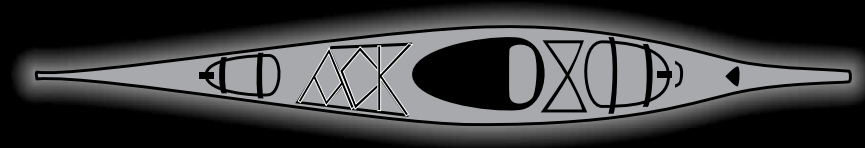


# ATLANTIC

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## Coastal Kayaker



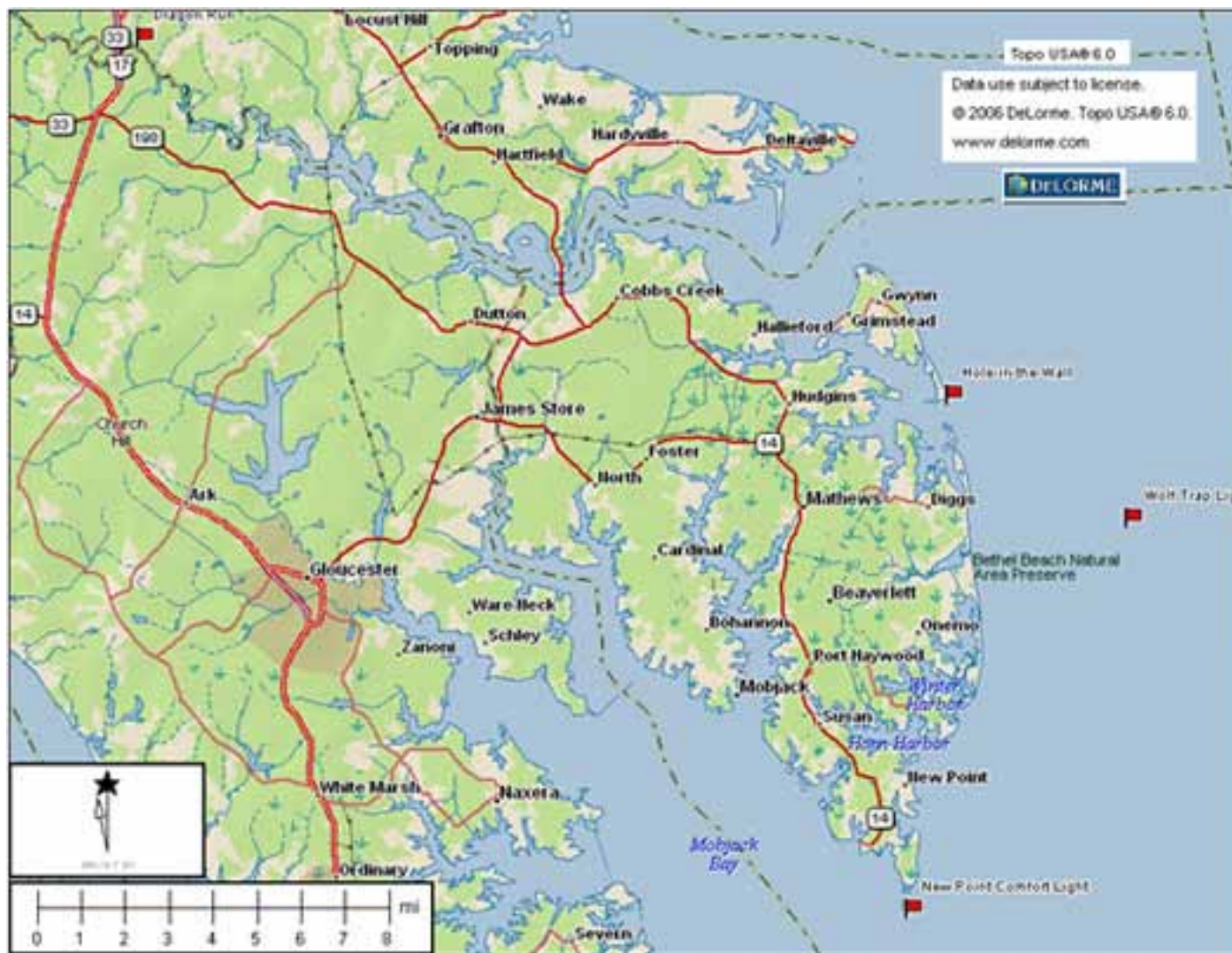
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### Paddling “The Platinum Coast” Mathews County, Virginia



## Paddling “The Platinum Coast”: Mathews County, Virginia

Story and Photos by Ralph E. Heimlich



Since 1650, mariners from what is now Mathews County, Va., on the eastern tip of the Middle Peninsula between the Rappahannock and York Rivers and the Chesapeake Bay, have plied their shallow waters. Once known as Werowocomico by the native Chiskiake, Mathews County is named for Major Thomas Mathews, a Revolutionary War veteran and Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates who introduced a resolution to create the county in 1791.

