

Story and photos by Ralph Heimlich

Paddling the Pocomoke and Nassawango



Soft-crab fishery at Hammock Road launch, Messongo Creek

On the west side of the Chesapeake Bay, as Captain John Smith famously wrote, "...were five Faire and delightfull navigable rivers" (the James, York, Rappahannock, Potomac and Patuxent), but for a kayak, some of the best paddling is on the smaller rivers and tributaries that run down to the bay from the east in the dozens. One of my favorite destinations is the Pocomoke River that flows into the bay from the Eastern Shore, and its most pristine tributary, Nassawango Creek. This area was not strange to John Smith, either, during his explorations of the area from 1608 to 1609.

"Passing along the coast, [we searched] every inlet and bay fit for harbors and habitations...The next day searching them for fresh water we could find none, the defect whereof forced us to follow the next eastern channel, which brought us to the river of Wighcocomoco [The Pocomoke]."

Coming to the Pocomoke from the Bay, as John Smith did, you'll find the wide estuary of Pocomoke Sound is bounded on the north and west by the Maryland shore that now harbors the town of Crisfield. The south and east are bordered by the Virginia salt marshes and the fishing village of Saxis. The Pocomoke enters the sound at the northeast corner, meandering north and east to cross the Delmarva Peninsula from its source in the Great Cypress Swamp of Delaware. The Pocomoke is the deepest river for its length in the United States. There are two towns along this stretch of the Pocomoke River: Pocomoke City is on the south bank of the river where the major north-south route (U.S. 13 Ocean Highway) crosses the river. Snow Hill is a smaller town at the head of navigation on the river where MD 12 comes south from Salisbury. My kayak companions and I do several trips to the Pocomoke each season, focusing on the sound and farther up the river.



Christopher Hoyt

Paddling Pocomoke Sound

When paddling Pocomoke Sound, we generally camp either in Maryland at Janes Island State Park, or in Virginia at a private campground called Tall Pines near Saxis. Janes Island State Park (See "Janes Island: A Taste of the Chesapeake," *SK*, Oct. '02) has regular car camping sites, cabins, and primitive camping at three sites on a water trail through the marshes separated from the dry land by Daugherty Creek Canal. You can reach another launch by driving to the ramp at the Cavalry Road bridge across Jenkins Creek, south of Crisfield. To get to Pocomoke Sound, paddle south on the canal past Crisfield on the Little Annesmessex River, and either west and south out into Tangier Sound around Cedar Island Wildlife Management Area, or shortcut through the Broad Creek Cut-through and Ape Hole Creek. The latter is preferred if the wind is strong and particularly out of the north. The entire north shore of Pocomoke Sound has excellent paddling and numerous creeks and inlets

bordered by salt marsh. The area is exposed to westerly and southerly winds and develops substantial waves in the shallow confines of the sound with the long fetch from those winds.

If you stay at Janes Island, consider spending a day paddling the Big Annesmessex River just north of Janes Island. The crossing from Janes to Mine Cove and Hazard Cove at the tip of the Fairmount State Wildlife Management Area is a treat on a fair day, and the dunes and lagoons in the tidal marsh are a great place for lunch, a swim and a snooze. Greenhead flies have a vicious bite and materialize wherever there is no breeze to keep them down.

