

Kayak Camping on the Patuxent and Potomac

By Ralph Heimlich

I forswore car camping, by and large, this summer, in favor of camping using only what could fit in my kayak's hatches. Fortunately for us, there are plenty of kayak camping opportunities around the Bay, and especially on our rivers. One trip I wanted to do was the string of beautiful campsites up and down the Patuxent. MDDNR and the counties, using funds from Mirant Power Plant in mitigation for the 1999 Swanson Creek oil spill, created these paddle-in campsites.

Patuxent—Greg Welker and I launched at Queen Anne Canoe Landing (just below Rt 214 on the PG County side) into the cool, shaded and flowing Patuxent River. The quiet of a Friday morning was great for bird song and soon we even spotted a bright yellow Prothonotary Warbler dipping down to the water. As the river broadened out, we passed the supposed last resting place of Commodore Barney's gun galley Scorpion (War of 1812 buffs alert, the bicentennial is fast approaching). As a slight



Landing at Spice Creek (Geoff Ultsch, Cragg Howard) photo by Ralph Heimlich

side trip, we turned up Back Channel into the historic river bed that was probably the one used by Barney's fleet when they scuttled their galleys to avoid capture by the invading Brits before marching overland to take part in the Battle of Bladensburg.

Below Route 4, we ran into Geoff Ultsch who had been going to join us for the launch at QAAC but got crossed up and launched from Selby Landing (one less shuttle to run). The three of us landed at Mount Calvert, climbed the "mountain" and had lunch with the staff archaeologists, who unlocked the museum for us. If you haven't caught it, the displays of artifacts dug up from the grounds documenting thousands of years of human habitation of this imposing rise above the Pax flood plain is well worth it. The archeologists plan a big bicentennial exhibit with artifacts from Barney's fleet, the British landing at Croom and other material related to the War of 1812, known by some as the Second American War for Independence.

We relaunched and completed our paddle down beyond Jackson Landing (Jug Bay) and Selby Landing, but did a short detour up Lyons Creek (on a falling tide--not a great idea) before getting out at White Oak Landing paddle-in site and setting up camp. White Oak and the other paddle-in sites include a signed (but usually somewhat obscure) landing area, a grassy or wooded area for camping, a picnic table, fire ring, and well-serviced porta-potty. The chain of sites (Iron Pot, Selby, White Oak, Spice Creek, Milltown, Indian Creek, Maxwell Manor, Greenwell) make it possible to travel the entire 55 mile stretch of the Pax from Queen Anne Bridge to Solomons Island, kayak camping on your way (see Patuxent Water Trail at <http://www.patuxentwatertrail.org/>).

We ate dinner and took a short hike along the Merkle Wildlife Sanctuary Critical Area driving tour road and the wooden bridge across Mattaponi Creek and back to the parking lot at Selby Landing. As we got back, the sun set and barred owls started calling and the lighting bugs were flashing in every bush, lighting up the night chorus of bull frogs from the creek.

We lunched at another paddle-in site, Spice Creek. This heavily wooded site is in one of the quietest parts of the river, surrounded by protected land everywhere you look. Spice Creek flowed strongly into the river here, deep green and very clear, making for a very refreshing swim after lunch. The original plan had been to camp here on Sunday night and paddle out on Monday, but schedules were too restrictive (if only we could work on weekends and play the rest of the time!), but I'll be going back to Spice Creek sometime soon.

Paddling down beyond historic Lower Marlboro, and the public boat ramp at Clyde Watson (Magruder Landing), we came to the paddle-in campsite at Milltown Landing. This is a grassy camping area in a grove of waterside trees bordering an old farm--now DNR property. Despite the early afternoon, we were content to while away the hottest part of the day lolling on the grass in the shade, with a cool southerly breeze, watching the ski boats play. The river necks down here and the incoming tide created a swift current, sometimes difficult to swim against.

As the sun sank down, the fireflies started a frenzy that made every bush and tree sparkle, and the frogs on the old farm pond (fortunately a ways down river) set up a cacophony. The night was warm, but very peaceful and we slept in until the boats started to run down river. Next morning, with the tide, we did the whole 12 mile run in a little more than 2 hours. Several of our group bought their own Pax Water Trail maps (drawn by CPA member Dave Linthicum, who lives just across the river) to plan further Kayak camping on the Pax.

