

# Chesapeake Paddler



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## UNEXPECTED BIRTHDAY GIFTS Lessons Learned with a Half Paddle

By Rob Pearlman

Sunday June 1, dawned a gorgeous day - sunny, warm, blue skies, mild breezes, perfect! My 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday. I invited my eighteen-year-old son, Daniel, to join me for what I thought would be a short afternoon paddle. That paddle offered us great gifts, most of which I did not expect. It also caused unnecessary pain for my wife and some close friends.

Many of you have probably heard stories like this before, as have I (I am embarrassed to say). Despite thinking that I take safety seriously, this particular paddle taught me many lessons, some new, some again. These were really simple things that would have made a huge difference, had I paid attention. I've paddled for several years now. Confidence is good. Overconfidence is potentially dangerous.

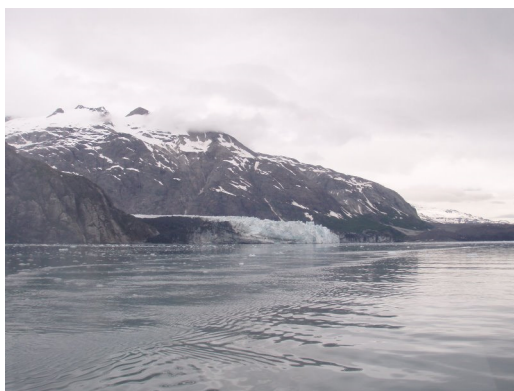
The previous weekend I had paddled alone three miles up the C & O canal from Pennyfield Lock to Violet's Lock, and from there into the Potomac River, and paddled across to the Virginia side. From there I took the canoe trail that parallels the river and then returned me to the main river for a leisurely mile and half downstream back to Pennyfield Lock. Six miles, a couple of hours, easy. I thought it would be fun to do this same route again and assumed we would be back in time for a birthday dinner with friends at 6 p.m.

The day remained glorious as we quietly paddled together. We cruised three miles, passing rocky cliffs and brilliant bunches of wild yellow iris. Soon we heard the din of the "Seneca Breaks," the river-wide rapids near Violet's Lock - we were about halfway through the paddle, still plenty of time to get home by six. We portaged our boats over the lock's bridge, down to the Potomac's banks, reached the Virginia side and entered the "canoe trail." As we exited the canoe trail we were no more than 20 minutes from

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Lush canal photo by Rob Pearlman



Glacier Bay photo by Marshall Woodruff

## ALASKA!

By Marshall Woodruff

I have wanted to paddle Alaska for a long time. Why? An Adventure, a challenge, an understanding of Nature, at least a glimpse. I wanted to paddle next to a whale; see an iceberg calving; see wildlife along the water, see nature in a light I have never seen before. I guess I wanted to see how insignificant I really am...to go to the last frontier. An Alaska trip was something I did not want to miss in my lifetime.

Now where? Read, read and read. Try to find people that have paddled in different areas, keeping in mind my main goal of whales and icebergs. Thru emails, I met people who shared their adventures with me. Asking lots of questions, they helped me find answers. Glacier Bay seemed the best spot after reading, looking at the charts and deciding that for my first time out, there were more choices out of Gustavas, at the

south end of Glacier Bay, than anywhere else. Gustavas had a starting point, the National Park, where I could camp and put in. There

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**Potomac Swim** (Continued from page 1)

Pennyfield Lock.

We had choices; enter the main portion of the river near the Maryland side or, as I thought I had done the week before, take the road less traveled - a more interesting route between the islands near the Virginia side. With the narrower, more interesting route we had to find the nearby cutover back to the main river and make our return to Pennyfield Lock on the Maryland side. Piece of cake - I did it last week. This time, without the map or GPS, we were running on my now-52-year-old memory banks. (Turns out I was a few megabytes short.)

Daniel and I paddled along with the current. Nobody was in sight. We heard the pre-historic cackle and woomph-woomph-woomph as blue heron winged away each time we approached. After awhile my intuition nagged me. Something was not right. The cutover should have appeared by now. When I checked my watch it was 6 p.m. We were going to be late for dinner - how late, I never imagined.

We debated the possibilities. Head back upstream? Continue downstream to the next cutover? We had no idea how far that might be, or where extreme rapids might lurk. Another alternative was to find a reasonably clear spot where we could portage our boats across the narrow island to the main river - a much shorter route.



So I climbed the muddy river bank up to take a look. The brush was thick and I could see an endless carpet of beautifully green poison ivy. We were in shorts and sandals. Decision made. We would stick to the river and keep looking for portage possibilities. As I prepared to re-enter my kayak after carefully sliding down the muddy bank, I positioned my paddle behind me to help stabilize the boat. All of a sudden, whoooooosh! I slipped on the mud, fell on my paddle, and felt and heard a sickening, loud "crack!" Good news - it was not my leg. Bad news - one of my paddle blades had "seceded from the Union." I'm glad I was not alone.

I had a knife that was crucial for the emergency paddle surgery we were about to conduct. I found a stick about the diameter of the shaft and broke it to fit inside both ends of the broken shaft. We cut strong, slender tree roots to use as splints positioned outside the shaft. With no other line available, I cut my rudder cord and used it to coil wrap

around the assembly as tight as possible, tying it off to hold the broken blade in place.

