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Paddling and Mentoring on the Patuxent

By Ralph Heimlich

In July, five other CPA paddlers and I spent a week kayak touring on the Patuxent River. As part of our trip, we stopped to help mentor some young campers in kayaking at the Patuxent Riverkeeper's Summer Camp program. Paddling the river can be a rejuvenating experience, and seeing kayaking again through the eyes of young people just getting started in the sport can update your point of view as well.

I try to lead a kayak tour on local waters at least once every season. Kayak touring is more than just a day trip: It is a multi-day kayak camping trip in which you cover distances on a water body and camp out of your boat every night in a different location. There are lots of opportunities for kayak touring in the Chesapeake Bay region (see <https://www.cpakayaker.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/A-Guide-to-Kayak-Touring-in-the-Chesapeake-Bay-Jun-2021.pdf>), but this year we returned to one of the original water trails on the Bay, the Patuxent River (see <https://patuxentwatertrail.org/>). The best guide to the Patuxent River is the excellent and informative map by CPA member Dave Linthicum (see <https://paxriverkeeper.org/product/patuxent-watertrail-navigation-map-non-waterproof-edition/>)

On Sunday, July 16, I was joined at the Queen Anne Canoe Launch, (river mile 52; rivers are measured in miles upstream from the mouth), by Gary Trotter, Sophie Troy and Greg Welker for our first day paddling downriver. Later we were joined by Ed Johnson, who paddled down from

the Hills (Rt 4) bridge (rm 46) and Barbara Southworth, who joined us as we paddled by the Patuxent Riverkeeper HQ at Nottingham (rm 37). Our destination on the first day was the Riggelman paddle-in campsite at Emory Landing (rm 41a), on the east bank of the Patuxent opposite Jackson Landing on Jug Bay.

Launching kayaks loaded with a week's worth of gear off a floating dock is a bit trickier than a beach launch. We had to snake our empty long boats down a guard-railed ramp to the dock, get them in the water, load the gear, then scoot our butts off the dock into the cockpit without taking a swim. Everybody passed the first test with flying colors.



Figure 1 Gary Trotter after launching his loaded kayak
photo by Ralph Heimlich

The Patuxent is tidal at least as far as Queen Anne, but the character of the river changes quite a bit as you descend. Our first day, we paddled narrow brown waters (sediment from recent heavy rains) through a green tunnel of vegetation with

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hardly a sign of human habitation. Nearly as soon as we launched, we passed another Anne Arundel county paddle-in campsite at Stockett's Run (rm 51). This stretch of the river is rich in history: Queen Anne was the original head of navigation and Queen Anne's Town was created as part of a 1706 act "for the advancement of trade and erecting ports and towns in the Province of Maryland." In 1747, it was designated as an official port of export for the tobacco trade, but silting from erosion caused by conversion of upstream forests to farm fields soon degraded the port and the last cargo ship left for England about 1790, and the town began to decline. In August, 1814, Commodore Joshua Barney scuttled the gunboats and galleys of the Chesapeake Flotilla in this stretch of the river to avoid capture by the invading British. Barney and his sailors then trundled the cannon from the boats overland as an artillery unit to take a major part in the Battle of Bladensburg.

The first signs of development are just above the Hills Bridge at Wayson's Corners. After passing under the bridge, the river widens out to emergent wetlands of Galloway Marsh and Billingsley Marsh, with the forest well back from the riverbank. Along this stretch at Pig Point, archaeologists have uncovered evidence of structures and artifacts of Paleo-Indian cultures reaching back 9,200 years (see <https://outlookbythebay.com/bay-trekking/2021/05/pig-point-maryland-archaeology/>). I suspect the river looked a bit different 10,000 years ago!

We lunched at another historic spot on the river: Mount Calvert mansion (rm 44), at the junction with the Western Branch. Mount Calvert Landing was the site of thriving colonial Charles Town. The mansion, and nearby Billingsley Manor, were the country seats of the two most prominent colonial-era settlers. It was nice to sit on the porch of Mount Calvert and look out on the broad river, much as our colonial forebears did. Recently, Mount Calvert Landing was designated an official launch site, but has been a stop on the Patuxent Water Trail for decades.

Below Mount Calvert and the still-intact causeway of the defunct Chesapeake Beach Railroad lies



Figure 2 Sophie Troy, Gary Trotter and Greg Welker enjoy lunch on Mount Calvert's porch photo by Ralph Heimlich



Figure 3 The view from the porch; Mount Calvert is now also an official launch photo by Ralph Heimlich

the expanse of Jug Bay. Our campsite for the night is nestled on the east shore of Jug Bay at Emory Landing (rm 41a), the second Anne Arundel County paddle-in campsite on the river. Part of the Jug Bay Farm Preserve, this entire area is now an Anne Arundel County park (see <https://jugbay.org/jug-bay-wetlands-sanctuary-properties/>), but there is no kayak launch here at present.