From a relatively sleepy agricultural and fishing community, Mathews has evolved to become a mecca for recreation and a getaway from nearby Richmond and Washington, D.C. The Mathews coastline has become the “Platinum Coast” to real estate agents. People from all walks of life with a yen for the water call Mathews County home for at least part of the year. Where sturdy watermen and sailors once roamed the placid rivers and creeks, today the weekend kayaker finds a wealth of quiet waters, beautiful scenery, and abundant nature.

From I-95 or U.S. 301, you follow the



Tidewater Trail (U.S. 17) and VA-3 some 90 or 100 miles (or about two hours), skirting the northern boundary of Fort A.P. Hill (named after the confederate general), east through bucolic fields and deep woods, and through the fishing port of Tappahannock to the county seat, Mathews Courthouse. There are a series of potential paddles here. On mild days, you can drive south on VA-14 to the end of the road looking out on the New Point Comfort Lighthouse, east to a beach from which Wolf Trap Light beckons far out on the Bay, or north on Cricket Hill Road, across the drawbridge to circumnavigate Gwynn Island, popping back off the bay through fabled “Hole-in-the-Wall.” If the wind is up, you can paddle up the Piankatank River, up the mysterious Dragon Run, in the sheltered “havens” behind barrier islands of Winter Harbor, Horn Harbor, or Milford Haven. You can also paddle in the sheltered East River, which flows down to Mobjack Bay.

## Two Lighthouses

Veteran kayak commander Bill Dodge, remembering long-ago sailing adventures with the Sea Scouts (the long-standing Boy Scout program), pioneered our first Chesapeake Paddlers Association trips to Mathews in the late 1990s. We chose to “rough it” at several beach-front camp-



*Beach at New Point Comfort.*

ing locales (see side bar) that let us launch conveniently from their shores. From the New Point Campground, you can launch off the beach and paddle three miles south past Dyer Creek around the abandoned New Point Comfort lighthouse. Commissioned in 1804 by President Thomas Jefferson, it stands sentinel on its rocky shoal. The sandy peninsula reaching out to the lighthouse offers a fine place for a picnic, a rest, and a little beach combing. The dumping surf runs at the southeast tip for a chance to play when the tide rolls in. Bottlenose dolphins often appear here to feed,

and roam up and down along this coast. This paddle is also accessible from the Mobjack Bay side, where VA-14 runs into SR-600 at Bavon and down to a landing on the west side of the peninsula. New Point Campground is also convenient to Horn Harbor and Winter Harbor to the north, which can also be accessed from public ramps off SR-608. On calm days when there is no threat of severe weather, a 3.5-mile open water paddle from Haven Beach (Mathews Public Beach at the end of SR-643) will take you out to Wolf Trap Lighthouse. This iron

caisson-built lighthouse erected in 1893 replaced a light ship and screw-pile lighthouse in the same location dating back to 1819. Now privately owned and being restored as a dwelling, it makes a good destination for the adventuresome paddler.

## Gwynn Island and “Hole-in-the-Wall”

Our other camping venue, at Gwynn Island Resort on the southeast tip of Gwynn Island, is grassy and shady, but still offers a beach to launch from for the circumnavigation of the island. This nine-mile paddle requires care with the tide tables since Milford



*New Point Comfort Lighthouse, with Bottlenose dolphins.*

Haven, which separates Gwynn from the mainland, is shallow. Flats on the Piank-tank River side of the island can leave you mud bound and aground. Keep a weather eye peeled, since it is not unusual to be flat calm and breathless on the south and west of the island, and face into a strong offshore breeze when you round Cherry Point into the Bay.

Gwynn suffers from the malady of many a Chesapeake Island: Erosion is consuming the southeast corner of the island. The



*Beach Camping at New Point Campground.*

opening to Milford Haven, Whites Creek, Stutts Creek, Billups Creek, and Stoakes Creek once known singularly to sailors as “Hole-in-the-Wall” is now several “holes” since violent storms have cut the tip of the island off in several places. If you stop on what is now Sandy Point Island, look for the remnants of the paved road that used to carry you there from Gwynn Island. The creeks off Milford Haven make fine paddling, accessible from the campsite launch, if the wind precludes paddling on the Bay.