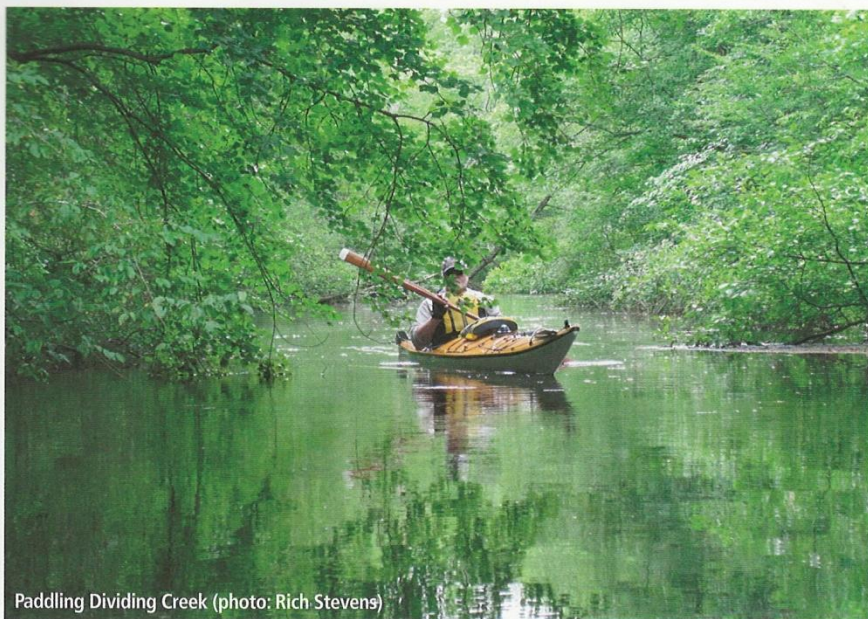
Saxis

The southern shore of Pocomoke Sound is easiest to explore from a base near the fishing village of Saxis, on a marshy peninsula extending out into the bay and made up almost entirely of the Saxis Wildlife Management Area. You'll find friendly car-camping accommodations at Tall Pines Harbor, on the inner arm of the

sound near Holdens Creek. The low-lying nature of the land has been made clear to us by the fact that more than once the tent campground we've used has disappeared beneath the waves! One time some returning kayakers paddled *over* their campsites to land, only realizing it when a Good Samaritan paddler told them where to find their salvaged tent and gear.

Good paddling destinations in this corner of the sound include the numerous small creeks, including Holdens Creek and Bullbegger Creek on the eastern shore of the sound, Pitts Creek on the Pocomoke River, just after the first meander, and Messongo Creek on the south of the peninsula on which Saxis is located.

While Crisfield to the north in Maryland depended on crabbing, oysters and fishing for its livelihood, the diminutive village of Saxis depended exclusively on fishing and now that much of the fishery is reduced, the village appears forlorn and abandoned. A few fishermen and crabbers still go out, though more and



Paddling Dividing Creek (photo: Rich Stevens)



Navigating Corkers Creek

more on a part-time basis. Fishing Creek and Back Creek form a shortcut through the peninsula at Saxis, but watch the tide since the creeks become very shallow and muddy when it is out.

You can launch off the beach at Tall Pines, but there are also ramps into Messongo Creek at the end of Hammock Road (Route 788), and into the Pocomoke at Shelltown on Williams Point Road.

Pocomoke River State Park and the Middle Pocomoke

Farther up the tidal Pocomoke, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources maintains Pocomoke River State Park, which has two locations, the Milburn area on the north bank of the river, and the Shad Landing area, about 4.5 miles farther upriver on the south bank. Both have camping sites amid sheltering loblolly pines close to launch sites direct to the river, bathhouses with hot showers, and at Shad Landing, a laundry and camp store. Shad and Milburn Landings have been our camping base for many of the trips on this stretch of the Pocomoke. A potluck feast is traditional with our group, and over the years we've vied to outdo each other's culinary delights.

Ecologically, the Pocomoke is a transition zone between northern and southern hardwood riparian gallery forests, and is also one of the northernmost concentra-

tions of bald cypress, whose "knees" push up around each trunk and become mini-ecosystems of their own with accumulated flotsam and small bushes taking root. While much of the land above the incised banks of the river has been cleared and drained for corn, soybeans and wheat to feed the Delmarva's poultry industry, paddling the black water of the Pocomoke's shores feels more like being in the sweet bay magnolia, sweet gum, red maple, black gum and bald cypress swamps of the Carolinas or Georgia. In the spring, understory shrubs blossom with wild azalea, fringed white orchids and purple blooms of pickerelweed. The area swarms with brightly colored warblers, mostly passing through, including the yellow and bluish green Prothonotary Warbler, who stays nearly all year. In the spring, harmless northern brown water snakes festoon the branches and hang over the water, soaking up the sun and keeping an eye out for watery prey. When startled, they instinctively drop into the water, so spray skirts serve double duty.

I'd paddled this area for years, enjoying what I thought was a neglected remnant forest overlooked by the loggers who cleared the Eastern Shore. But when I visited the museum at Furnace Town, I was shocked to find that nearly all the forest had been cut and burned for charcoal to feed the bog iron foundry from

1831 until it closed in 1850. Nassawango Creek now appears to be a tortuously winding creek, but in the 1840s it was channelized into a canal that moved ocean-going schooners to the furnace. One hundred sixty years later, Nature has regained her own.

Dividing Creek

This waterway enters the Pocomoke from the north about 4 miles downriver from Milburn Landing. On the paddle down to it, you pass the stately Cellar House, which has stood in a grove of large black walnut trees on the north bank since 1740. The grounds are decorated with many modern sculptures, but the real gems are stories about Cellar House's mysterious past: a Native American burial site unearthed in the cellar in the 1960s, a French sea captain builder who smuggled goods in a tunnel beneath the house, his young wife's mysterious murder on a dark night when the captain returned unexpectedly from the sea, and later, many north-bound slaves swimming the dark Pocomoke to shelter in the cellar on the Underground Railroad. Cellar House is privately owned, so enjoy it from the river, and do not land unless invited ashore.

