

Four days of kayaking on the Potomac



A group of CPA members prepare to launch from Mallows Bay Park for a kayak camping adventure on the Potomac.

By Ralph Heimlich

I've been pushing kayak camping (also called kayak touring) on the Chesapeake Bay rivers and shores as part of CPA activities for more than 20 years. This year's installment was a successful version of the trip we tried to do in Spring of 2019, involving the new paddle-in campsite at Virginia's Widewater State Park, and a second stop at Virginia's older Caledon State Park paddle-in camp.

Seven intrepid CPA members (John Gibbs, Ed Johnson Carolyn Sanford, Barbara Southworth, Sophie Troy, Lois Wyatt and I) set off from Maryland's [Mallows Bay Park](#) mid-morning on Friday, September 25. Our boats were fully loaded with all our camping gear and food and water for a four-day trip.

Mallows Bay, in addition to being the focal point of the new Mallows Bay National Marine Sanctuary, has a gated entrance and allows overnight parking of vehicles, necessary for extended kayak touring on the River. Any park that offers paddle-in camping should also be set up to offer safe overnight parking. As much as it would be nice to depend solely on the River for going and coming, modern life requires most of us to get to the launch and

run shuttles using cars that have to be parked somewhere safe during the trip.

We spent a little time checking out the wrecked wooden WWI ships and the steel Chesapeake ferry wreck in Mallows Bay before heading downriver around Liverpool point. The weather was fair and almost calm, a beautiful September morning. Eagles wheeled overhead and landed in the tall trees lining the bluffs above the Potomac.

A couple of miles downriver, we pulled into a beach along Smith Point, part of Maryland's undeveloped Purse State Park for lunch before crossing the river. Purse State Park is the site of what would have been a nuclear power plant. Fortunately, it was never developed and Maryland acquired the land for a park.

The cliffs along this part of the river are part of the Aquia Formation which formed in the Paleocene Era about 60 million years ago when a gigantic meteor hit the earth. This area was covered with warm shallow water which made it a suitable habitat for sand tiger sharks, mackerel sharks, Turritella (snails) and Eagle Rays more specifically

[See Potomac on page seven](#)

[Potomac, from page six](#)

Cownose Rays which all lived during this time period. We searched for shark teeth and other fossils along the surf line as we ate our lunch, then got back in the boats and headed to Smith Point.

The Potomac at Smith Point is 3.5 miles wide, crossing a major navigation channel. We grouped our seven boats in a parallel line and set off on a due west compass course, carefully scanning for boat traffic headed up or down the river. During the crossing, large military airlift planes came in low over the river, conducting “touch and go” landing exercises on the airfield at the Quantico Marine Corps Air Facility, looking like apartment buildings floating in the sky.

Fortunately, a September Friday morning is not usually a busy time for boat traffic on the river, and only a handful of boats passed in front or behind us on the crossing. We made our Virginia landfall just a little down river from [Widewater State Park](#), but opted to head into Aquia Creek for a little exploration before landing.

We paddled around Simms Point into Aquia Creek and headed up to Widewater’s kayak launch in the first cove upstream. A large flock of Canada geese were disturbed by our arrival, lifting off noisily as we paddled up. After checking out the launch, we headed back out into the Potomac and upriver to the Widewater State Park paddle-in campsite. This first leg of our trip was an 11.2

mile paddle, taking 6.7 hours.

After landing and checking out the camp, we laboriously unloaded our gear and moved it up the winding paved path to the camp, then moved the boats off the beach to the grass area along the path. Widewater State Park’s new paddle-in sites are among the “poshest” on the river. Large wood-framed camping pads filled with pea gravel, nice picnic tables, fire rings (complete with split firewood) and food storage poles equip each of four campsites. There is a new, well-ventilated and lighted restroom serving both the camp and the adjacent picnic area.

Our group had initiated the campsites back in the Spring of 2019, shortly after they were completed, and we were happy to be using them again. We set up camp and quickly began to work on dinner as sunset was a relatively early 6:59 p.m. After dinner and a little walk down to the landing to check on boats and watch the sunset, we started a campfire and settled in.

In a few minutes, Park Ranger Paul Anderson drove up and welcomed us to the camp. He remembered our group from the previous year and was happy to see us using it again. We thanked him for the good condition of the camp and the park, and gave him our trip plan.

After breakfast on Saturday, we packed up and got an early start on our next leg downriver. We paddled down

[See Potomac on page eight](#)



Day one included paddling along the Maryland shore, a stop for fossil hunting and a crossing to the Virginia shore.

