

Muddy Adventures

By Gina Cicotello

I'm not sure why it is that I've developed a close relationship with mud this paddling season. As I understand it, climate change should, if anything, make the water levels rise, not expose more of the waterway shorelines and bottoms or change their basic consistency. But my adventures in 2008 have been marked by mud encounters that were frustrating, interesting, even instructive.

I spent 4th of July weekend at a friend's family beach house in Delaware. As we took a nature walk through the marsh near the house, picking our way through dense reeds, our path led us into loose mud that caused me to sink knee-deep. So there I was, wriggling and stymied, trying to haul one foot out of the muck while the other foot only sank deeper. And I was wearing flip-flops, so the potential to lose my shoes in the process was very high. Seeing the predicament, my friend offered whatever assistance he could without getting stuck himself. What had fascinated us about that area of the marsh in the first place was its enormous colonies of fiddler crabs, appearing and disappearing from holes in the mud and skittering across its surface. I noticed whenever I paused to reassess my extrication strategy, a regiment from the army of hundreds would start to creep closer. It was like a scene out of a creepy Hitchcock movie. Motivated by marching crabs, I finally extracted one foot - minus the shoe - and reached into the hole with my hand to tug at the Texas. The process worked, but I got covered in slime. By the time we got to the shore to rinse off and continue our walk, my friend couldn't contain his laughter as he brushed off the mud streak where I'd (of course) unconsciously scratched my face.



Fiddlers photo by Gina Cicotello

Later in July on a trip to the Eastern Shore of VA, we launched at high tide from a gravel canoe/kayak launch in Kiptopeke. I paddle with some notorious nature freaks, so we were mesmerized by the beautiful scenery of marsh grasses, wildflowers, shore birds, and trees with the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel visible in the background. We took our time in the winding creeks, making our way out to the shore. After playing for hours in the surf, exhilarated by adrenaline and unusually perfect conditions, we reluctantly made our way back to the creek leading to the put-in site. We should have thought harder when we had trouble even getting to the mouth of the creek, because collectively we either didn't know or didn't remember a better take-out spot within walking distance of our cars. Anyway, the group pressed on, eventually into water so shallow that we had to get out and drag our boats. The creek was now a stinking, black, ugly crevice in the pretty scenery. The creek bed we had to walk along varied in viscosity from firm to horribly soft, shoe-grabbing "suck mud." We cursed our way to the end, and discovered that getting to the spot where we'd haul out required crossing a 20-foot channel of waist-deep dirty water. Most opted to straddle our boats rather than risk one final submersion in the gooey mess.



Gina in the "Suck Muck" photo by Jerry

Mud has presented paddling challenges, and sparked some intellectual questioning and debate. Exploring around Smith Island (MD) this past weekend, we found the flats on the north end of the island were almost unnavigable at low tide. Ironically we watched huge tour boats charging through the marked channel, while we were alternately paddling and poling our way through the mud looking for the water trails. Around the dinner table in Crisfield that evening, we talked about the principles of physics that slow down a kayak in shallow water. Even when the hull isn't scraping the bottom causing friction,

everyone reports noticeable deceleration. Why? There was a lot of conjecture and theorizing over our Mexican food and margaritas, some from knowledgeable engineers, but I'll leave it to you to research and accept the explanation you find the most adequate. (Perhaps post your conclusions in the next newsletter to enlighten us all?)

Mud is Mother Nature's greedy side. I've sacrificed two cameras to the mud gods, thus far. I love the Pentax waterproof cameras because they perform well and fit in a PFD pocket, but they don't float. Last year I dropped the Optio W10 in the Little River heading towards Delaware Bay. The tidal depths there can be 6 feet or more, so we went back at low tide and found no camera, only mud. I kicked myself, replaced the camera, and subsequently last weekend I dropped the Optio W30 near the docks in Ewell on Smith Island (MD). It fell underwater deep enough that there was no hope of retrieval, and I imagine it's embedded in the mud forever. So just yesterday I ordered the new Optio W60, and vow not to take it anywhere until I've corrected its floatational flaws. My plan is to stop at the local boat store for a handful of those foam keychains, attach a string of them to the camera, and test the buoyancy. The camera will look a little silly wearing its own "PFD," but photography is getting to be too expensive a hobby without some precautions. [Editor's note: Cords tied to PFD D rings and gear are called "dummy straps" for a reason.]

I don't quite know how to interpret mud, which has appeared as a theme or frequent literary motif in the story of my summer adventures. It has claimed cameras, stained clothes, stolen shoes, slowed progress, and altered courses. But obviously it hasn't stopped me from kayaking, and it has created many memorable moments. I just hope this fall I won't be writing such filthy, dirty trip reports!