

# ATLANTIC COASTAL KAYAKER

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## Trip Report



Launching at Mallows Bay Park, Charles County, Md. Lois, Paul, and Sophie.

### Kayak Camping on the Potomac River

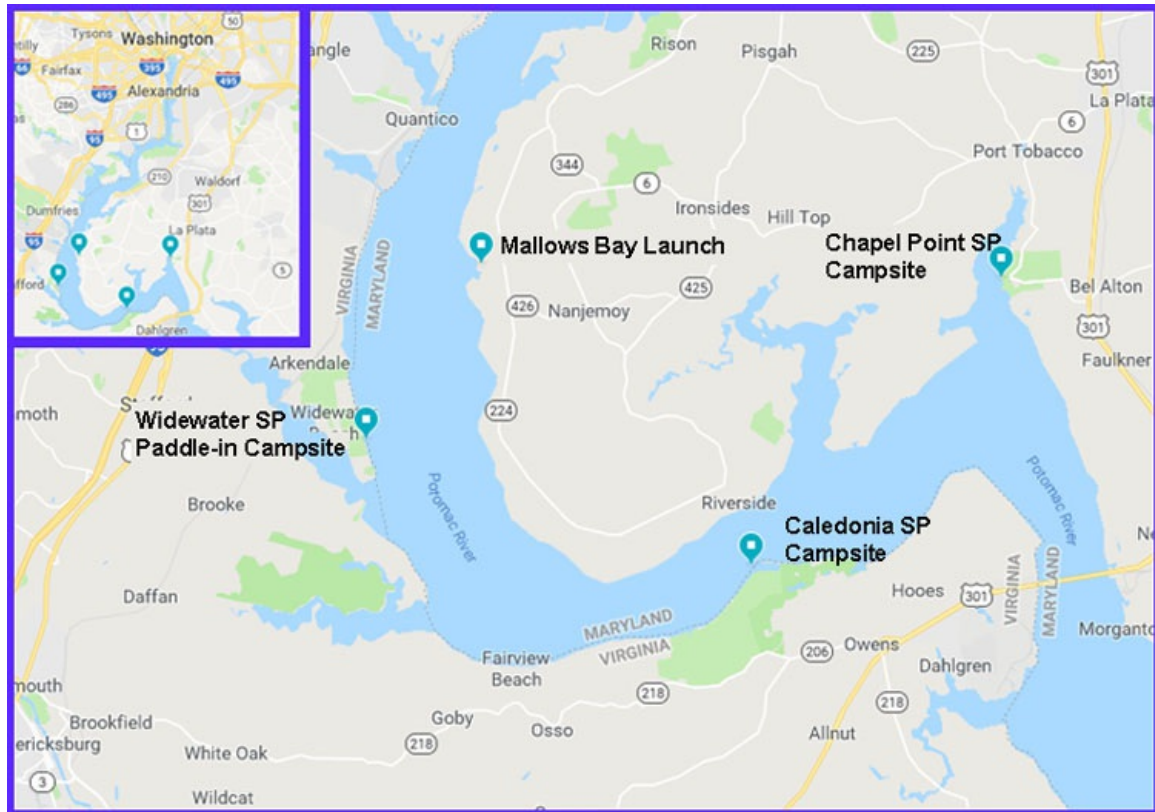
*By Ralph Heimlich*

The Potomac River is many things: The "Nation's River," running right through the heart of the nation's capital; a major avenue of exploration for John Smith and his men in their shallop over 400 years ago; one of "...five faire rivers..." he described as major tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay<sup>1</sup>. Increasingly, it is also becoming a venue for extended kayak touring from one paddle-in campsite to another across a wide swath of the river from

just below Washington, D.C., nearly to the mouth at Point Lookout on the Bay.

In June, four paddlers of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association, Jim Allen, Paul Levine, Sophie Troy, Lois Wyatt, and I, set out on a tour to try one of the newest campsites on the river. We had to modify our tentative route, which was thwarted a bit by some tricky weather, but we managed to cover a good part of the river despite contrary winds.

There are now 11 paddle-in campsites covering 113 miles of the river from Point Lookout State Park, Md., (at mile 14, measured on center line from the Bay) to Pohick Bay Regional Park, Va., (mile 113). On average, there is a paddle of about ten miles between camps, but the actual distances range from one to 27 miles apart (see table). We planned our trip to hit the newest, at Wide Water State Park, Va., (mile 88), Caledon State Park, Va., (mile 77), and one of the oldest, Chapel Point State Park, Md., (mile 68) on the Port Tobacco River.