After a quiet night spent at Emory Landing, we prepared to load up for another day of paddling.

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Packing all your stuff for a week is never as easy the second night. Damp tents, sleeping bags, and gear never seem to find their way as compactly back in the boat as when packed dry at home. Eventually we crammed it all in, and with the addition of Ed Johnson, who had been dropped off at Hills Bridge at oh-dark hundred to paddle down and meet us, we were soon underway for day 2. This paddle was bittersweet for Ed, who after a career in the Washington area, is moving with wife Donna to Bend, OR.

There are other kayak camps on this stretch of river, starting from Iron Pot on the Western Branch (rm 44a), Canoe Camp (rm 41) on the Prince George's County side, Selby Camp (rm 40) at Selby Landing, and White Oak Landing (rm



Figure 4 Loading up at Emory Landing on Day 2; Ed Johnson and Greg Welker photo by Ralph Heimlich

40a) up the Mattaponi Creek. In fact, it is an embarrassment of riches in terms of paddle-in sites in this stretch because paddle-in campsites tend to be developed where the public owns land to put them on, not necessarily where they need to be to accommodate kayak touring. There is only one paddle-in site with limited capacity (Greenwell State Park at Sotterley, rm 9) on the lower 23 miles of the river, while we have 5 clustered within a few miles of each other on Jug Bay.

As we paddled toward our next campsite, we stopped at the headquarters of the Patuxent Riverkeeper in Nottingham, MD (rm 37), to pick up

our last member, Barbara Southworth. We stopped to refill our water and touch base before continuing down the river.

Spice Creek Campsite (rm 35a) was our home for the rest of the night. We arrived at about lunchtime and took a little break before setting up camp. While we were eating, a Maryland National Park and Planning Commission (MNPPC) truck arrived with a replacement for the porta-potty. We had to unrig our tarp a bit for them to back in, pick up the old and drop off the new one. Talk about service! The established paddle-in sites on the Patuxent River are maintained by four entities: MNPPC, Anne Arundel and Charles counties, and Point Lookout State Park for the Greenwell site. They generally are equipped with a picnic table,



Figure 5 Taking delivery of a new porta-potty; Barbara Southworth and Gary Trotter photo by Ralph Heimlich

fire ring and porta-potty. Sometimes they have camping pads (4 x 4 enclosures filled with sand or

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wood chips) to camp on, but none of them have water directly in camp.

After we set up and got our new facility, we decided to do a day paddle and headed across the river to paddle up Hall Creek. Hall is typical of the many tributaries to the Patuxent on the lower river. Usually some kind of a sand or gravel bar at the mouth, followed by 2-5 miles of sinuous curving waterway gradually getting shallower, narrower and more woodsy in character. While there is often wildlife on the main river, especially in the stretch above the Hills bridge, your best chance of seeing birds, snakes and other critters is up the many tributary creeks. After a 6-mile paddle, we were back in camp for the night at Spice Creek.

We were up bright and early the next morning to get packed and on the river. Remember, the Patuxent is a tidal river, so planning your paddle to take account of the movement of water in and out of the river just makes good sense. The tidal current on the Patuxent is usually a knot or two, except in some places where the channel is constricted in width or depth, but why fight it? We were up early to get a little kick out of the ebbing tide on our way downstream to the next campsite.

Our paddle took us past Sneaking Point and Kingsbury Marsh, and past the historic town of Lower Marlboro. I suspect Sneaking Point was named by the sailors on the Patuxent who found tacking against a foul wind around the long undulation involved a bit of "sneaking". Lower Marlboro was the last of the customs and tobacco inspection ports on the Patuxent. As the river silted in, prohibiting vessel traffic, first the colony and then the State moved the port farther and farther downriver, from Queen Anne to Nottingham, and finally to Lower Marlboro.

There is another paddle-in site at Milltown Landing (rm 30) on this stretch, and Kings Landing Park (rm 29) is a good rest stop for bathrooms and a water refill (ask up at the swimming pool in the summer months).

A dominant navigation feature on this stretch of the river is the stacks of the power plant at Chalk

Point. There are two high stacks for the coal-fired boilers, a couple of shorter ones for oil-fired production, and some really stubby ones for natural-gas fired generation. You can see the taller stacks for a dozen miles up and down the river and they marked the location of our next paddle-in campsite at Maxwell Hall (rm 23). The campsite is the old landing on Swanson Creek for the Maxwell Hall plantation, established here in Charles county in the 1740s (see <https://www.friendsofcmh.com/>). After we set up camp, several of us hiked up to the manor house, built in 1768. Once a year in fall, the Friends of Maxwell Hall hold a Colonial Faire and Fall festival. It is a good time to visit the park from the land, or by water from Kings Landing.

