

Point Lookout To Smith Point

By Mihail Popov

The purpose of this trip was to explore the area and to “benefit” from the expected wind and wave conditions. The forecast was for 10-15 knots of South winds with gusts up to 25 knots and waves up to 3 feet. The idea was to paddle upwind, then surf back down to the launch site and surf the forecasted wind waves. Since “upwind” happened to be way in the middle of the open Chesapeake bay (in the general direction of Tangier Island), I did not want to risk being that far (at least 8 miles) away from land for the entire duration of the paddle. For added safety, I decided to cross the Potomac going South/South-East from Point Lookout and take a break on a beach there. This way the open water crossing could be as short as just under 6 miles. Once on the other side, I could either continue South-West along the Eastern Potomac Shore towards Smith Point (to gain additional “upwind” distance near the safety of the shoreline) or paddle back to the launch site depending on the conditions and how I felt.

There was no one to ask where I could launch in the middle of the week, so I decided to pick the Southern-most launching place: a convenient launch site perhaps 500 feet before the end of the road – at the last parking area just before the final U-turn circle at the tip of the peninsula (and right next to the bathrooms). The left side (the Chesapeake beach) was farther away from the parking and was exposed to waves this day. The water on the east side (the Potomac beach) was only about 25 feet from my car.

I launched from Point Lookout around 3 PM, which was a little later than I hoped. I knew that I could not make it all the way to Smith Point as the distance to there would be close to 25 miles. Sunset was around 8 PM and I wanted to be back during day light. That meant I had about 5 hours total and I watched the clock carefully to make sure I got back in time. The wind was supposed to remain from the South for the entire afternoon and I was counting on an “assisted” return downwind where I could catch some waves and be pushed by the wind. So I planned to use half the time to go up and the rest to go back with some rest mid-way.

I had done 6+ miles open water crossings near the Bay Bridge before so I was comfortable with the distance. However, unlike near Bay Bridge, there was almost no boat traffic and very few buoys to get a bearing from. Also, I could barely see my intended destination in the distance. If it started to rain, visibility would drop below what I needed to see either shore—I would not have anything to get a visual on. So I was prepared to go on compass and also had my GPS take note of where I started, and also took a good note of the wind and wave direction, in case I had to paddle “blind”. As it turned out, visibility remained good for the entire paddle and I did not need to rely on the “aids”. There was some rain at one point—I could not see the far beach, but I could still see the near shore and could figure out my bearing from there.

As I left Point Lookout, I could see the churning water to the south of it, where the Potomac and the Chesapeake met. There is a shallow there and the tide and currents meet and created quite a stir with unpredictable and changing waves running in all directions or exploding upwards. This area was maybe $\frac{1}{4}$ mile or so long and a few hundred feet wide. I imagine it may change location with the tide somewhat. I stayed just to the side of it and paddled away towards the opposite shore on the Potomac.

Initially I headed on the shortest path to cross, but the waves were almost parallel to me this way and my boat tends to weathercock. My goal was to go up-wind and against the waves as much as I could so that I could surf back down longer. I figured the conditions were not too bad—only good 2 foot waves with some 3 footers here and there, only a few breaking and the wind was not really too strong or gusty (10-15 knots as forecasted seemed about right). After a half a mile or so, I decided to go at a 45 degree angle to the waves and headed for a slightly longer crossing a little more upwind. I took a bearing from the large buoy before me, lined that with a radar tower on the other shore and found it easy to maintain that course. Once I passed the buoy, I could look back and have that lined-up with the structures behind me, on the tip of Point Lookout, so I had a good directional guide this way at least till the point that was closer to the South shore than to my launch point. There I could no longer see well far behind me and the buoy was too small to discern in the haze. The tall radar tower I was headed to also disappeared behind trees when I was more than a mile away from the South shore. But it did not matter, as I could now clearly see the shore and could pick a beach to land on.

