Gunpowder paddle offers scenic variety from fall line to bay

Over three short miles, dramatically changing flora and fauna — and a spot for a cool dip

By Paul Fofonoff

One of my favorite paddles is north of Baltimore on the lower two branches of the Gunpowder River where they enter Chesapeake Bay. Most of bay's big rivers start in the mountains, carve deep valleys in the bedrock of the Piedmont Plateau, and reach the fall line, where they drop through rocky gorges to the soft sand, gravel, and clay of the coastal zone. For big rivers like the Potomac, the tide pushes the water back and forth for about 50-70 miles from the bay to rocks of the fall line. In the Big Gunpowder Falls River, it's three miles from the bay to the rocks and rapids of the fall line, so all the changing environment of the river is compressed into a few hours' paddle. And there's more - the Little Gunpowder River, which joins the big one at the mouth.

I launched at Mariner's Point Park in Joppatowne. Parking and launching are free, but kayakers have to drop off their boats, park in a picnic area, and return to carry or drag them about 100 ft to a small launch area. I got off around 1:00 PM and paddled down a creek busy with motorboats to the wide inlet where the two Gunpowder Falls Rive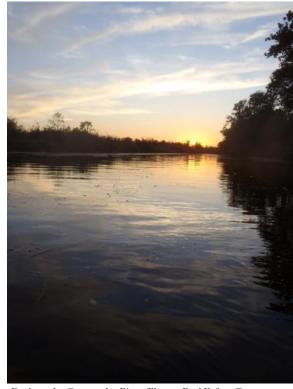rs meet the bay. I paddled along the shore through beds of hydrilla (an escaped Asian aquarium plant), and ribbon grass (*Vallisneria americana*) to the mouth of the Little Gunpowder where I turned upriver. At first the plants were typical of a brackish marsh, mostly the tall European reeds (*Phragmites australis*), but as the water got fresher, I began to see colorful flowers. There were also lots of great blue herons, ospreys, and a few migrating spotted sandpipers teetering along the shore.

Dusk on the Gunpowder River /Photos: Paul Fofonoff

Yam-Leafed Clematis (Clematis terniflora)

Eventually, I reached the broad lake-like portion of Little Gunpowder, with a couple of islands. It's nice paddling, but it takes a bit of hunting to find the upstream river. Floods created a bunch of sand and mud-bars with dead end sloughs. After exploring several, I found the channel by feeling for cold water. Both Gunpowders flow out of drinking-water reservoirs with outlets at the bottom. They don't feel like the Chesapeake because the water is clear and cold.

The Little Gunpowder was paddle-able for a long way up, past the head of tide and noticeably uphill. Eventually, I reached a shallow gravel riffle and turned around. On a previous trip, I dragged my boat over the riffle and then paddled upstream to the U.S.-40 bridge. This time, I decided to save my energy for the Big Gunpowder.

On the way down, I took photos of two invasive plants that dominate the river banks, Japanese knotweed, also mistakenly called Mexican bamboo (*Fallopia japonica, a* kind of tubular), and Japanese hops (*Humulus japonicus*). Then I continued down the Little Gunpowder across the lake and through a channel that connects to the Big Gunpowder.

After a long stretch, marshes and swamps were replaced by steep banks and tall trees. I paddled under the U.S.-40 bridge that I drove over on my way to Joppatowne. Dense beds of hydrilla continue for a long way up the river. It's a bit of a nuisance for paddling, but fish and ducks like it.

Past the U.S.-40 bridge and an old but still-used railroad bridge, I paddled over a shallow, navigable cobble bottom to the bedrock outcrops where the river's lowest rapids flow. I explored the rocks, climbed the little cliff, and then took a dip in the cool, flowing water. An old guidebook, *Baltimore Trails*, calls the cliffs Lorelei Rocks, but there were no beautiful and deadly Wagnerian water-sprites singing here, just happy Spanish-speaking families picnicking.

Then, around 5:30p.m., I started downriver. I stopped to photograph a couple of invasive if pretty plants, purple loosestrife and yam-leafed clematis. I emerged from the Big Gunpowder and reached the kayak launch about 7:00p.m. with enough daylight left to load the boat easily. ⬧