

# The Chesapeake Paddler



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## A guide to kayak touring in the Chesapeake Bay

How to enjoy multi-day trips using water trails on the Potomac and the Patuxent



*Kayak touring is the art of taking multi-day trips. In the Washington, DC area, two water trails on the Potomac and the Patuxent rivers offer great opportunities to get started. Above, hammock and tent camping at Chapel Point State Park on the Maryland side of the Potomac. (Photo: Ralph Heimlich)*

### By Ralph Heimlich

Have you ever wondered about kayaking and camping out of your boat? There are many places you can do an overnight on the water at a paddle-in campsite. The [Chesapeake Bay Water Access Map](#) on the CPA website lists a total of 64 paddle-in sites around the greater Bay area.

However, if you want to take a multi-day trip where you paddle from site to site along a route (known as kayak touring), your options are more limited. This article focuses on two well-developed water trails that follow the Patuxent River in Maryland and the mid-Potomac River forming the border between Maryland and Virginia.

To work best, water trails for kayak touring require a series of paddle-in campsites that are approximately one day's paddling (about 10-12 miles) apart. Ideally, they would all be managed by the same authority and have put-ins with secure overnight parking for your vehicle. We are not quite there in all cases, but the "bones" of well-organized kayak touring water trails are in place on the Patuxent and Potomac Rivers.

Most sites are managed by the county in which they are located, and state parks generally handle their own paddle-in campsite reservations. They are generally not listed on state online camping reservation sites. Adding to the confusion is that many staff at these parks are not

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*In camp at Milltown Landing on Patuxent River trail. CPA offers both workshops and practice trips to learn about kayak camping and touring. Check the [CPA Meetup page](#) for scheduling information. (Photo: Ralph Heimlich)*

aware that they even HAVE paddle-in sites to reserve, stemming from their infrequent use. Be prepared to insist and speak to a supervisor if your initial contact is negative. Fees generally run about \$20 to \$25 per night and are payable when you make the reservation.

### **Kayak Touring on the Patuxent Water Trail**

There are currently 11 paddle-in campsites that make up the Patuxent Water Trail. They are documented in what is now the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the Patuxent River Water Trail Guide and GPS-Ready Map, created by CPA member Dave Linthicum and available through the [Patuxent Riverkeeper](#) and at the visitor centers of the Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary (AA county) and Jug Bay Natural Area (PG county).

A good launch for the upper part of the water trail is the Queen Anne Canoe Launch (at mile 53, measured upstream from the Drum Point light). You can obtain the gate code and parking passes for overnight parking here (and at Selby Landing) from MNCCPC at Jug Bay Natural Area.

When considering a kayak tour of the Patuxent, you need to think about arranging a shuttle since the distances involved can be substantial (53 river miles from Solomons Island to Queen Anne Canoe Launch). Many of the camp sites are relatively close to each other, but on opposite

sides of the river, so a large loop route may be advisable (e.g., Selby Landing to White Oak Landing, then to Spice Creek, and back up to Emory Landing, then return to Selby Landing).

Tides are another consideration, since this entire stretch of the river is tidal. The tidal difference on the river is not great (about 1-2 feet), but it is a lot easier paddling WITH the tide than AGAINST it.

Consider setting your departure times to coincide with the tide moving in your direction (up or down stream). River current is negligible, except in the top five miles or so (river miles 48-53), so don't count on much help from the current.

In descending order down the river, the campsites are:

- Mile 51: Stockett's Run campsite (AA County)
- Mile 44a: Iron Pot Landing (MNCPPC, up Western Branch)
- Mile 41a: Emory Landing (AA County)
- Mile 41: Selby Canoe Camp (MNCPPC)
- Mile 40: Selby Landing (MNCPPC)
- Mile 40a: White Oak Landing (MNCPPC, up Mattaponi Creek)

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- Mile 35a: Spice Creek (MNCPPC, at the mouth of Spice Creek)
- Mile 30: Milltown Landing (MNCPPC)
- Mile 23: Maxwell Hall (Charles County, up Swanson Creek)
- Mile 20: Indian Creek (Myrtle Grove WMA, up Indian Creek)
- Mile 9: Greenwell State Park (DNR, Point Lookout SP, up Hog Neck Creek)

Contact information (note that often staff are not familiar with paddle-in campsites, you may have to explain in some detail before you find someone knowledgeable to deal with):