I decided to check out a nice sand beach between some houses. No one was there and I saw no signs warning that paddlers will be shot if they set foot there, so I decided to land. I floated on my back in the water but got a minor sting by some jelly fish so I got out to have a snack. On shore, some nasty flies apparently thought they needed a snack too and quickly chased me back in the water for some more floating rest. After 20-30 minutes of rest I was back in my kayak.

Checking the time and the remaining distance, I figured I'd better head back. Took a line parallel to the waves for a couple of miles directly into the bay so I could later have a pure downwind run rather than be pushed by quartering waves all the way down. Whenever a nice set of waves came, I took the opportunity to surf it down, then headed back parallel to gain enough distance to surf down



Mihail's GPS track

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New CPA Logo Performance Paddling Shirts

If you were at SK102, you may have seen the Pacific Blue shirts given to each of the instructors with a CPA Logo and the words "CPA Volunteer". Now you too can proudly display our club logo on a high-performance wicking shirt that's perfect for paddling. These shirts are similar to the Patagonia Capilene ultra-light, breathable and quick drying shirts on sale at stores for **\$35-\$40**. They have an 8-15 SPF factor and come in Sage Green, Khaki, Pacific Blue (and a very few Sky Blue, which is darker) in unisex sizes from Small to XX Large.

We got a special deal on these from OpenAirWear, a top-notch local maker who supplies performance wear to the Naval Academy, ski resorts and athletic teams, so these shirts are available to you for **\$15** each, while they last. They're handled by logomeister [Bela Mariassy](#) at Pier 7 and other events, and for \$5 S&H, he'll mail you one.

Ralph Heimlich

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later. I was more than 8 miles away and could barely see the Point Lookout beach in the distance and knew it would disappear completely if it started to rain. The waves and wind had not changed much as I began to paddle back, so I had a good directional orientation by just following them downwind plus the GPS knew where I was supposed to go, so I was not worried that I'd miss my destination.

As it turned out, the wind and waves calmed down a little by the time I was 6 miles away from my destination. The challenging and fast downwind runs did not quite materialize. Most waves were not as steep as when I was heading out, there were very few white caps left and the wind was mostly below 10 knots. Thus, I only had a handful of good long runs linking waves. I switched the wing paddle I was using up to this point for the Greenland paddle as going downwind required more steering than pulling and the stick worked better for this.

Approaching Point Lookout I could see the churning water where the Potomac and the Chesapeake met. This time I decided to go right through it to see what it was like. The waves were lower and the tide ebb was barely there at that time of day, so the "washing machine" did not look nearly as bad as it did on my way out. It was rather shallow and the waves and currents came from all directions and pushed the kayak about quite strongly. That made for some exciting fast but short runs on the steep waves there, a little splashing over the deck, and I was out of the area in no time. Pretty amusing actually, but I would not want to spend too much time in water like that, especially if it were rougher and a capsize would definitely be a possibility. It would make for a good play spot though!

Back on the launch spot, I rested a little, took some photos of the evening sun, and was back on my way up Rt. 5 just after sunset. Overall, I was on the water for four full hours making a total distance of 17.2 miles with an 8 mile open crossing on the way out and over 9 miles in open water going back. The GPS track showed my average speed was almost constant at 4.3 miles per hour (except for the few brief fast surfing moments). It was interesting to observe that going downwind was not faster than going 45 degree upwind or parallel to the waves. Steering without a rudder actually slowed me down going downwind more than the waves helped propel me. Still, going downwind was easy as long as I did not insist on going fast and catching most every wave. Catching more waves was an option and I could move very fast this way, but due to my slow boat and the already weakening and not too steep waves it required a lot of energy to do this for any length of time. So I just floated down with not too much effort and only surfed the occasional bigger and steeper waves that came in cycles and where I had a chance to link several waves and make longer runs (a few good runs ended-up at speeds around 7 mph for close to 30 seconds, peaking above 8 mph – not as fast as the fastest large boat wake surfing I've done in flat water as the waves changed shape but still fast and enjoyable).



Sunset from Point Lookout photo by Mihail Popov