

Tangier Island Adventure

By Susanita Hicks and David Moore



Tangier photo by Susanita Hicks

This was my third trip to Tangier. Last summer I blogged about the second trip ... ["Island Hopping in the Chesapeake Bay."](#) It was such a fun trip that I couldn't wait to do it again.

We (Shannon Bishop, David Moore and I) met at the dock at Crisfield around 11 am Saturday morning for the 12:30 ferry. The long open water crossing didn't appeal to all of us, so Shannon and I decided to save our energies for exploring around the islands and take the ferry out and back. There are several ferries with service to Tangier and Smith Islands and most of them take kayaks as well. We decided to take the mail boat. So we loaded the kayaks on to the mail boat and the bags with all our camping and kayak gear. The cost was \$15 per person and \$10 per kayak. The sky was blue. The sea was calm. It looked like the start of a perfect weekend. Earlier we had heard reports of rain forecast for the weekend but it didn't seem serious enough to cancel the trip. And besides I had built in a number of exit plans in the event of bad weather.

The original plan was to launch from Tangier and kayak east to small, uninhabited Watts Island, about 6 miles from Tangier, lunch on Watts, then kayak from Watts east to another island where we would camp for the night. On Sunday, we would kayak back to Tangier, explore the island and camp on the southern tip of Tangier which is a long sandbar. Monday our plan was to kayak from Tangier north to Smith Island and take the afternoon ferry back from Smith to Crisfield. David was looking for a long open water crossing, so he planned to stay with us until Sunday and kayak back to Crisfield. I was a little concerned that he would be making the long open water crossing alone, but David is an expert kayaker and loves the challenge of open water crossings.

I had printed out and laminated maps of the crossing, maps of Tangier and Smith and a list of important GPS coordinates for the trip. I had two GPS devices and in one I had programmed the GPS coordinates we would need to navigate around the islands. The second GPS was intended as a backup. Navigation is not a skill I claim to excel in. I get lost just wandering around my house. But I was sufficiently confident that I could navigate the short crossing from Tangier to Watts and out to the other island.

Six miles after launching, we landed on the south end of Watts. The sea had been like glass and the sky was clear and the humidity low. After a short snack at Watts we realized we were running a little behind schedule. It was around 5:30 and we wanted to get to the other island soon enough to set up camp before the sun set. The long lunch on Tangier was probably about a half hour too long. So I tried to pick up the pace a little for the final four miles. This was easy to do with a wing paddle but Shannon uses a greenland paddle and she started to lag farther behind. Still the weather was so clear I wasn't too concerned.

The sun was setting by the time we pulled all the kayaks up on the beach. I looked around the strip of beach that we had enjoyed so much last year on the Island Hopping Trip. It felt a little lower ... like it had sunk a little. Shannon seemed a little concerned that we didn't see a really clear high tide mark and so was I.

It was hard to sleep that night. The tide had brought the surf in closer to the tents and it was really loud. Several times I woke up and went out to check on the kayaks. They were fine, but just as a precaution I moved them up the beach about six feet. The next morning we awoke to grey skies and a stiff wind. But it was still within our abilities. We decided to kayak over to Watts and assess the weather from there. If we could make it, we'd continue to Tangier but if not we'd stay on Watts until the weather cleared.

The four mile paddle to Watts was quite different from the paddle over. The swells were 2-3 feet. Shannon said that I often disappeared between the swells. And at times they were breaking over the bow. But it was the wind which was the real challenge. By the time we got to the south end of Watts we were clearly struggling. Shannon and I



Underway photo by Shannon Bishop

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had also both experienced kayaking in the wind earlier in the season at Assateague. After that fateful trip we had learned to respect the wind. But David is stronger, more confident of his skills and he still thought he could make it to Crisfield. So after discussing the options Shannon and I decided to camp on Watts and proceed to Tangier in the morning. David decided to continue his course to Crisfield.

I know at this point many people are wondering ... why he left us on the island with a storm approaching. Clearly there is safety in numbers. But we had planned this trip alone and we were both skilled kayakers and we had good tents. We had no fear about staying on the island through the storm. But I was worried about what he was kayaking in to. It would be hard for me to explain what he went through that night so I asked him to write it up. This is David's story.