Dividing Creek itself is narrow and winding, hemmed in thickly by flooded swampland on either shore. Wildlife abounds in this area, including many



A Bald Cypress with bushes growing from its "knees"

water snakes and turtles. One sharp-eyed member of our group spied a Barred Owl swiveling his head to get a better look at our fleet of waterborne intruders.

You can paddle up the creek to the Route 364 bridge and beyond, and the paddle back to Milburn brings the round-trip total to about 12 miles. Some have launched from the public dock at Pocomoke City, underneath the Route 13 bridge, for this paddle. The distance to Dividing Creek is about the same as from Milburn Landing.

Corkers Creek Water Trail

If you are staying at Shad Landing, Corkers Creek Water Trail is a pleasant way to spend an hour or two. This 1.5-mile trail loops around the island that sits at the mouth of Corkers Creek. Marked with interpretive signs, it can introduce you to the unique vegetation and wildlife of the area, and some of the history. You can also paddle up Corkers Creek by turning left (south) instead of following the trail. Corkers winds around in habitat similar to that of Dividing Creek, and passes under U.S. 113.

Nassawango Creek

In 1977, "Nassawango Joe" Fehrer retired from his job as property acquisition specialist with the National Park Service on the nearby Assateague National Seashore, and began working

with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to acquire easements on property along Nassawango Creek. Thirty years later, TNC has protected 15 square miles,

nearly all of the creek's watershed, and the Bog Iron Water Trail helps lead kayakers and canoeists along the maze-like channels. Our usual trip

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launches from either Milburn Landing or Shad Landing, up the main stem of the Pocomoke to a sentinel bald cypress near green day mark #9 that marks the mouth of Nassawango Creek (about 1.8 miles from Shad Landing and 6.2 miles from Milburn Landing).

From the mouth, paddle up Nassawango Creek about 4 miles to Red House Road. The lower creek is fairly broad

and open, with numerous cut-throughs across the meanders. After the bridge at Nassawango Road and a broad pool, the creek squeezes down to a twisting, jungle stream that echoes with bird calls, kerplunking turtles or otters and the keening of a red-shouldered hawk circling high above. About 1.5 miles from Red House Road on the south (river right) bank is TNC's Francis M. Uhler

Nature Trail, which offers one of two places to pull out and stretch or take a lunch break. If you miss the Fran Uhler area, you eventually come to the Red House Road Bridge take-out, a timbered and grassed area that is slippery, requiring teamwork to get everyone's boat out without taking a swim in the deep, cool pool just down from the bridge.

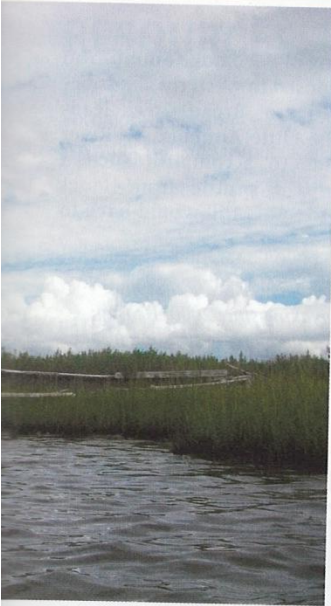
You can paddle beyond Red House Road, but Joe Fehrer, Jr., who now oversees the preserve his father led in creating, and his crew of chain-sawing canoeists concentrate on the lower creek, so your passage may be blocked unexpectedly.

The Furnace Town Living Heritage Museum is upstream of Red House Road another mile, as is TNC's visitor center and the Paul Leifer Nature Trail. These are worthwhile stops before or after paddling and will help fill out the area's history and ecology for you.



Snow Hill to Porters Crossing

Another pretty stretch to paddle is from Snow Hill to the next bridge at Porters Crossing Road. Snow Hill has some stores and restaurants, a killer ice-cream shop in the summer, and a very helpful and accommodating canoe livery, the Pocomoke River Canoe Co.—situated at a historic steamboat landing right at the MD 12 bridge. You can park in a lot behind the livery and ask permission to launch from their dock for the paddle upriver while you shop for T-shirts,



maps or a snack. You can paddle up to Snow Hill from Shad Landing (about 4 miles), passing Goat Island (look for the wild goats roaming the island), and Byrd Park, formerly the town dock for barges and steamers navigating the river. There is a boat launch at Byrd Park, but the low bridge at MD 12 may be impassable at high tide and is always a tight squeeze.