My pics at <http://picasaweb.google.com/ralph.heimlich/PaxRiverKamper2010#> and Greg's are at <http://onthewaterandinthetwoods.blogspot.com/2010/06/patuxent-water-trail-kayak-camping.html>

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Pax and Potomac (Continued from page 5)

Potomac—This was a repeat of a Chip Walsh original back in misty memory (2004). Some slight differences were 2 months (July vs. May), 3 feet (difference in gauged height at Point of Rocks), and 20 degrees (82 vs. 102). In addition, most of the faces were changed to protect the names.

While the forecast heat emergency scared off a couple of people, the REAL threat was tornado-style winds after we got off the river—but who knew?

Thanks to Chip's arranging an outfitter shuttle for Sunday, we could drive directly to the launch at Brunswick (at the end of Maple Avenue, beyond the MARC parking lot at the ramp under the Route 17 bridge), where we stuffed gear into boats and then moved the cars back to the MARC lot under the watchful eyes of the train dispatchers. A pattern that was to prove prophetic had most of the paddling crew IN the river as soon as they were reasonably ready to go, as later arrivals sweat to get ready. The assembled crew were: veteran river runners Chip Walsh, Scott Brody and Greater Baltimore Canoe Club's Kara Brown, Al Larsen, Suzanne Farace, new CPA member (but old paddling hand)

Charles Brown, Cragg Howard, Tom Heneghan, Steven Jahncke, and Ritu Sharma. We launched into the backwater at the ramp, scraped over some rocks and were afloat on the wide Potomac with a nice 5 knot breeze helping the rushing current to carry us along.



Going Hippo—Cragg Howard, Tom Heneghan, Suzanne Farace, Ralph Heimlich, Charles Brown, Steven Jahncke *photo by Chip Walsh*

They said it was going to be hot, and we had had a briefing on heat exhaustion, but with splashing and such we mostly stayed cool as we kayaked along. Spying a shady bank, we took the opportunity for an early lunch, rest period and...hippo practice in the river. Getting back on the river, we flowed along with current as the heat rose, finding lots of rocks and ripples, getting stuck occasionally, and taking time outs every so often to get into the shade. We made a pretty quick passage to our campsite area on Meadow Island, opposite Noland's Ferry, but shielded from it by another intervening island. We all...went hippo. While the water was not COOL (86-89 degrees F by the Martha Stewart scale--Chip's meat thermometer) it was tons cooler than the air temps and did produce a few degrees of evaporative cooling when you stood up.

As the full moon rose, the strains of dance music wafted (ok the base driver VIBRATED) from some swanky venue on the Virginia shore, and we ate our evening meal, many with as few caloric inputs as possible. Suzanne provided emergency rehydration supplies (in red and white) and we simply lazed around, rising occasionally to engage in...hippo practice in the river (what did you think?).

Dawn broke at a cool 89 or so, and we all got up from our beds, went to the river, and...went for some hippo practice! We proceeded downriver, making one stop at the Dickerson Power Plant outlet, which is the location of the Dickerson White Water Course (<http://bce-racing.com/blog/>). We eventually reached our pull out at Edwards Ferry ramp. Lo and behold, Lee from River and Trail Outfitters was there in a van just as we arrived. Perfect timing. The "drivers" quickly buttoned up our boats, grabbed keys and licences and piled into the 15 passenger van, while the "stayers" headed back to the river for...hippo practice (\$90 minimum fee for a shuttle).

As we drove away from the landing over a tangle of back roads, the T storm that had been on the weather alert grew closer and darker, finally bursting down into heavy rain. We didn't think much of it as Lee pulled into the MARC lot at Brunswick. After a quick confab over directions, the various vehicles moved out into the waning rain. Apparently the "stayers" hippo practice was rudely interrupted by near-tornadic winds that blew sticks and branches over everything, as well as rising a gritty dusting. Alas, Ritu's rent-a-boat from Annapolis Canoe and Kayak took a direct hit from a large branch, smashing gel coat on the Up side (she'd been concerned about rock damage to the hull). It was a good trip, immortalized by Ritu with a limerick:

On the Potomac River they met
To paddle, to soak, and to sweat
Then came a storm
From trees limbs were torn
Now a broken Solstice does Ritu get

Pics of all but the storm are online at <http://picasaweb.google.com/ralph.heimlich/PotomackKayakKamper2010#>

Complete trip reports (with many details omitted due to space limitations) are on the Forum at

<http://www.cpakayaker.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=25&t=4907> and

<http://www.cpakayaker.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=25&t=5031>

I encourage you to get out our beautiful rivers and CAMP.