

# Chesapeake Paddler



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## Kayak Camping on the Chowan River, North Carolina

By Greg Welker



Holladay Island, Chowan River map by Roanoke River Partners

A swampy, forested river that is still relatively remote and undeveloped, the Roanoke River at the Virginia/North Carolina border has been on my places to paddle list for several years. The Roanoke River Partners have established several paddle-in camp sites along the Roanoke River. Reading through the information about these campsites it appeared that almost all would require a car shuttle due to the typical river current.

However, recently the Chowan County Parks and Recreation Department opened up five new campsites on Holladay's Island, on the Chowan River. This island is located about 20 miles upriver from Edenton, NC. A check of the chart revealed this was within a section of the river where the current would not be a factor in an out and back trip. All of these island campsites are platforms, or "chickees," in the swamps and sit about two to three feet above the typical water level. The island has essentially three places to camp. Two of these are single platforms, on the east and west sides of the island. At the south point, there is a group campsite composed of three interconnected platforms. I made my reservations and payment by email for the Holladay West platform.

I arrived at the Chowan River around noon. The launch location I was using was a paddle launch site at Cannon Ferry, slightly downriver from the island. The launch area has a boardwalk along the river, a port-a-pot, and a gravel parking area easily visible from the road. The area looked OK to me for leaving my

vehicle overnight. I loaded up the Pisces while swatting mosquitoes and wondering if a mid-July camping trip in a swamp was a good idea bug-wise. It was an easy launch from the sand beach. The river is about 1.5 miles wide at this point with a long South/Northwest fetch, and I would imagine that in windy conditions there would be whitecaps out in the open. I took a leisurely 1 mile course to the south end of the island. Almost all of the river shoreline is cypress swamp, and from my position, the island also looked to be heavily forested in cypress. Arriving at the southern end, I paddled into the cypress and found the dock for the southern group campsite. These sites are made more for canoes than kayaks, with a wood step about 8 feet long being about 1 foot above the water, and then a loading platform about a foot or two above that. In a kayak, this means



Hey chickee, have I got a campsite for you...photo by Greg Welker (Continued on page 4)

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that you pull up along the platform step and do a dock exit, which is not always the most graceful of maneuvers. A quick exploration of the site and I got back in the boat to circumnavigate the island. I enjoyed quietly paddling in and out of the cypress along the edge of the island. It was apparent that "island" was not going to mean dry land. While I saw a deer and signs of otter and raccoon, I did not see anything I would consider dry land. All three of the sites sit back from the river about 100 feet into the swamp, which provides some privacy and protection from wind and waves. They are well marked with yellow signs if you are observant.



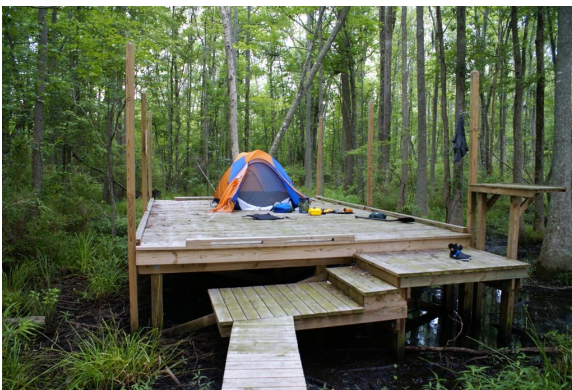
Kayak pulled up on the landing step and secured for the night photo by Greg Welker

Completing the 3.5 mile circumnavigation, I backtracked to Holladay West and examined the landing platform. Some poking with the paddle revealed that there was a sand shoal along the back corner of the landing platform that was only about one foot underwater. I stood on this shoal while unloading the boat. Having platform camped from a kayak before, I figured out a way to prevent individual items from dropping overboard during the unloading. When loading the boat's front hatch, I took a line with several plastic clips strung on it. I tied one end of the line to the item that would go furthest up into the bow of the kayak, and then proceeded to clip the other items in the order they would go into the boat. This way, during the platform unloading and loading if I dropped an item into the water I would be able to retrieve it by the line. Better than watching your camp stove sink out of sight!