As you paddle up from Snow Hill, the river gradually narrows and cuts deeper until the surrounding upland is 20 or 30 feet above you. We've come here in early spring, when the wind was too high on the coast at Assateague, and paddled in near dead calm on the river. The narrow, twisty channels have the same primeval character as Nassawango Creek, and they are often graced with significant downstream nontidal flow since about half the Pocomoke's drainage is still above this point. There are few places to land and stretch, but the occasional woods roads dead-ending at the river suffice. Pull out at Porters Crossing for a lunch stop in the shady woods.

You can continue paddling beyond Porters Crossing (the next road is Whiton Crossing), but major storms have blown down a number of trees that have only gradually been cleared to open up the river. It is also possible to shuttle and launch from Porters or Whiton Crossing, but the distance up and back is short enough (about 10 miles round-trip) to obviate shuttling.

From the marshy shores of Pocomoke Sound up through the swampy forests of the Pocomoke River and Nassawango Creek, you will find beautiful and peaceful paddles in an environment that shifts from sandy bay shores, to bayou-like, steamy Southern heat, to cool, dark, damp and mysteriously winding hardwood streams. You will enjoy more varied paddling environments in fewer miles along the Pocomoke than any river along the bay.

While there is an opportunity for kayak camping at the three paddle-in sites on Janes Island, there is not much opportunity for impromptu kayak camping along these settled shores. One could do a multiday trip, starting at Snow Hill and paddling downriver and exploring Nassawango

Left: Northern brown water snake on Nassawango Creek. Center: Abandoned fishing boats near Saxis. Above: Brown pelicans, frequent visitors to the Chesapeake Bay, have been nesting here since 1987. Below left: Red House Road pullout, Nassawango Creek.

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Sweet Bay magnolia on Dividing Creek (photo: Rich Stevens). Below: Lunch Break at Hazard Cove, Fairmount State Wildlife Management Area, across the Big Annemessex River from Janes Island.

Creek, then with the tide to Shad Landing (south bank, 10 miles) or Milburn Landing (north bank, 13.8 miles) of the Pocomoke River State Park for the first night's stay. On the next day you could paddle downriver with the tide and explore Pocomoke City, staying at a motel in town (10 miles). Another day paddling down-river would have you staying at Tall Pines (18.3 miles). You could then explore as much of Pocomoke Sound and Janes Island as you desire, finishing up at Janes Island State Park (20 direct miles from Tall Pines with a 5-mile open

water crossing of Pocomoke Sound. You would be exposed to westerly winds before the shelter of Broad Creek leads you up to the Little Annemessex River and Crisfield. To accomplish such a multiday trip, a shuttle from Janes Island back to Snow Hill would have to be arranged. **SK**

Ralph Heimlich has been canoeing since age 10 and kayaking since 2000. He is an active member and officer of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association, leading trips and editing their newsletter, The Chesapeake Paddler.



RESOURCES

CAMPING

Pocomoke River State Park
www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/eastern/pocomokeriver.html
Janes Island State Park and Water Trail
www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/eastern/janesisland.html
Tall Pines Harbor Campground
www.tallpinesharbor.com

INTERESTING PLACES

Furnace Town Living Heritage Museum
www.furnacetown.com
Cellar House Plantation
www.cellarhouse.com

GUIDES AND MAPS

Water Trails of Worcester County, MD
www.dnr.state.md.us/boating/mdwatertrails/pdfs/worcestercounty-watertrailpage.pdf
ADC Chesapeake Bay Chartbook, 8th Edition
www.amazon.com/Chesapeake-Bay-VA-Chartbook-8th/dp/0875305849
Nassawango Creek Preserve
www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/maryland/files/pdf_nassawango_brochure.pdf

CLUB

The Chesapeake Paddlers Association, Inc.
www.cpakayaker.com

OUTFITTERS

Pocomoke River Canoe Company
312 N. Washington St., Snow Hill, MD 21863
410-632-3971
canoe@atbeach.com
www.atbeach.com/amuse/md/canoe
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WHEN TO GO

The Pocomoke has good paddling opportunities from March through December, but the best times up the river are early spring (April–June) and fall (October–November). Pocomoke Sound is best in the hotter months, when bay breezes cool things off.

The most important weather hazards are summer thunderstorms that can materialize across the bay quickly and turn calm days into howling gales, complete with vicious lightning strikes. Keep your VHS monitoring the appropriate weather channel for alerts and get to shore quickly when these storms are imminent. Captain John Smith had the same problems in the 15th Century:

"Seeing many isles in the midst of the Bay we bore up for them, but ere we could obtain them such an extreme gust of wind, rain, thunder, and lightning happened that with great danger we escaped the unmerciful raging of that oceanlike water." John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*, (1624).