After meeting at Chapel Point State Park to leave a shuttle car with extra water supplies, Jim Allen and I rendezvoused with Lois, Sophie, and Paul at Mallows Bay Park boat ramp for a 10:00 launch on Friday morning. Mallows Bay is currently going through the nomination process as a National Marine Sanctuary to protect the hundreds of WWI-era wooden ships and dozens of other ship wrecks and scuttles littering the shallow river bottom from the Port Tobacco River to Mattawoman Creek. Built in 1917 as part of a massive ship-building surge to carry American troops and supplies across the Atlantic to the battlefields in Europe, these wooden ships were completed too late to be of much use, and were surplus for salvage after the war. Beached at Mallows Bay, they were burned to the waterline in an unsuccessful attempt to recover the valuable metal fittings and bracing. The hulks loom at the tideline, emerging with each low tide and festooned with their own ecosystem of vegetation and critters from crabs to osprey. Scattered amongst them are wrecks dating from the colonial era to a post-WWII steel car ferry. Once fairly inaccessible, Charles County's Mallows Bay Park and boat ramp brings the wrecks within a few paddle strokes. The park is gated after sunset and has an attendant, making it a safe place to leave cars for a multi-day kayak tour.



Wrecks at Mallows Bay.

We loaded our kayaks and paddled out beyond the wrecks under a grey but dry sky, turning downriver past Liverpool Point along the Maryland shore. Osprey cried and bald eagles wheeled overhead as we cruised along a shoreline only minimally changed since John Smith and his crew rowed by in 1609. We pulled onto a narrow beach beneath steeply rising cliffs at Purse State Park, Md., for a lunch break.

Purse State Park is an undeveloped park acquired after a failed attempt to build a nuclear power plant at the location. This area of poorly consolidated sedimentary cliffs, topped by mature oak, poplar, and ash, is an extension of the Miocene reef that grew in the shallow seas off what is now the Atlantic Coast 20 to 14 million years ago. We scoured the waterline for shark's teeth and other fossils of that long-ago sea as we ate our lunch and contemplated our crossing to the Virginia side.



L: Fossil shark teeth and a larger fossil crocodile tooth from Purse State Park beach.

R: Paul, Sophie, and Jim near the head of navigation on the Port Tobacco River, Charles County, Md.

Widewater State Park is a mélange of private and park lands sharing the road and shoreline. After a short paddle, we came to the rock jetties making up “turtle” beaches along the park shoreline and found the take out for the paddle-in campsite. Park planners along the Potomac struggle with balancing existing land holdings, needed capital improvements, and the needs of paddlers. At Widewater, the paddle-in site is located 300 feet from the landing beach up a paved path. The site is adjacent to the picnic area, playground, and restrooms. All the facilities are brand new, and much more luxurious than at most paddle-in sites. On this Friday afternoon, other than a few fishermen, we were the only customers.



Landing at Widewater State Park, Stafford County, Va.



Widewater paddle-in campsite. Top L: Path up to the campsite. R: The campsite before we filled it.  
Bottom: Gourmet cooking on our first night out at Widewater State Park.

We quickly set up camp and were greeted by Park Manager Paul Anderson, making his rounds. We were only the second group to use the campsite, the first being a youth group that had arrived by car. We thanked Paul for the plentiful firewood provided and were assured that the gate would be closed (but not locked) at dusk, and that rangers would be on patrol all night. After a somewhat gourmet dinner (we all brought fresh provisions from home for the first night) and a short campfire, we turned in under the whisper of pines as the wind came up and the moon came out.

Next morning, the forecast called for ten- to 15- knot winds with gusts up to 20, but it was only slightly breezy as we launched. We hoped to sneak downriver and get to our second stop, Cameron State Park, before the wind came up too much. Our hopes were blown to tatters pretty soon after paddling past the mouth of Aquia Creek, and we battled a beam wind that was rising in intensity with every stroke. When we got down to Potomac Creek, where the Potomac River makes a huge bend to the east, we ducked in behind a breakwater and reassessed our plan.



Paul getting underway on Saturday. The wind picked up a lot later.

After much discussion, we decided to paddle back upriver beyond the Great Bend, thus getting out of much of the east wind, then cross back to the Maryland side to shelter in the lee of the cliffs and return to Mallows Bay. We would then drive over to Chapel Point State Park, the last stop on our tour and stay there two nights instead of one. Enduring the wind on the other beam for a while as we worked back up river, we eventually turned directly into the wind for our second crossing of the Potomac. Paddling into a consistent head wind is not fun, but is a lot easier than fighting a beam wind, merely requiring an untiring persistence to make as much headway as possible. Everyone did marvelously, staying together to maximize our visibility to the boaters forcing through one- to two-foot waves and strong winds. As we approached the Maryland cliffs, the wind still howled over head, but the waves flattened out and paddling became much easier.

We took a much needed rest and lunch break and were amazed to see how the wind seemed to drop right off. Looking away to the Virginia shore, however, we could still see whitecaps where the three-mile fetch rolled up the water on the far side. All agreed that it was much better to be paddling easily along under a sheltering cliff and watching white caps than battling in them.

After landing at Mallows Bay and loading everything back in the cars, we drove over to Chapel Point State Park, then used our kayak carts to haul our loaded kayaks about a quarter of a mile down to the paddle-in site. We would much rather have come in from the water side, but needs must when the wind blows. After setting up, we enjoyed dinner and a beautiful sunset in our more primitive surroundings (the porta-potty at Chapel Point is at the launch, a pretty good hike away). We had a beautiful half moon, and the sky was clear and full of stars at three a.m.