David's Story

Shortly after saying goodbye on Watts Island I began wondering if I was doing the right thing by leaving Susanita and Shannon on the Island, knowing that a storm was coming that evening. I knew both were good kayakers and had good tents, but it is always better to have more people if things got ugly. I kept debating about leaving the whole time I was going by the island and wondering if I should just turn around and stay on the Island and go back to Tangier together.

As far as the trip back to Crisfield I knew it was not going to be an easy one. It was going to be slow paddle because the boat was weather-cocking really bad, plus the fact I really did not know where or how far Crisfield was from Watts Island. I figured it was about 12 to 14 miles Northeast. I kept looking at the charts so that seemed about right and hey the Chesapeake is only so big. I figured the trip would take me between 3 to 4 hours, since I left Watts Island around 1:00 PM or so I figured I would be at Crisfield no later than 5 PM and back home by 7:30 PM.



David on the beach photo by Shannon Bishop

Right away I saw this was going to be an ugly paddle, going downwind with the waves to get around the island and on my way towards the northeast was a constant struggle. Every once and awhile I could just ride the waves and gain some speed but most of the time I had to keep using correcting strokes to keep me from turning into the wind, which was coming from the southeast. Normally I would just use body lean to turn my kayak, but with the boat weighted down with camping gear and the waves as rough as they were my leans were not as far as they needed to be nor as effective.

A couple things started to happen that caused me to think that I better be prepared for a flip in the middle of the bay six miles from the nearest land. First, I was taking in a lot of water every time the wave broke over me. Things were floating around in my cock pit. Second, the boat was really getting heavy riding really low and I was getting a bit tired.

I spotted the water tower that I knew was in Crisfield and it seemed like it was really far away. My GPS told me I had paddled seven miles so far from Watts averaging a very discouraging 3 mph. I then remembered that I marked the starting point in Crisfield on my GPS when we took the ferry ride to Tangier. All I had to do was find the location on the GPS. I did and it was 12 miles due north. So that was really disappointing.

Now the wind was beginning to howl. The waves were moving faster and they were breaking over my head ... and often. So I decided the only way I was going to get there was to start riding the waves since they were heading in the right direction anyway. Riding the waves was not going so well because it seemed like I was riding in the waves not on top and taking in even more water and not having any control. So now my biggest concern was getting the water out of my boat, which I did not want to attempt under these conditions. So I started heading to the nearest piece of land due east, the land turned out not to be so near, but an accommodating beach 12 miles away from Watts Island. I kept thinking who was the idiot who ever invented a kayak without a rudder and why didn't my boat come with an automatic pump like Susan's and why did I not use my whitewater skirt? When is that storm coming ... and this was not so fun anymore.

I finally made it to the beach and my GPS told me, Hurray you made progress. You are now only 10.4 miles away from the Crisfield at 330 degrees NW. So now with a full belly of peanut butter crackers, chewy Granola bars and some Chocolate pudding I was ready to head out. With all the water out of the boat now I was going to surf the waves all the way with a whitewater state of mind, meaning no correcting strokes. I was just going to brace and lean my way through and surf the waves and make as much speed as I could. It worked for the most part.

It was now completely dark. The storm clouds were blocking all the stars and the moon. Every time I started to head into a channel

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October

- 5-8 (Fri-Mon)** **Non CPA Event: Delmarva Paddlers Retreat:** Now in it's 19th year, the Delmarva Paddler's Retreat has grown into one of the largest celebrations of the origins of kayaking. Participants and Guides alike have opportunity to share and hone traditional kayaking techniques and skills. Activities range from on-water instruction, along with rope gymnastics, seminars on traditional kayak construction, presentations and lectures. **Skill Level:** All **Organizer(s):** Led by Ed Zachowski.
- 12-14 (Fri-Sun)** **Elk Neck Car Camper:** Fourth Annual Elk Neck Car Camper and Moveable Feast. **Skill Level:** Advanced Beginner Paddlers **Web Site:** <http://troop424.freesevers.com/Elk%20Neck%202006/ELKNECKTRiPREPORT.html> **Organizer(s):** Led by Ralph Heimlich 301-498-0918 (leave a message).
- 25 (Thu)** **PoG Halloween Paddle Party:** The event to end the season. We will dress up, paddle and then part on the docks as we close the season. More information will follow shortly. **Skill Level:** All **Organizer(s):** Led by Dave Biss 703-241-0036.