With a broken paddle, upstream was no longer an appealing option. The blade actually held fine going downstream. Possible portage opportunities proved to be unavailable. At 8:15 pm we finally saw the Maryland side of the river and gratefully crossed the main river where the current was even stronger. After checking the Maryland shore there was still no obvious access to the towpath and the canal. How far from our destination we were remained a mystery so we needed to conserve energy. Paddling for five hours and being stressed about the inability to communicate was exhausting. Thank goodness for adrenaline.

The sunset was beautiful as it spread out in the sky and on the river like a fluid painting. We were now paddling hard upstream. We approached some rapids that looked doable. My surgically enhanced paddle was hanging on for dear life. I made a go of the rapids and within seconds my paddle blade was gone. Not only had it "seceded from the Union" but it had now completely deserted. Invoking skills from long ago, I used my now "mono-paddle" like a canoe paddle. My J-stroke actually worked.

The next set of rapids was just too strong. Each attempt upstream quickly became a 180 degree turn for the boats. They reared like racehorses, begging to go downstream with the strong current. We portaged around this one and launched again into flatter water, continuing upstream. At 8:45 pm, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a helmet fly by through the woods - a bicyclist on the towpath! Relief at last! There, in their darkening glory, were the towpath and the canal.

We pulled the kayaks up the steep rocky rise onto the towpath and began paddling again, now in total darkness, still not knowing how far we had to go. A waterproof flashlight that I had stowed in my PFD "just in case" came in handy. We slithered along the canal like many of the animals that emerge at night. At last we heard the sound of water, like a waterfall, and we realized it had to be a lock on the canal, hopefully Pennyfield. Again we pulled the boats out of the water onto the towpath and saw a sign plaque looming in the dark - Pennyfield Lock with a brief written history.

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## Unexpected Birthday Gift *(Continued from page 4)*

It was now 9:30 pm, more than three hours past the time we'd intended to be home. We called home and confirmed that we were OK, just as the police were interviewing Barbara and asking her to describe identifying birthmarks and features in case any bodies turned up. What a birthday. Boy did I feel like an idiot. I quickly countered that feeling by focusing on what I had learned. I did do a few things right and they made a big difference. I had brought a flashlight, a knife, water and energy bars, and insect repellent. I was not alone and neither of us was injured. Though humbled, I learned and will be more prepared for the "unexpected" on future paddles.

### LESSONS LEARNED

Always tell someone where you are going

Bring a map and/or a GPS (with extra batteries)

Don't assume you will remember important details

Carry a spare paddle

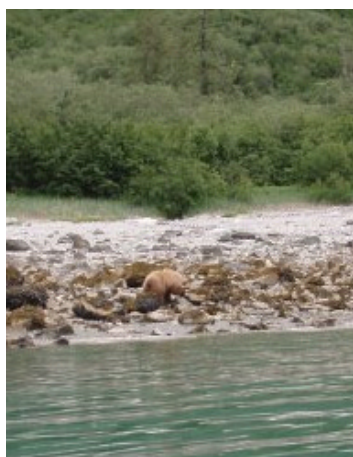
Bring a cell phone or radio (and make sure the batteries are charged or bring extras)

Carry a well equipped first aid kit, and food and water

Carry a flashlight and knife, a repair kit with essentials/ tools, duct tape, etc

Don't assume you won't need any of these things

[Edited by Lynn Erwin]



**There's a bear on shore** photo by Marshall Woodruff

## Alaska *(Continued from page 9)*

scared at first. Would my first campsite be a bear encounter? As I saw bears along the edge of the water, they just blended in with the adventure, I slept more soundly and I just lived with it. Did being alone bother me? No. There is enough out there to keep you busy between the paddling, setting up camp, looking for water, washing, looking, seeing and feeling the world around you. No radio, TV, people, cars, traffic, news. Silence. But not really—Nature has her own ways of filling the wilderness and I think I found it.

I want to thank Bob Pullman, Dave Biss, Cyndi Janetzko, Dave Isbell, Alison Sigethy, Nelson Labbe, Gail Ferris and many others from CPA and the KIP Paddles, for helping to make this a most successful trip.

My gear: Feathercraft Khatsalano folding kayak, Drysuit-Kokatat, Marmot Swallow tent, Lowrance GPS Expedition with Topo

chip, Epic wing paddle, Wolfgang Brink's Aleut paddle, Patagonia-underwear [better than REI], Marmot Arroyo Goose down sleeping bag with silk liner [double dry bagged], Glacier gloves, divers hood, 2-6 liter MSR Dromedary bags, Snow Peak stove, 30 liter flat Dry Bags, mosquito net for the head, Olympus 720SW along with my camera mount I made for the paddle-worked great, Katadyn Hiker Pro water purifier, marine radio Icom M-88.

Books: "Adventure kayaking trips in Glacier Bay" Don Skillman; "The Only Kayak" by Kim Keacox; "Deep Water Passage" by Ann Linneu; "Spirited Water" by Jennifer Hahn; "Southern Exposure" by Chris Duff; "Keep Australia on Your Left" by Eric Stiller.



**Gets a little cold with the wind off the glacier** photo by Theresa Bear