

The Chesapeake Paddler



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A summer tour of paddle-in sites goes slightly awry

But these paddlers lived to tell the tale. They recommend you pack Plans B and C in your hatch. In fact, keep them in a dry bag! And then stay flexible.

By Ralph Heimlich

The Potomac River is steeped with significance in the history and politics of our country. Our Nation's River runs right through the heart of the capital city. Over 400 years ago, it was a major avenue of exploration for John Smith and his men in their shallop, one of "...five faire rivers..." he described as major tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay. 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., almost to its mouth at Point Lookout on Chesapeake Bay.

In June, five paddlers of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association - Jim Allen, Paul Levine, Sophie Troy, Lois Wyatt, and I - set out with the plan for a four-day tour with stops at three paddle-in campsites, including the newest one on the river. Our plan was partially thwarted by some tricky weather, but despite contrary winds, we managed to cover a fair section of the river.

There are now 11 paddle-in campsites covering 113 miles of the river from Pohick Bay Regional Park, VA (mile 113) to Point Lookout State Park, MD (mile 14), measured on centerline from the bay. On average, there is a paddling distance of about 10 miles between camps, but the actual distances apart range from one



Landing at Widewater State Park, Stafford County, VA (Jim Allen, Sophie Troy, Lois Wyatt and Paul Levine). Photos/Ralph Heimlich

to 27 miles ([see table](#)). The plan for the first day was to stop at the newest paddle-in site at Wide Water State Park, VA (mile 88), the second night at Caledon State Park, VA (mile 77), and the last at one of the oldest, Chapel Point State Park, MD (mile 68) on the Port Tobacco River.

After I met Jim Allen at Chapel Point State Park to leave a shuttle car and extra water supplies, we rendezvoused with Lois Wyatt, Sophie Troy, and Paul Levine at Mallows Bay Park boat ramp for a 10

AM launch on Friday. A month after our trip, July 8, Mallows Bay was officially designated as the newest 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 Mattawoman Creek to Port Tobacco River. Many of these were wooden ships built in 1917 as part of a massive ship-building surge to carry supplies and troops from the United States across the Atlantic during World War I. These wooden ships were thoroughly unsatisfactory for their intended purpose and delivered too late to be of much use, so after the war they were declared surplus. In Alexandria valuable metal fittings and bracing were salvaged before they were beached at Mallows Bay and burned to the waterline. The hulks loom at the tideline, emerging with each low tide, festooned

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with their own ecosystem of vegetation and critters from crabs to osprey. Scattered among them are wrecks dating from the colonial era to a steel, post-WWII car ferry. Once fairly inaccessible, Charles County's Mallows Bay Park and boat ramp now makes them available to anyone willing to hop into a rec boat and paddle a few strokes. The park has an attendant and is gated after sunset, making it a safe place to leave cars for a multi-day kayak tour.

Under a gray but dry sky, we loaded our kayaks and paddled out beyond the wrecks, turning downriver and passing 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 into a narrow beach beneath steep cliffs for a lunch break. Purse State Park, MD is an undeveloped state 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 same Miocene reef that grew in the shallow seas off what is now the Atlantic Coast 14 to 20 million years ago. We scoured the waterline for sharks' teeth and other fossils of that long-ago sea as we ate our lunch and anticipated our crossing to the Virginia side.

At this point, the Potomac is almost three nautical miles wide, and crossing the river is always subject to whims of weather, wind, waves and boat traffic. Picking a landmark on the far side, we paddled steadily across in light winds, with very little competition from boats early on that Friday afternoon. Fearless Leader (me) was a little bit off in choosing a bearing, so we found ourselves at the mouth of Aquia Creek, a bit farther downriver than we wanted to be. Widewater State Park is a mélange of private and park lands sharing the road and shoreline on a peninsula north of Aquia. After a paddle into the wind, 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 and elsewhere struggle with balancing the expectations of present land holders, needed capital improvements, and the basics for paddlers. At Widewater, the paddle-in site is located up a 300-foot paved path from the landing beach



Gourmet cooking on our first night at Widewater State Park (Sophie Troy, Paul Levine, and Jim Allen)

and adjacent to the restroom facilities which also serve a picnic area and playground. All the facilities are brand new and much more luxurious than at most paddle-in sites. Other than a few fishermen, we were the only customers on that Friday afternoon. Even before we finished setting up camp, Park Manager Paul Anderson and two other park rangers stopped to greet us warmly as they were making their rounds. We were only the second group to use the campsite, and the first actually to arrive by kayak. The previous occupants were a youth group that arrived by car. We thanked Paul for the plentiful supply of firewood and heard that the gate would be closed but not locked at dusk and that rangers would patrol all night. Because we all brought fresh provisions from home for the first night, we enjoyed a "gourmet" dinner, by kayak-camping standards, followed by a brief campfire. We turned in under the whisper of pines as the wind came up and the moon came out.



Camping pad at Widewater State Park. There are four of these basic sites, including one handicapped accessible site.