November

- 4 (Sun)** **CPA Annual Meeting:** details to follow. **Skill Level:** All **Organizer(s):** Dave Biss.
- 10-12 (Sat-Mon)** **Chicahominy Riverfront Park:** Car camping and paddling in the protected waters of Chickahominy River **Skill Level:** Advanced Beginner Paddlers **Organizer(s):** Led by Bill Dodge 703-201-8636 (cell).

Participants in CPA events must read and comply with the statement of CPA trips requirements and ratings. Please contact the trip leaders in advance, even if you are familiar with the area being paddled. They need contact information in case of changes, and there may be space limitations or other trip restrictions. The latest information about CPA trips is at <http://www.cpakayaker.com/events.html>

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the lights would disappear meaning that there was land blocking my progress. So much for short cuts. So then I just headed for the boat channel marked by the red and green channel lights, knowing that this was going to take me the long way into Crisfield but at least it would get me there. I finally arrived at the Crisfield dock at 9:58 PM.

I did a grand total of 23 miles from Watts Island on top of the 4.5 miles coming from the other island to Watts Island. So I was a little bit worn out. So now all I had to do was drive two and half hours back in the rainstorm without falling asleep at the wheel.

Back on Watts

I turned on the VHF radio to the weather alert channel and listened to the forecasts. They have to run through every forecast in the area and that was tedious. So I decided to call David Shames, who always seems to be close to a computer and ask him to look up a forecast online. Fortunately my cell phone had excellent coverage. I got hold of David and explained our situation. Between the laughter he went online and found a forecast for Crisfield. The wind which was southeast would change to northeast by morning. Scattered thundershowers were forecast for the evening.

It was probably around 10 when the storm approached the island. I could hear the thunder from afar. Then the sky lit up with lightning. It was coming so quick that it seemed like someone had just turned the lights on outside and left them on. I could hear the waves crashing on the shore and wondered if the dune I had chosen was high enough. Then it hit. The force of the wind was incredible. The sides of tent were pushed inward and I could feel the tent lifting off the sand. Then as quickly as it came it ended. The wind died down to a slow roar. Cautiously I climbed out of the tent to inspect the damage. I looked over at the kayaks. They were still secure on the dune. The wind picked up and continued to blow throughout the night but that was the only thunderstorm which hit us directly. I could hear thunder in the distance. Somehow I got back to sleep and awoke the next morning to a steady rain. I waited about an hour for the rain to let up then ventured outside. The sky was grey and heavy but there was the hint of blue peaking around the clouds. The water was almost dead calm. I yelled over to Shannon's tent to get ready to leave. A half hour later we had the tent and gear packed in the kayaks and we were on the water.

The GPS was helpful in keeping us on course but it wasn't hard to navigate to Tangier. We could see the island from Watts. The waves were a little choppy as we got further away from Watts and out in the unprotected waters. But it was manageable. An hour and half later we paddled close to shore where the crab houses are situated. The channel was past the crab houses. But now we had another problem. The tide was low and we were running out of water. We tried pushing the boats forward with our hands in the sand but that would only take us so far. We had to get out of the kayaks and walk pulling the kayaks behind us.

I went back to the crabhouse / bar that we had eaten at on Saturday and asked if there was any place where we could shower. They directed us down the street to the marina where we found an open door and a hot shower ... waiting for us. Clean and refreshed we had lunch found at one of the restaurants and called David Moore to let him know we were ok. We took the 4 pm ferry back to Crisfield and called it a day. [Editor's Note: This is an excerpt of [Susanita's Blog](#), so go there for the full story. Also, see the [photo albums](#).]