

The Southern Bay: From Onancock to Machipongo

By Greg Welker

Andy DeVito, Dale Murphy, Bill Dodge, and Ron Barnett joined trip leader Greg Welker for four days of mainly sunny paddling May 12-15, 2007 on the eastern shore of Virginia in the Chesapeake Bay and among Atlantic Ocean barrier islands. We camped at Kiptopeke State Park (nice) on the Bay just south of Cape Charles and took day paddles. Three of the paddles are described in Andrea J. Nolan's excellent book "Sea Kayaking Virginia."

Ron and Greg arrived late morning on Day 1 and met by chance in Cape Charles a terminus for the former ferry service that ran the mouth of the Bay to mainland Virginia and back and before construction of the present 20-mile bridge-tunnel. We checked-out the town, the local kayak outfitter, the burgers at an Irish pub, and then headed for the park to setup camp. When the others did not arrive after a period of waiting we went for a 10 mile paddle. We launched from the park and paddled north hugging the shore to cut a brisk northeastern wind to undeveloped Elliot's Creek. We explored there in a grand silence that was in sharp contrast to the windy Bay. The eastern shore of VA is known for its many varieties of birds. We were not disappointed as we saw eagles, pelicans, snowy, herons, loons, and large aggregates of mystery shore birds. On returning to camp Andy, Dale and Bill greeted us.



Wharf at Onancock VA (founded 1680)



Bill gets it going



Greg catching up

A CPA mantra could be “wait, see, decide...wait, see, decide.” Given the brisk winds and strong tidal currents known to this area we chanted this mantra daily. In fact both factors influenced our daily paddle decisions and Greg had planned paddles to take advantage of the tidal currents. The major open water paddle was planned for Day 2 but, given the small craft advisory, we opted to drive 40 miles north to Onancock (founded in 1683) to paddle its more protected waters out to the wild beaches

Parkers Marsh Wildlife Refuge. This 11.5 mile paddle featured the viewing of two bald eagle nests situated very close together and the unexplained sighting of an unidentified wooden structure on land with what looked like a small white igloo on a platform (see photo). Greg said he’d seen them elsewhere on the Bay but did not know their purpose. Does anyone know? An avian totem?



Parkers Marsh Wildlife Refuge with the Bay in the distance

Our Day 3 open water paddle to Smith and Mackhorn Islands departed from the Eastern Shore of VA National Wildlife Refuge and ran parallel to Fisherman Island Wildlife Refuge. We landed on Smith with its Cape Charles Lighthouse and took a long walk along the beach on the Atlantic side. The beach served up many creatures from the ocean deep including large conk shells (inhabited and vacated), sand dollars, a strange looking fish, lots of shells (no tourists walk here), and a deceased dolphin. From the beach one could look across the Atlantic to the Cape Henry Lighthouse. On returning to our kayaks we saw an oyster catcher status then had lunch and waited for low tide to paddle north to Mackhorn Island. On the way we saw large white semi-soft structures in Magothy Bay on the bottom in different shapes. No one knew what they were – whether plant or animal. After exploring the southern end of Mackhorn and seeing eagles once again we returned past Skidmore and Raccoon Islands to the put-in. Along the way we spied-on a red fox apparently stalking several large white egrets fishing near the water or their eggs.



Dale and Greg off of Parkers Marsh Wildlife Refuge



Ron Barnett

The Day 4 paddle was planned for the coastal Machipongo River launching from Willis Wharf. We were eager to view the reported sea turtles and even sharks that inhabit this river but this was not to be. After launching we paddled a short distance out to the river chanting our CPA mantra but given the strong southwestern wind (passing watermen yelled something about "where are your sails!" and a fisherman had earlier spoke of 2-3 foot swells) we returned to Parting Creek for protected waters – some protection. After 90 minutes of being blown around we opted to call it a day and retire to Stella's a nice little eatery in a pre-Civil War building with a screened dining porch overlooking the water. Afterward seafood and dessert we made the 4-hour drive home - well worth it given the abundance of wild places, wildlife, and the paddling pleasures of the Southern Bay.



This shell is alive



Greg on Magothy Bay

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