### **History All Around**

The drawbridge on SR-223 to Gwynn Island marks the site of the Battle of Cricket Hill, one of the first naval engagements of the Revolutionary War. In 1776, Lord Dunmore, the last colonial governor of Virginia, retreated to a stronghold on Gwynn’s Island. In June of that year, General Andrew Lewis led Continental forces to bombard the British fleet and attack the loyalist troops, routing Lord Dunmore and Maryland’s fleeing Royal Governor, frustrating a plan to retake the region and sending the Royal Governors back to England forever.

Gwynn Island is also home to a fascinating local museum, housed in the former Odd Fellows Hall, which poignantly documents the seafaring history of Mathews County and the Island. Mathews County, once covered with forests of Live Oak trees

needed for ship frames, was an established shipbuilding center for the Chesapeake Bay. The Continental Navy built many of its ships in Mathews during the American Revolution.

By 1791, boatbuilders had constructed 12 sailing ships of more than 20 tons each in a single year in Mathews. Between 1790 and 1820, approximately a third of the ships built in Virginia came from Mathews. The sharp, fast vessels, popularly known as “Baltimore Clippers,” were built throughout the Chesapeake Bay, but before the War of 1812, these fast ships were simply known as “Virginia built.” During the Civil War, Mathews County sailors manned the blockade runners that were the South’s lifeline. Captain Sally Tompkins, the only female confederate officer, was from Mathews County and more than a match for the men.

Into the 20th century, Mathews men manned the merchant marine, and many became ship captains. So wide did they roam that it was said “the sun never set on Mathews County mariners.” In the early days of World War II (1942-43), the merchant marine bore the brunt of the Battle of the Atlantic and became the supply lifeline to a desperate England, suffering under “the Blitz.” Mathews local papers weekly recorded the grizzly toll as local men were killed in German U-Boat attacks along the

Atlantic coast and in the Caribbean. In 1942 alone, German U-Boats torpedoed merchant ships and killed 15 Mathews men. In tribute to this disproportionate loss, the U.S. Navy commissioned the attack transport ship U.S.S. Mathews.

### The Piankatank River

There are at least three interesting paddles on the Piankatank River, especially if the wind kicks up on the Bay and a little more sheltered conditions are in order. Two public ramps are accessible about halfway up the Piankatank: one just downstream of the VA-3 bridge at Wilton Point, and the other at the end of SR-708 on the north shore (turn left on SR-708 at Graf-ton). Another interesting launch (or landing) is the Freeport Marina, on the south bank at the junction of Harper Creek. The marina is a quirky collection of small, hand-launched boats, a grassy, shady yard, and a charismatic old country store.

At the head of the Piankatank is a tributary stream called Dragon Run. One of Virginia's most pristine watersheds, only about 500 houses intrude on a landscape little changed since John Smith. The area is targeted for preservation by state agencies and The Nature Conservancy, and the narrow, twisting waterway makes for a cool, shady



*Gwynne's Island and the "new" Hole in the Wall.*



*On Milford Haven.*

retreat in the summer heat.

I've only touched on a few of the more well-known paddling destinations in and around Mathews County. Come down for a long weekend (or a week) and discover



*Horn Harbor.*

more for yourself.

### Places to Stay: Camping

Gwynn's Island RV Resort, 551 Buckchase Road, Gwynn, VA 23066 804-725-5700 [http://morganrvresorts.com/pages/gwynnsisland\\_homepage](http://morganrvresorts.com/pages/gwynnsisland_homepage)

New Point Campground, 846 Sand Bank Road, New Point, VA 23125 804-725-5120 [http://morganrvresorts.com/pages/newpoint\\_homepage](http://morganrvresorts.com/pages/newpoint_homepage)

**Places to Stay: Cottages, B&Bs, Houses**  
<http://www.visitmathews.com/LODGING/lodging.htm>

**Restaurants**  
<http://www.visitmathews.com/RESTAURANTS/restaurants.htm>

We've eaten at the Southwind Café, an upscale and healthful pizzeria; Richardson's, a made-over old-time drugstore; and The Sandpiper Reef, a classic seafood restaurant at a former camp on the Piankatank.

**Outfitters**  
Bay Trails Outfitters, 2221 Bethel Beach Rd. Onemo, VA, 804-725-9290 [www.baytrails.com/](http://www.baytrails.com/)

All map references are to the ADC Chesapeake Bay Chartbook, 5th Edition.

*Ralph Heimlich is a member of Chesapeake Paddlers Association and has been sea kayaking since 2000.*