sounds, and gentle glide on an outgoing tide quickly consign the landbound Cape to an out-of-sight world.

“The first 10 minutes I call kayaking chaos,” Hilmer tells the group. Then, after wobbly paddlers become more comfortable with their mechanics, an entertaining classroom-on-the-marsh begins. Over three hours, Hilmer holds court on the history of horse-shoe crabs, the feeding habits of seals, the changing topography of the barrier beach, and how to read the depth and flow of water.

“Always follow the lobster traps. That’s always a sign of deep water,” Hilmer says. With only a 3-inch draft, however, 15-foot kayaks can get just about anywhere.

Twice-a-day, seven-day-a-week tours for about 2,500 customers a year are not a grind. Just the opposite, Hilmer insists.

“It’s the dynamics. It’s the fun. It’s why we teach out here,” Hilmer says. **KAYAKING, Page M7**

Dick Hilmer (below) leads a tour on Salt Pond Bay in Eastham last month. Elizabeth Pratt, 83, of Eastham, loaded her kayak onto her car to come paddle with an Appalachian Mountain Club tour around the bay.



PHOTOS BY VINCENT DEWITT FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

‘It’s the dynamics. It’s the fun. It’s why we teach out here. . . . It’s about getting people out here to understand where they are.’

DICK HILMER (above), owner of Explore Cape Cod



PHOTOS BY NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Experiments in reef building include (from top): concrete “castle blocks,” mounds of surf clam shells, and concrete reef balls.

WELLFLEET

## Getting back the wild oyster

By Niecee Regis  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

“In the 1960s, there were a thousand bushels of oysters out here,” said Bob Prescott, director of Mass Audubon’s Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. He spreads his arms wide and turns.

We are standing on sand flats off the western edge of Lieutenant Island in Wellfleet Bay, and I’m trying hard to imagine such a thing. I see sand in every direction, an undulating toast-colored landscape punctuated by shimmering pools of tidal water reflecting the periwinkle sky.

A dozen of us cluster around Prescott. We are on an Oyster Reef Tour, hoping to learn about the history of wild oysters on the Outer Cape and to observe the reef restoration experiments launched in 2009 by Mass Audubon, The Nature Conservancy, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The project aims to restore a section of an oyster reef that once extended from Boston through New York down into Chesapeake Bay. (The famous Wellfleet oysters of today are farmed on grants in other parts of the bay.)

“The oyster habitat is gone,” said Prescott. “There hasn’t been a [stable] oyster reef in Wellfleet since 1770. It was fished out by early harvesters.”

A compact man with a curly rim of white hair poking out from beneath his baseball cap, Prescott has seemingly boundless energy. Like a true scientist, he poses more questions than he can answer, a fact that does not seem to bother him at all.

“An oyster reef is a massive structure **OYSTERS, Page M6**



# Luring the wild oyster back to Wellfleet Bay

► OYSTERS  
Continued from Page M5

of living organisms, the ecological equivalent of coral reefs," he said. "How do we rebuild it? This is a giant scientific experiment to get us to the point where we can restore habitat."

The oysters here in the 1960s were dispersed as strong tides, shifting sands, and prevailing winds changed the landscape. Without a reef, there was nothing to hold the oysters in place.

"It's a dilemma," Prescott said. "How do you put oysters back in an area where the sand is moving? This is the most challenging aspect of creating a stable reef. How do you put a foundation under a reef? What do you use for substrate?"

► OYSTERS GONE WILD

Where there used to be natural reefs people are trying to provide wild oysters with something to attach to. Look around at the Cape's oyster country at [www.boston.com/travel](http://www.boston.com/travel)

The enormous tidal flow in Wellfleet Bay is part of what makes its oysters so tasty, but it is also problematic for establishing a wild reef. In a mere six hours the sand on which we are standing will be under 10 feet of water.

We traipse across the flats in knee-high boots or sturdy sneakers, attempting to keep up with Prescott, who offers a running commentary on life on this spit of land. What I saw as only sand in fact teems with life. There are horseshoe crab tracks, fiddler crabs, mud snails ("the scavenger of the salt marsh"), glassy tube worms, a smattering of oysters, razor clams, and the egg masses of lug worms, long gelatinous forms that look like jellyfish.

Prescott lifts his binoculars and points to a small brown animal skittering across the sand. "I've never seen a chipmunk out here before!"

When the scientist leading a tour is excited and surprised by the habitat, the enthusiasm is infectious. We are like 10-year-olds in awe of our surroundings. We have come to learn about oysters, and we do.

The sanctuary, which owns 243 acres of these flats, is experimenting with a se-



NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Bob Prescott, director of the Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, with a tour group at the concrete balls being tried in an effort by Mass Audubon, the state, and the Town of Wellfleet to get wild oysters to develop reefs again.

ries of structures where oyster seeds can attach themselves and thrive. In order to grow, a wild infant oyster needs to attach to a hard surface, such as a rock or a larger shell. Working closely with Massa-

chusetts Department of Fish and Game's Division of Marine and Fisheries and the Town of Wellfleet, the Mass Audubon staff is utilizing bare concrete balls, concrete blocks, netted mesh bags filled

If you go . . .

**Mass Audubon Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary**  
291 State Highway, Route 6  
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[www.massaudubon.org/Nature\\_Connection/Sanctuaries/Wellfleet/index.php](http://www.massaudubon.org/Nature_Connection/Sanctuaries/Wellfleet/index.php)  
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Monday, Aug. 1, 6:30-9 p.m. and Monday, Aug. 29, 5-7:30 p.m. \$15 Members/\$20 Non-members

rington. "I like the statistical analysis and seeing the experiments that failed."

Lynn Stelman of San Francisco agrees. "I enjoyed seeing research in action. Seeing the things that work and don't work. It's very refreshing."

Why should we care so much about restoring the reef? An oyster filters 50 to 60 gallons of water a day, and healthy shellfish populations that are not disturbed act as a filter.

"I believe that shellfish is our salvation to have clean coastal waters," said Prescott. "This is the future."

The reef restoration project has been years in the making, and is supported by the shellfish advisory committee and Wellfleet's Board of Selectmen and its shellfish constable. Prescott is pleased to have brought oyster farmers and scientists together to sit at a table and talk.

"You have to start the dialogue of how to live in this harbor," he said. "Dialogue creates a picture and understanding of how the ecosystem works. It makes for a strong social community. We've introduced 'oyster the natural habitat' into the conversation, rather than just 'oyster the product.'"

As we head back across the flats and climb the wood stairs to the van that will ferry us to the Nature Center facility (where there is a wonderful exhibition about the project, with examples of the concrete balls and blocks), the talk turns to eating oysters.

"I don't know much about oysters and restoration, but now I might have to try and eat one," said Young.

"We're going to the Beachcomber now for oysters," said Chris Rudomin of Bolton.

I'm ready for a dozen or so myself. This is, after all, the capital city of oysters and it would be a shame not to sample them.

But I pause for a moment at the top of the wood stairs and survey the sandy expanse.

"If this works, in 25 years there will be a whole less sand out here," said Prescott. "You'll be standing on layers of oysters."

*Necce Regis can be reached at [necceeregis@gmail.com](mailto:necceeregis@gmail.com).*

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