- Maryland National Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC) is located at the Jug Bay Natural Area HQ at Jackson Landing (16000 Croom Airport Road, Upper Marlboro, MD 20772, 301-627-6074)
- Anne Arundel County Parks and Recreation Department (AA County) (1 Harry S Truman Parkway Annapolis, MD 21401, (410) 222-7313 <https://www.aacounty.org/services-and-programs/paddle-in-camping>)
- Charles County Parks and Recreation Department



*Packing up to go home at the Spice Creek campsite on the Patuxent River Trail. (Photo: Ralph Heimlich)*



*Kayaks allow room for extra camping gear, such as chairs and a tarp for the weather. Above, setting up camp at White Oak Landing on the Patuxent River. (Photo: Ralph Heimlich)*

(Charles County) (8190 Port Tobacco Rd, Port Tobacco, MD 20677, 301-932-3470)

- Myrtle Grove Wildlife Management Area (WMA) (5625 Myrtle Grove Rd. LaPlata, MD 20646 301-743-5161)
- Point Lookout SP (DNR) (11175 Point Lookout Road, Scotland, MD 20687 301-872-5688)

### **Kayak Touring on the Tidal Potomac River**

The situation on the Potomac River is less organized than on the Patuxent, partly because the river is the boundary between Maryland and Virginia, and partly because development of campsites on the river is more recent.

There is no official river distance signage on the Potomac, but I have created one using the center line mileage that approximates distance from the mouth of the river.

There are seven paddle-in campsites on the Virginia side of the river, and seven on the Maryland side.

- Mile 113: Pohick Bay Regional Park, VA (camping is about a half-mile up from the kayak landing on Gunston Cove via a paved road)

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*Kayak touring is a great opportunity to spend more days and nights on the water. Above, sunset over the Potomac Caledon State Park on the Virginia side. (Photo: Ralph Heimlich)*

- Mile 102: Leesylvania State Park, VA (paddle-in campsite shares facilities with group campsite at Bushey Point landing on Powells Creek)
- Mile 101: Smallwood State Park, MD (campsites are across a wooden foot bridge from Sweden Point Marina landing on Mattawoman Creek)
- Mile 99: Chicamuxen WMA, MD (two campsites located up Chicamuxen Creek)
- Mile 89: Widewater State Park, VA (paddle-in campsites share facilities with picnic area)
- Mile 81: Lions Club Camp Merrick, MD (in the past, paddlers have pre-arranged to camp here)
- Mile 75: Friendship Landing Park, MD (there is a single tent platform on a steep bank up a small creek off Nanjemoy Creek northeast of Friendship Landing, first come-first served, no reservations)
- Mile 77: Caledon State Park, VA (six camp site areas serviced by a porta-potty, can be reserved or use the pay station)
- Mile 69: Chapel Point State Park, MD (a large open field with picnic table and fire ring a short ways up the Port Tobacco River, serviced by Charles County Parks department)
- Mile 56: Colonial Beach, VA (it may be possible to pre-arrange hotel/motel accommodations here for overnight stays)
- Mile 49: Westmoreland State Park, VA (a paddle-in campsite is located at the down-river end of the beach. There are also regular campsites about a mile up a steep paved road)
- Mile 43: Newtowne Neck State Park, MD (there are two paddle-in campsites here, one on Breton Bay to the east and one on Saint Clements Bay on the west of the peninsula)
- Mile 33: Coles Point Marina and Resort, VA (there is RV camping at this marina and they may accommodate paddle-in tent campers)
- Mile 23: Chancellor's Point Campground, MD (this is about 5 miles up the St. Marys River and consists of 6 tent pad sites)
- Mile 14: Point Lookout State Park, MD (there are 15 designated campsites which can be reserved on the Green and Hoffman Point waterside loops)

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Contact information (note that often staff are not familiar with paddle-in campsites, you may have to explain in some detail before you find someone knowledgeable to deal with):

- Pohick Bay Regional Park, VA ( (703) 339-6104, 6501 Pohick Bay Dr, Lorton, VA 22079)
- Leesylvania State Park, VA reservations must be made through the park (2001 Daniel K. Ludwig Dr., Woodbridge, VA 22191; Phone: 703-730-8205; Email: [Leesylvania@dcr.virginia.gov](mailto:Leesylvania@dcr.virginia.gov))
- Smallwood State Park, MD camping reservations through the MD State Park site (<https://parkreservations.maryland.gov/>). Smallwood State Park, 2750 Sweden Point Road, Marbury MD 20658, 301-743-7613, [smallwood.statepark@maryland.gov](mailto:smallwood.statepark@maryland.gov)
- Chicamuxen WMA, MD these sites are managed by the Myrtle Grove Work Center ((301) 743-5161, 5625