Rules of the Road photo by Greg

The Holladay West platform consisted of three platforms connected by wooden boardwalk. The first platform was the landing platform, and this connected to a boardwalk that ran back further into the swamp to the camping platform. The camping platform was about 16' x 24', with a toe rail and six vertical posts along the edge. The posts were about seven feet tall, with eye bolts on top. These would work well if you were looking to rig a tarp during rainy weather. The platform is also equipped with a wooden counter for doing your cooking (so you don't scorch the platform). Between the landing and camping platforms a short T takes you to a privacy screen that conceals a wooden thunder box (aka privy). This was somewhat unexpected, as the site instructions on the web indicated it was total Leave No Trace. Looking at the spiders, I decided my portable facility was a better choice! Since the camping is all on wooden platforms, a free standing tent that does not require staking is essential. In windy conditions, you could tie off the tent to the toe rails. The platform could easily fit two 2-3 person tents, and you could squeeze three tents on it and still have some room to sit, eat, etc.



The camping platform photo by Greg Welker

All of the platforms were well shaded by the cypress, and there were amazingly no mosquitoes. However, there was a healthy population of biting flies, and I quickly changed into long pants and long sleeved shirt. Dinner, to the sound of distant thunder, involved swatting a few flies. Once dark came, the flies went away, and I spent a pleasant evening listening to the swamp sounds – again, not a single mosquito! The island was reported to usually be a good spot to listen to owls, but during my circumnavigation I had noticed several crows in the trees. Typically, crow sightings mean that the owls won't be around, and I heard only a few owls off on the river shoreline.

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Next morning I woke early and quietly packed up. The river air was still, with patches of fog. I quietly paddled along the western edge of the island, watching for wildlife in among the trees. At the northern tip I headed east to the river shore, and explored Catherine Creek. This is a very nice, pristine creek, and well worth a day paddle. Following the river shore south, eating lunch in the kayak, I eventually ended up back at the launch site in mid afternoon.

I imagine this island would be very nice in the fall, perhaps as part of a trip downriver from Winton, about 16 miles upstream, with a take out down at Edenton, 22 miles downstream. With a wind from the north, this would be a very enjoyable trip. With a south wind, you would reverse the trip, but being careful of the large fetch between Edenton and Holladay Island. [edited by Lynn Erwin]

<http://www.roanokeriverpartners.org/Platforms/Holladay/Directions.pdf>  
<http://www.roanokeriverpartners.org/>



Fred Tutman trimming with the Roughnecks photo by Chip Walsh

## Patuxent Roughnecks

By Chip Walsh

There's something charming about paddling a narrow wooded river through our Atlantic coastal plain. It's peaceful and relaxing, a world away from "must-make" whitewater moves and battling the wind on some of our large open waters. But there is another 'something' that is not so charming: timber blockages or strainers. If you have ever spent any time paddling a river in the woods, you've had your fill of strainers, and you may have even wished somebody would do something about them, or contemplated a few well-placed saw cuts of your own. Carry around a dozen strainers and you may be thinking about a few well-placed explosives.

Fred Tutman is a guy that enjoys paddling the Patuxent, which, once you get above the tidal portion, is a narrow wooded river. He grew up near the Patuxent and loves the river. Presently, Fred is the Patuxent Riverkeeper, and as such, is primarily concerned with the river and its ecology. The Riverkeeper's scope is far wider than creating a place to paddle, but Fred believes that if he can show people the river and get them to realize its potential and its problems, it will help foster a political climate that will contribute to the well-being of the river. That's the logical reason Tutman became interested in strainer busting, but I've seen him on the river, and believe there's an emotional element, too. Tutman is like the rest of us paddlers, and those strainers are in our way.

Under the auspices of the Riverkeeper organization, Fred Tutman created a group of individuals willing to work at strainer-busting. None of the Patuxent Roughnecks, as the group is called, knew much about strainer busting when they started.

The first Roughneck outing was attended by about a dozen people and characterized by more enthusiasm than organization. We had boats and saws and we attacked a strainer formed by a downed tree across the river which had snagged and accumulated a number of smaller logs. We decided to attack the crown end of the tree near the left bank. The crown was intertwined with branches from a nearby, live tree. Together, the trees formed about a twenty-yard stretch which was crisscrossed with limbs and branches. Before long, several teams were cutting branches on both the up and downstream sides of the strainer and, as we progressed, two boats got into the crown itself and were cutting. A shore party organized itself and began pulling up branches and limbs from the top of the banks, which were six to eight feet above the water level.

At first, progress seemed quick. Unfortunately, our first hard lesson was the truth that strainers can be like an iceberg: most of the mass is underwater and unseen. There was a lot more wood entangled in the crown, and much of it wasn't obvious until we removed the surface level. Or rather, until we TRIED to remove it. We'd try to drag out a cut limb only to

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