

The Chesapeake Paddler



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Maryland water trails make kayak touring possible

Paddle-in campsites, marked trails deem Janes Island State Park a destination.

By Ralph Heimlich

There are not many places in the Chesapeake Bay region to enjoy kayak touring (camping out of your kayak at primitive sites). The three paddle-in campsites at Janes Island State Park, near Crisfield, MD, are part of one of Maryland's first water trails. Three other kayakers joined me for a weekend of paddling at this location in late March.

Late winter is one of the best times to visit Janes Island because there are few other visitors, the temperatures are generally cool compared to the heat and humidity of summer, and there are NO BUGS! I actually jumped the gun a bit in planning this trip for late March, since the park doesn't officially reopen until April 1. However, we got permission to use the backcountry sites from the Park Manager, as long as we registered with the office and got hang tags for our vehicles. Campsites are \$7 per night and offer little beyond wooden tent platforms. There are no tables, open fires are prohibited, and Leave No Trace camping is required (see <https://Int.org/learn/seven-principles-overview>).

Joining me were Sue Sierke, Greg Welker and Dave Isbell. We were all paddling larger touring kayaks, were well equipped with dry suits and insulation to deal with 47-degree water temperatures, and were blessed with a benign weather forecast (partly sunny, air temps ranging from mid-40's to mid-60's, very little rain, and winds at 10-15 kts from the SW). We arrived at the Janes Island boat ramp about 10



Backcountry campsites offer little beyond wooden tent platforms — and solitude. Pro tip: go early in the paddling season to avoid the bugs. Photo/Ralph Heimlich

a.m. and after the usual ramp-side trauma of getting everything packed, paddled out about a half-hour later.

My original plan was to camp one night at the southern-most campsite on Long Island, then paddle up the bay-side beaches to the northern-most campsite on Daugherty Creek for Sunday night. I had scheduled a Monday paddle on the Big Annessex River, which borders the park on the north, to include our group and a few other day paddlers. A rainy forecast for Monday caused all the day paddlers to bail, and the Ranger had cautioned that the Long Island

site would be very exposed to SW winds, so we altered plans to fit the circumstances.

Paddling down Daugherty Canal from the ramp was very pleasant against a light SW wind. We decided we could avoid the continued paddle against the wind by ducking into the Black Trail. Entering Back Creek, we immediately lost the wind as we wound our way through low marsh, eventually emerging onto the Flatcap Basin. A lone and unsociable kayaker was just paddling around the bend away from us as we approached. The park has an elaborate boat dock on the bayward end of this basin at a wash-over beach. We landed there for lunch in the warm sunshine looking out over the bay. Deale Island was visible to the NW and the faint trace of Smith Island seven miles to our west could be made out. Behind us, the new wind turbine at Crisfield turned slowly, and the twin towers of the high-rise condos

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rising above the marsh on Crisfield's waterfront provided an unmistakable landmark.

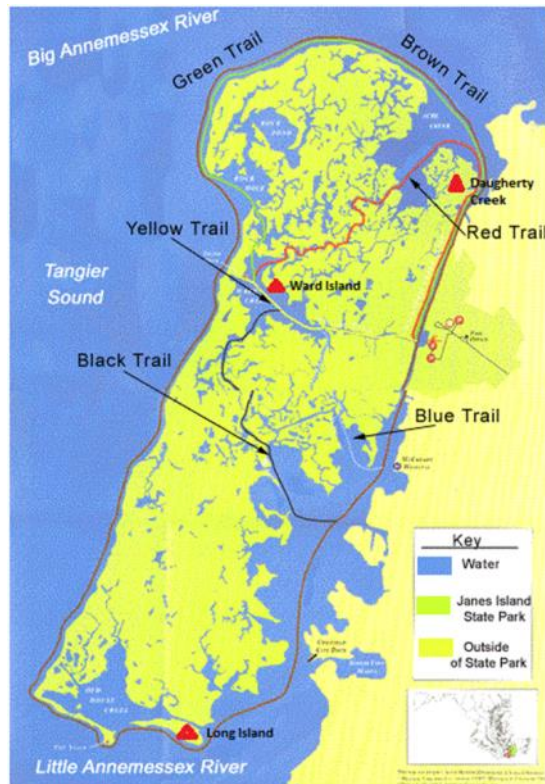
At the time of Captain John Smith's Chesapeake Bay voyages, the inhabitants of the land near present-day Janes Island State Park were American Indians of the Accohannock or Annessex Nation. Later, settlers farmed the land in the marsh. One resident lady nicknamed "Old Ailsey" lived at the north end in an area known as Long Acre and is responsible for the Chesapeake Ghost story of Old Ailsey's Light. A fish packing plant at the southern tip of the island prospered early in the last century but eventually went out of business.

We paddled out of Flatcap Basin following the Green Trail through the cut and coasted along the beach in the bay for awhile, then turned into another cut at Rock Hole, into Rock Pond. After exploring awhile, we exited and paddled north and east along the northern end of the island, passing miles of beautiful, pristine white beaches. Dave Isbell got out his new half-dome shaped downwind sail and after a hesitant start, soon was clipping along at a good pace. We passed a couple with a dog and a skiff and turned into Acre Creek, intending to follow the Red Trail through the marsh to our campsite at Ward's Island. Unfortunately, we had dawdled too long and the receding tide left too little water for forward progress. We reluctantly turned around and crawled out of Acre Creek to Daugherty Creek.

We paddled down past some houses on the east bank, and the Daugherty Creek campsite on the western shore. Coming to the Park boundary, we passed the cabins, which can be rented year-round, and eventually came back to the boat ramp. Turning west on the Yellow Trail, we paddled the short distance to Ward Island.

Camping at Ward Island is fine, except that at low tide, THERE WILL BE MUD! We got within 10 feet for the landing and ran out of water.

Over the side we went and into a foot and half of grey, sticky mud.



Then we had to drag the loaded boats that last few yards to the "beach."

Accommodations at Wards Island were "cozy," to say the least. The two platforms have room (barely) for two tents each, but it is better than attempting to sleep on the brushy, often wet ground.

After setting up camp and cooking dinner, we sat around enjoying the still-mild temperature. Without a camp fire, nights at a primitive camp in March often begin early, with everyone

heading into the sack to stay warm. However, with temperatures in the fifties, we weren't in any hurry to head in. Going out to the "beach" for one last check on the boats tethered to the small dock, we were fascinated to see how the lights helped pick out landmarks so easily. Crisfield was all lit up, but even far away places like Smith Island and Tangier Island showed up easily in the clear night with lights ablaze.

Next morning, the forecast confirmed that our weekend was coming to a close. With rain and higher winds forecast, we had a leisurely breakfast (had to wait for the tide to come up and spare us slogging out through the mud), and packed up our gear.

After paddling back along the Yellow Trail, we unloaded the boats and loaded them on the cars, then sat down on the dockside benches for a nice lunch in the sunshine. As we were finishing, a young man drove up in a pickup, looked over the landing, and hauled out a short rec boat. We warned him about the cold water temperatures, but he proceeded to launch in street clothes with no PFD. At least he paddled out to the sheltered Yellow Trail. We hope he enjoyed his paddling at Janes Island. We certainly did. ♦



Photo/Ralph Heimlich

Sue Sierke, Dave Isbell, and Greg Welker don cold water gear for a March tour of Janes Island trails.