Jim strolls around the paddle-in campsite at Chapel Point State Park, Charles County, Md.

Sunday morning at Chapel Point the gray skies rolled in as forecast. We got through breakfast and into the boats for a paddle on the Port Tobacco River. We initially paddled downriver to the junction with the Potomac, but turned around when the mist turned into rain and the wind started to blow out of the northeast. By the time we'd worked our way upstream into the wind (again), the rain had increased and gusts were making headway a bit difficult. It was with some relief that the river narrowed and vegetation crowded in to block the gusts. As in many rivers on the tidewater Chesapeake Bay, it is hard to believe that ocean-going sailing ships used to navigate the Port Tobacco River in colonial days, landing cargoes of manufactured goods and taking off the valuable "sot weed (tobacco)," grown in southern Maryland. Too many years of cultivating that highly erosive crop allowed the soil to clog the river, resulting in the narrow, winding stream we paddle today.

After reaching the head of navigation (a huge blow down completely crossing the river blocking farther paddling), we turned around and headed back downstream in continuing drizzle. Rather than find some muddy bank-side lunch spot, we pulled into the Port Tobacco Marina and Restaurant. The marina was very quiet on this rainy, windy day, but the restaurant was jammed. Just as well that we were seated at an outside table under an awning since we dripped from rain and wet paddling clothes. The crab cakes, shrimp, and hot tea and coffee quickly warmed our cockles and revived our drippy spirits. Service was excellent and quick, considering how many others were sheltering under their roof and at their bar.

By the time lunch was over, the rain had slacked off and the wind had abated somewhat, but we still had a quick run downriver on the current and residual breeze. Given the forecast for continuing rain, three of our number opted to break camp and pack up for home. Jim and I helped them cart their loaded boats back to the cars (uphill this time), and then settled in for an afternoon of tall tales and kibitzing under our tarp. After a peaceful, but rainy night, the weather held off long enough on Monday morning for breakfast and to break camp.

This trip demonstrated some of the strengths and weaknesses of kayak camping along the great Potomac River. When the weather goes sour, the Potomac is a big piece of water with lots of fetch, so conditions can quickly make paddling untenable. Wise paddlers either batten down in camp, or head for a weather shore affording some shelter. Always have a Plan B in hand (and maybe even a Plan C), which is easy to arrange on the Potomac with many sheltered creeks and smaller rivers to paddle. Paddling in scenic areas is great, but so is hospitable restaurant with hot food and hot beverages on a rainy day. You can experience all this and more kayak camping on the Potomac.



Top: Paddling up the Port Tobacco River in the rain on Sunday morning.  
 Bottom: Lois checks out our lunch stop at the Port Tobacco Marina and Restaurant.

Paddle-in Campsites on the Potomac River (does not include private campgrounds or marinas with camping)					
Latitude North	Longitude West	River Mile	Leg Distance	Name	Owner
38.059	-76.3306	14		Point Lookout State Park	Md Dept of Nat Res
38.2408	-76.705	41	27	Newtown Neck State Park	Md Dept of Nat Res
38.1715	-76.8712	50	9	Westmoreland State Park	Va Dept of Cons & Rec
38.4645	-77.0306	68	18	Chapel Point State Park	Md Dept of Nat Res Run by Charles County
38.4591	-77.1458	75	7	Friendship Landing	Charles County
38.3639	-77.1426	77	2	Caledon State Park	Va Dept of Cons & Rec
38.4078	-77.3151	88	11	Widewater State Park	Va Dept of Cons & Rec
38.5384	-77.2311	100	12	Chicamuxen WMA	Md Dept of Nat Res
38.5564	-77.1886	101	1	Smallwood State Park	Md Dept of Nat Res
38.5847	-77.2597	102	1	Leesylvania State Park	Va Dept of Cons & Rec
38.6769	-77.1688	113	11	Pohick Bay Regional Park	NOVA Regional Park Authority

Source: [Chesapeake Bay Access and Paddle-in Campsite Map](#)





Ralph is on the Steering Committee of the [Chesapeake Paddlers Association](#) and is a long-time contributor to ACK.

<sup>1</sup>Originally in John Smith's *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer isles: with the names of the Adventurers, Planters, and Governours from their first beginning, Ano: 1584, to this present 1624. With the Proceedings of those Severall Colonies and the Accidents that befell them in all their Journyes and Discoveries. Also the Maps and Descriptions of all those Countryes, their Commodities, people, Government, Customes, and Religion yet knowne. Divided into sixe Bookes. London: Printed by I.D. and I.H. for Michael Sparkes. 1624. Folio. Arber 1910, pp. I:273–38; II:385–784. The work was republished in 1726, 1727, and 1732, but popularized in Robert DeGast's *Five Fair Rivers: Sailing the James, York, Rappahanock, Potomac, and Patuxent* (1995)*