*Ya' gotta eat, especially on a CPA trip. Campers preparing gourmet camp food at the gazebo in Caledon State Park, VA, Potomac River. (Photo: Ralph Heimlich)*

Myrtle Grove Rd. LaPlata, MD 20646)

- Widewater State Park, VA reservations must be made through the park (101 Widewater State Park Road, Stafford, VA 22554; Phone: 540-288-1400; Email: [widewater@dcr.virginia.gov](mailto:widewater@dcr.virginia.gov))
- Lions Club Camp Merrick, MD (PO Box 56, Nanjemoy, MD 20662, (301)-870 -5858, [info@LionsCampMerrick.org](mailto:info@LionsCampMerrick.org))
- Caledon State Park, VA unlike the other VA state parks, these sites are in the State's online reservation system (800-933-7275, <https://virginiastateparks.reserveamerica.com/camping/caledon-state-park/r/campgroundDetails.do?contractCode=VA&parkId=140158>) park is (11617 Caledon Rd., King George, VA 22485; Phone: 540-663-3861; Email: [Caledon@dcr.virginia.gov](mailto:Caledon@dcr.virginia.gov))
- Chapel Point State Park this is now managed by Charles County Recreation Department (1-888-432-2267, Charles County, other aspects contact Smallwood State Park, 2750 Sweden Point Road, Marbury, MD 20658, 301-743-7613)



*Maryland and Virginia have established several paddle-in campsites along the Potomac, including the above site at Westmoreland State Park on the Virginia side. (Photo: Ralph Heimlich)*

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*Are you SURE this was all in the boat? Getting it all to fit is just one step, learning how to properly pack for weight and balance to ensure your boat handles properly is also key. Above, on the beach at Westmoreland State Park on the Virginia side of the Potomac River. (Photo: Ralph Heimlich)*

- Westmoreland State Park, VA this site needs to be reserved directly with the park (145 Cliff Road, Montross, VA 22520; Phone: 804-493-8821; Email: [westmoreland@dcr.virginia.gov](mailto:westmoreland@dcr.virginia.gov))
- Newtowne Neck State Park, MD this site is managed by Point Lookout SP (301-872-5688 or email [pointlookout.statepark@maryland.gov](mailto:pointlookout.statepark@maryland.gov))
- Coles Point Marina and RV Resort, VA ( (804) 472-4011, [info@colespointmarina.com](mailto:info@colespointmarina.com), 190 Plantation Drive, Hague, VA 22469)
- Chancellor's Point Campground is part of Historic St. Mary's City (240-895-4980 or email: [groups@digshistory.org](mailto:groups@digshistory.org), 18751 Hogaboom Lane, Lexington Park, MD 20653). Details at <https://www.hsmcdigshistory.org/business/chancellors-point/>.
- Point Lookout State Park, MD only Loop B Green's has water access, reservations through the MD State Park site (<https://parkreservations.maryland.gov/>), (301-872-5688, email: [pointlookout.statepark@maryland.gov](mailto:pointlookout.statepark@maryland.gov), 11175 Point Lookout Road, Scotland, MD 20687

Training for kayak camping is not necessary, but remember that you are limited more by space (in your boat and through your hatches) than by weight. Even the smallest kayaks can carry much more weight than the

typical back packer can handle. Compared to back packing, kayak camping can be considered "glamping"!

Pack everything that can be damaged by water in dry bags, even though it will be in the waterproof compartments (they aren't). Pack heavy items (cookware, food) closest to the cockpit and low in the boat, and lighter items (clothes, sleeping pads) in the ends of the kayak.

Water can be carried in flat skins or bags and packed in the cockpit under your legs or in front of the footpegs. Smaller collapsible containers like Platypus or Camelback bottles can be squeezed into spaces in the hatches.

It is a good idea to limit deck-loaded items because they negatively affect your kayak's stability and increase your windage. As far as clothes, consider limiting yourself to one set of paddling clothes and one set of "camp" clothes, rinsing and drying paddling clothes as needed.

Check the [CPA calendar](#) on Meetup for trips. Suzanne Farace is organizing a [practice kayak camper on the Patuxent](#) on July 24. While kayak camping isn't limited to summer, that is probably the best season to start because you can get by with fewer clothes and a less bulky sleeping bag.

The best way to learn about kayak camping is to get out there and try it!