

Paddlers explore haunted Potomac waterscape

Large birds, strange shapes, and the possibility of sharks' teeth make for a mysterious day

By Lois Wyatt

One large rusting steel hull rises high against the Virginia shore, in contrast to the mostly wooden hulls exposed only about two or three feet at low tide. From our Charles County Park launch into Malloys Bay, we paddled out toward the conspicuous bow adorned with an osprey nest and its resident who watched us carefully but more quietly than most osprey I've encountered in the Chesapeake. Apparently, kayakers are common and the height of the bow provided a sense of safety for the bird. As we passed on the starboard side and round the stern, we saw that the back half of the hull is largely gone, giving a clear view of a lower deck and a peak into an interior space. We could hear short, rhythmic moans from the decrepit hull, as if to comment on its sad fate.

Beyond that rusting hull, Malloys Bay opens wide to the Potomac. Paddling northward where river meets bay, we found one hull with a

higher profile beached on the Potomac shore. There are probably more further north, but none were obvious, so we turned and followed the shore, led by Paul



The hull-derived islands of Malloys Bay make for a mysterious and melancholy waterscape, but one with benefits for local waterfowl — and paddlers!

Photo/Cindy D.

Miller, seeking a good spot to land and search for sharks' teeth. The first stretch was too rocky, but then we did find a possible strip. While we did not find teeth, the beach was clearly a favorite spot for birds to devour their catch, as revealed by the strewn ribs, vertebrae, fin, and other bones littering the sand. Over the narrow ridge of sand, we saw another small inlet, a resting place for yet more abandoned boats. That cove we judged to be too shallow for even our kayaks to navigate. Launched again, we paddled around and

between larger hull-shaped islands baring their enormous nails in neat arrays, occasional large concrete blocks that had once served as ballast, and a range of well-established weeds, bushes, and even substantial trees. For a bit more on the history of this ghost fleet, see the Jan-Feb, 2017 issue of this newsletter.

The date for this trip was selected by the time of low tide. There are scheduled, commercial weekend trips which run independent of tides, but much of what there is to see is submerged at higher tide. With the boat carcass debris obscured from view, there is also greater risk to the well-being of the boats. Tom Heneghan's CPA trip, which leaves from Quantico, warrants an Intermediate rating because of the Potomac crossing. With a launch from the Maryland park, this remarkable slice of history is accessible to almost everyone. Fifteen people joined this Beginner trip, including a few beginners, others with years of experience paddling in Meetups, and several longtime CPA members from Maryland, for whom a drive to Quantico only to return to Maryland had never been appealing. Malloys Bay is a unique and fascinating location to paddle. ♣



Paddlers search for sharks' teeth on Malloys Bay. Photo/Cindy D.