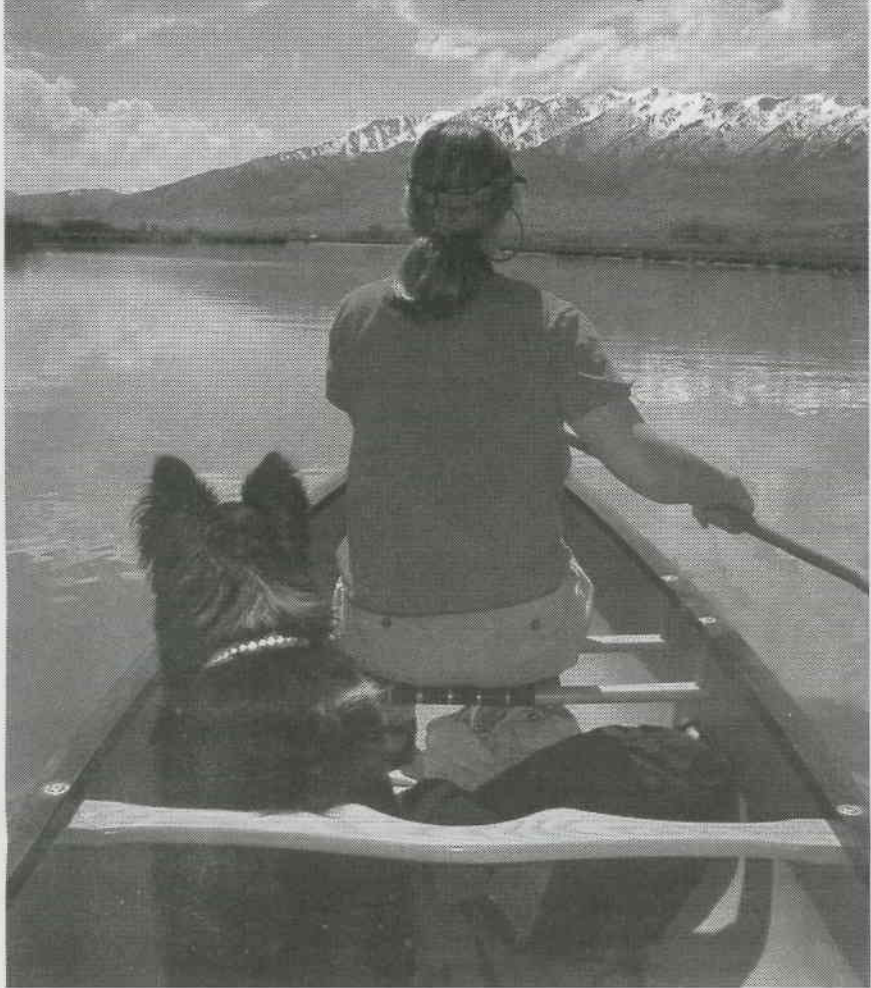


ENTER

the Maze

Canoeing Cache Valley's Cutler Marsh



By Mark R. Johnson

I'd never paddled a canoe "trail" before. In fact, I was a little hesitant about canoeing with buoys as route markers. I mean, wouldn't that take some of the adventure out of the excursion? Isn't there an unspoken understanding, like a creed of self-reliance, that comes with pushing off in a canoe?

Well, as we quickly discovered during a recent morning paddle at the Cutler Marsh Wetlands Maze, the buoy markers come in pretty handy. Because, yes, the area has been dubbed a maze for good reason.

Cradled in northern Utah's scenic Cache Valley, between the Bear River Range and the steeply pinched Wellsville Mountains, the Cutler Marsh covers roughly 10,000 acres of open water and associated wetlands. The Maze is part of the Cutler Reservoir, created by the Cutler Dam Project, which draws water from the Bear, Logan, and Little Bear rivers to provide water for agricultural use and to generate hydroelectric power. And this wide-ranging watery labyrinth makes for many miles of paddling options.