Next morning, the forecast called for 10-15 knot winds with gusts up to 20, but it was only slightly breezy as we launched. We hoped to sneak down river to reach our second stop, Cameron State Park, before the wind came up too much. Our hopes were quickly blown to tatters. After paddling past the mouth of Aquia Creek, 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 the sharp bend to the east north east, we ducked in behind a breakwater and reassessed our plan.

After much discussion, we decided to paddle back upriver beyond the Great Bend, thus reducing the number of miles of open water and resulting fetch of the strong east wind. We endured the wind on the

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other beam for a while as we worked back up river. Reducing our exposure to *only* three miles of river width and fetch, we turned directly into the wind for our second crossing of the Potomac, much more challenging than the previous day. Paddling into a consistent head wind is not fun, but is easier than fighting a beam wind, as it *simply* requires an untiring persistence to make as much headway as possible. Everyone did marvelously, staying together to maximize our visibility to the boaters and forcing ourselves into one- to two-foot waves and strong winds. As we approached the Maryland cliffs, the wind still howled overhead, but the waves flattened out and paddling became much easier. Eventually we arrived back by the Maryland shore to shelter in the lee of the cliffs.

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 roiled up the water on the far side. All agreed that it was much better to be paddling comfortably under a sheltering cliff and watching whitecaps rather than battling them.

After landing at Mallows Bay and loading everything back in and on our cars, we drove to Chapel Point State Park and used our kayak carts to haul loaded kayaks about a ¼ mile down to the paddle-in site. We would much rather have arrived by boat. After setting up, we enjoyed dinner and a beautiful sunset in our more primitive surroundings. The Chapel Point porta-potty is at the launch, a considerable hike away. We had a beautiful half moon and the clear sky filled with stars at 3 AM. The site planned for our last night instead had us there for two nights.

Sunday morning at Chapel Point the gray skies rolled in as forecast. Finishing breakfast, we got into the boats for a paddle on the Port Tobacco River. Initially we paddled downriver to its mouth on the Potomac but as the mist turned into rain and the wind started to blow out of the northeast, we turned around. By the time we had worked our way upstream, again into the wind,



Near the head of navigation on the Port Tobacco River, Charles County, MD (Paul Levine, Sophie Troy, Jim Allen)

the rain increased and gusts were making headway a bit difficult, though it was nothing compared with the previous day. We appreciated the relief when 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 in colonial days ocean-going

sailing ships used to navigate the Port Tobacco River, landing cargoes of manufactured goods and taking off the valuable "sot weed," *i.e.* tobacco, grown in southern Maryland. Too many years of 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 crossing the river,

we turned around and headed back downstream in continuing drizzle. Rather than find some muddy bank-side lunch spot, we pulled up to 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 and shrimp, 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 slacked off and the wind abated somewhat. We had the breeze at our backs and the current in our

favor and thus a quick run downriver. 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 rainy but peaceful night, the rain held off long enough Monday morning for us to eat breakfast and break camp.



Paddle-in campsite at Chapel Point State Park, Charles County, MD (Jim Allen)

This trip demonstrates some of the strengths and challenges of kayak camping along the great Potomac River. When the weather goes

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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 shore affording some shelter. It is wise always to have a Plan B in hand, and maybe Plan C, both easy to imagine on the Potomac with its many sheltered creeks and smaller rivers. Paddling in scenic areas is great, but so is a hospitable restaurant with hot food and hot beverages on a rainy day. You can experience all this and more when you go kayak camping on the Potomac. ♠



Above, Paul Levine gets underway on Saturday. The wind picked up at lot later. At left, paddling up the Port Tobacco River in the rain on Sunday morning (Paul Levine, Lois Wyatt, Sophie Troy).

Paddle-in Campsites on the Potomac River (does not include private campgrounds and marinas which may have camping)

Latitude North	Longitude West	River Mile	Leg Distance	Name	Owner	Comment
38.059	-76.3306	14		Point Lookout State Park	MD DNR	some directly on water
38.2408	-76.705	41	27	Newtown Neck State Park	MD DNR	construction pending
38.1715	-76.8712	50	9	Westmoreland State Park	VA DCR	one site on beach
38.4645	-77.0306	68	18	Chapel Point State Park	MD DNR run by Charles County	large grassy site
38.4591	-77.1458	75	7	Friendship Landing	Charles County	one site on slope; first come first served
38.3639	-77.1426	77	2	Caledon State Park	VA DCR	several sites with large grassy area
38.4078	77.3151	88	11	Widewater State Park	VA DCR	directly adjacent picnic area
38.5384	-77.2311	100	12	Chicamuxen WMA	MD DNR	Paddle in site
38.5564	-77.1886	101	1	Smallwood State Park	MD DNR	long hike to camping area
38.5847	-77.2597	102	1	Leesylvania State Park	VA DCR	adjacent to group site
38.6769	-77.1688	113	11	Pohick Bay Regional Park	NOVA Regional Park Authority	long hike to camping area

Source: Chesapeake Bay Access and Paddle-in Campsite Map online at <https://www.cpakayaker.com/resources/places-to-paddle/chesapeake-bay-access-and-paddle-in-campsite-map/>