[Potomac, from page seven](#)



Camping at Caledon State park included beautiful sunsets and a day for hiking or paddling to nearby sights.

the Virginia shoreline, past the mouth of Potomac Creek. Several in our party wanted to explore the creek and Crows Nest Landing park, but I argued that we had a 14 mile paddle to Caledon State Park and needed to stay the course.

There are a lot of large waterfront houses along the shoreline past Potomac Creek. We passed Belvedere Beach, Passapatanzy Creek, and the small town of Fairview. As the noon hour approached, we began looking for a lunch stopping place, finally settling on a disused marina that had a "For Sale" sign on it. After a short break, we were back on the water.

If we had waited about 20 minutes, we could have had lunch on the sandy bar blocking the Caledon Marsh outlet at the upriver end of the park itself. We continued on along the shore, some closer in and some of us farther out, finally arriving at the [Caledon State Park](#) campsite landing at about 5:30 PM, after a 13.5 mile paddle from Widewater State Park.

Caledon is one of the nicest paddle-in sites on the Potomac, with six wood-framed tent pads, all equipped with picnic tables, fire rings and food storage poles. They are separated from each other by screens of trees and brush, so you have some privacy, even with such a large

capacity. There is also a roofed gazebo with tables down by the landing beach, and we set up there for cooking and eating.

There is a porta-potty and firewood for sale, but no running water available (we packed ours in, refilling at Widewater SP). In previous outings, we have had Caledon all to ourselves, but on this night, there was a father and 5-year old son on their first backpacking trip, and three young guys who hiked in with a wheeled cart. "Paddle-in" is accurate, but Caledon is for people-powered travelers of all kinds.

We set up camp, had dinner at the gazebo and watched the sun set over the Potomac. We'd planned a campfire, gathering driftwood from the plentiful supply on the beach, but an early shower sent us all to our beds for a well-earned rest.

Sunday morning, three paddlers set off after breakfast for a paddle up around Jones Pond and into Chotank Creek and its natural area preserve, and then beyond to Mathias Point. Two others put on their hiking shoes and explored the Caledon trail system. I stayed in camp and helped the others do some repairs to rudders and a stuck skeg, which would help speed our return trip the

[See Potomac on page nine](#)

Potomac, from page eight

next day.

It is easy to get into a ceaseless “go-go” attitude on these trips, but I like to kick back (we all brought folding chairs in our kayaks), read a good book, and catch some rays and few winks when the sun is shining. September can be a great time for river camping: Not too hot, not too cold and with plenty of sunshine.

When the others returned and after dinner, we enjoyed another lovely sunset and finally had our driftwood campfire. The camp was quieter on Sunday night, the other campers and all the boaters on the river having left. We had gentle breezes all night and heard the ghostly calls of barred and Great Horned owls calling as they hunted the deep woods and meadows.

We got an early start Monday morning, packing up and somehow cramming everything back into the kayaks, despite having used up nearly all our food and most of our water. The river was nearly empty as we paddled directly north, striking the Maryland shoreline a little downriver from Halfway Creek. The high banked cliffs sheltered us from the prevailing NW wind, but it was a little unsettled halfway across the Potomac as the flooding tide and wind contested each other, creating small standing waves over the river’s central shoal.

The Maryland shoreline here is much less developed than the Virginia side, but we passed some isolated waterfront houses and the Lions Club Camp Merrick.

Rounding the great bend of the river at Maryland Point, we were coasting along Harrison Cove below thickly-wooded cliffs that looked much as they must have in John Smith’s day, when we were jarred by the anachronistic site of two huge Star Wars radar dishes that could have graced Mos Eisley’s spaceport. The Maryland Point Radio Telescope facility was operated by the Naval Research Laboratory. The first dish (an 84 foot wide telescope) was built in 1958. A slightly larger second telescope was built in 1965.

We rounded Thomas Point and stopped on the beach at Thorne Gut, where a small tributary enters the Potomac, for a leisurely lunch and some fossil hunting. Everyone was able to find a few small shark teeth to add to their collection, or start one. Our final dash took us back around Smith Point, where we had crossed on Friday, and then along the shoreline, back to Mallows Bay and our waiting cars.

We finished 13.8 miles, adding up to a total of 38.5 miles over the three days (not counting the side trip on Saturday some took). It is hard to beat this stretch of the Potomac for kayak touring. We are truly lucky to have two such great facilities as the paddle-in campsites at Widewater and Caledon State Parks in Virginia, and the Mallows Bay Park in Maryland for a launch.

More pictures of the trip online at <https://photos.app.goo.gl/kKufGDkS5FCxnbG9A>



After two nights at Caledon State Park, the final day’s paddle was a trip back to the starting point at Mallows Bay.