With channels peeling off from the Maze's main body, winding this way and that, many of them dead-ending, it definitely pays to heed the floats strung out across the designated canoe trails—if you want to guarantee any continuity to your paddling, that is. My wife and I found out the hard way, first deciding to wing it, setting out and steering for any channel that lured us in. But after a few trial-and-error decisions—which involved back-paddling each time—we opted to head for a main route.

From the Maze's central boat launch, the Cutler Marsh Marina (just west of downtown Logan), you have several options. Here, heading south, you can follow two marked canoe trails: the Logan River Trail and the Little Bear River Trail. The Logan River Trail heads south, then east, through the marsh until reaching the Logan River, and you can continue on for several miles as the river current isn't much to contend with. The Little Bear River Trail takes you

south and threads through many scrubby islands and offers access to a remote part of the marsh. Or paddle north, up under the bridge at the road, and explore an expansive—though unmarked—section of the marsh, including the North Marsh Trail and the Rookery Trail.

Regardless of the direction you head, just after you launch your boat and dig in with a few paddle strokes, you're quickly assimilated into the setting. Around you, looping channels are fringed in cattails. Banks rise into sweeping terraces. And in an instant you leave the road, parking lot, and everything else behind. Throughout, the paddling is easy, all of it on flat water, which gives you plenty of time to kick back and enjoy the surroundings.

Part of the allure of the Maze is that it's prime wetland—a rarity in Utah. As the nation's second driest state (after Nevada), only about one percent of Utah is wetland, the bulk of which is found around the Great Salt Lake (consisting of both salt- and freshwater wetlands). While wetlands are essential for things like storing ground water, stabilizing water runoff, and helping to reduce the effects of erosion, they also make for excellent habitat, creating a home for countless plants and animals.

In places, the Maze's water is shallow enough to allow plants to root, offering a sheltered, watery habitat for many birds. And Cutler is a crucial layover for migrating shorebirds and waterfowl. There's plenty of life under the surface, too, where a unique ecosystem contains various invertebrates and crustaceans. You can watch shorebirds jabbing their bills—of all specialized shapes and designs—into the muck for a snack.

Throughout the Maze, birders will find themselves in a veritable slice of avian heaven, with something new around every bend, flapping overhead, or bobbing nearby. On the list: yellow-headed blackbirds, black-crowned night herons, white-faced ibis, black-necked stilts, American avocets, willets, American coots, pelicans, and grebes. Also look for northern harriers hovering just off the ground, short-eared owls, snowy egrets, and great-blue herons. At one point, coming around a corner, we were eye-to-wild-eye with a massive sandhill crane. For neophytes, it's hard not to become a bird nut in a matter of hours at a place like this. Definitely bring some binoculars and a field guide.

Other sightings may include deer, elk, and beaver. We even spied an adult moose feeding close to the boat put-in, quietly munching in the tall grass. The last time I paddled a body of water teeming with so much life—where eyes and nostrils and beaks seemed to be a fixed part of the landscape—was in Africa, canoeing on the Zambezi. No hippos or crocs here, though we were attacked by one local "baddie": a carp. The size of a toaster oven, this cheeky fish torpedoed us from the shallows and scored a direct hit, thudding heavily against the hull as he passed under. Chalk one up for the little guys.

It's easy to spend the better part of an afternoon zigzagging through the Maze. I recommend starting off on one of the designated trails to get a feel for the scope of the wetlands, and then leaving the buoys behind, meandering out into the heart of the marsh. And even if you only paddle in a short ways, it'll feel like you're in a faraway land.

How to get there: From downtown Logan, drive west on Route 30 (also known as the Valley View Hwy.) to the Cutler Marsh Marina, a gravel parking lot and boat launch about 6.5 miles from town, located on the south side of the road.

To learn more about Cutler Marsh paddling opportunities, and to see a map of the Maze, visit the site of the Bridgerland Audubon Society at www.bridgerlandaudubon.org.

FOR CANOE RENTALS, CONTACT:

The Trailhead, downtown Logan, (435) 753-1541, \$20

Muddy Road Outfitters, Benson, (435) 753-3693, \$20;
drop-off service included (24-hr. notice required)