One of the disadvantages to camping at Maxwell Hall is that it is directly across from the Chalk Point power plant. In past years, when different fuels were in use, this often involved shift changes and other activities announced over a loud speaker at all hours of the night. This time, all we really heard was the steady dull roar of the generating plant, which is mostly running on natural gas now. The power plant was sort of an industrial white noise generator. Other than the noise, the site is lovely, with plenty of space, flat ground and nice, shady trees. We were dry setting up and mostly throughout the night, but the weather finally caught up to us in the early morning with a torrential downpour. It dampened our gear a bit, but not our spirits (see <https://photos.app.goo.gl/J9iRAEM9UnuAejy9>). Luckily, we didn't have to be up early to catch a tide.

There are several ways to design kayak tours. One involves a straight shot launching at point A and paddling downstream (usually) to point B, often involving a shuttle to get back to your launch site. I've done that several times on the Patuxent (see https://www.cpakayaker.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Patuxent-Camper_2012.pdf) but it is more difficult because of the shuttle, and because of the uneven distribution of campsites along the river's length

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(especially the last 23 miles). The second way, employed here, is an out-and-back trip where your return to your original launch. On non-tidal rivers, this may not be possible because of the one-way current, but on tidal rivers such as the Patuxent, out-and-back itineraries are possible and often the easiest to arrange (no shuttle needed).

So, on the 4th day of our kayak camper, we were headed back UP the Patuxent to Spice Creek, the campsite we'd used the prior night. Thus our mileage was going to be about 58 miles, plus the 6 or so miles we did on Hall Creek (rm 52-rm23 = 29 miles x 2 + 6 = 64 miles in total) and we were



Figure 6 Our camp at Maxwell Hall; Gary Trotter and Sophie Troy photo by Ralph Heimlich

on the “and back” part of our paddle. You might be thinking that covering the exact same stretch of the river twice would be boring the second time, but it is an old truism that you never paddle the same river twice, and the perspective of moving in a different direction on a different bank of the river adds variety.

After staying the night at Spice Creek again, we were up early to pack and head up for the mentoring part of our trip. Fred Tuttmann has been the Riverkeeper on the Patuxent for nearly three decades. He is an environmental advocate and watchdog, a naturalist and a publicist for the river, and still finds time to run a summer program for youth to introduce them to the river on which his family still farms and where he grew up (see

<https://paxriverkeeper.org/patuxent-summer-mentoring-camp-2/>). Earlier, he'd asked for help in mentoring his camp kids in kayaking, and we agreed to jigsaw a morning of mentoring in with our kayak camper. We showed up and beached our loaded kayaks, and were quickly involved in introductions to the kids, hauling out kayaks and paddles from the barn, and helping kids get fitted to PFDs, paddles and boats. In addition to our kayak campers, Fred had help from paddler Chip Walsh, Lisa Arrasmith and a couple of other volunteers.

Fred divided the group in half to do both kayaking and fishing from the pier. We got everyone down to the water and launched from the floating dock, then herded the paddlers up the river to do a little on-water instruction. Gary Trotter tried manfully to organize a short talk on forward stroke and other basics, but the ebbing current made it hard to keep all the kids within earshot.

We finally decided it was OK to just go with the flow and let the kids experience the joy of being on the water and in control (sort of?). Some got in the rhythm right away, some had done previous kayaking and some were clearly out there the first time. I've included a couple of photos here, but there are many more on the Riverkeeper's website (see

<https://patuxentriverkeeper.pixieset.com/patuxentsummercampjuly/>).

During the lunch break, the kids got together an impromptu “thank you” card (photo) and shyly shared it with us. We said our goodbyes, including to Barbara Southworth who had left her car at the Riverkeeper HQ, and paddled off for our last night's camp back at Emory Landing.

While you are camped at Emory Landing, take advantage of the many hiking trails on the Preserve. We hiked over to the manor house and passed a picnic table overlooking a bluff on the river. There is a story about that table: A group of CPA paddlers on a previous campsite maintenance trip manhandled it over a narrow footbridge and a couple hundred yards farther into the woods to get it there. The park people

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Figure 7 Preparing kayaks for campers photo by Ralph Heimlich



Figure 8 Gary Trotter and a successful mentee on the river photo by Jennifer Carabaja

couldn't believe we'd tackled it, let alone got it done.



Figure 9 Sophie Troy and Barbara Southworth herding cats, ...er children in kayaks photo by Ralph Heimlich



Figure 10 Patuxent Riverkeeper Mentor Summer Camp; CPA paddlers Barbara Southworth, Ralph Heimlich, Gary Trotter, Greg Welker, Sophie Troy and Ed Johnson photo by Jennifer Carabaja



Figure 11 The kids' impromptu "thank you" card

Paddling back up the river past Hills Bridge on Friday was bittersweet for us all. It was the end of a great week on the river, but for Ed Johnson, who left us at Hills Bridge, it was the end of paddling on the Patuxent. He somewhat mistily promised to scout out the rivers near Bend, OR, and have us all out there for a paddling trip. Somehow, I think we will ALL be back on the Patuxent again, our "backyard" river into history.