

The Chesapeake Paddler



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The Park Ranger Paddles

By Melissa Acuti

For the past six years, I have been a park ranger with the Maryland Park Service and up until last spring worked at the Point Lookout State Park Complex in St. Mary's County. I currently work in Annapolis at the Maryland Park Service Headquarters, overseeing the Maryland State Park's Youth Conservation Programs. My work and play have taken me to some of the most beautiful places in Maryland. Allow me to share with you some of my favorite paddling places.

Point Lookout State Park is the southernmost point on the Western Shore, where the Potomac River meets the Chesapeake Bay. You are surrounded by water on three sides, making it is one of my favorite places for both beautiful sunrises and sunsets. Lake Canoy at Point Lookout is a wonderful little place to paddle, especially when you want to be a bit more sheltered. Although it is not actually a lake as its name suggests, it is a shallow body of water connected to the Potomac River near the park's boat launch. You can launch there if you like cement ramps or from the sandy beach behind the park store. You can also launch directly from the campground if you happen have one of the most popular waterfront campsites in the Green's Point Loop. Campsites, which can be booked up to one year in advance, are quite popular on weekends during the summer. If you have the option to visit during the week or in September or early October, it is a bit less busy and often the weather is still very nice!

During your paddle in Lake Canoy, be sure to take time to enjoy the wildlife all around. There is a small heron rookery, or nesting colony, between the causeway and the park store. If you look and listen, you will see great blue herons coming and going, building nests and feeding young, from late spring to early summer. If you listen carefully, you may even hear the young herons "clacking" and begging for food. You will also see plenty of bald eagles and ospreys in this area. There has been an active eagle nest in the top of a large pine across from the boat launch on "Treasure Island" for many years. The nest typically yields two young each year. It takes about five years for the young eagles to get their "bald" heads; the juvenile eagles maintain a dark, blotchy appearance until then. Osprey can also be seen nesting on man-made nest "towers," or platforms, throughout the park, as well as using some dead tree snags. Watch for these



Perks! The chance to paddle Maryland's best waters comes with the territory when you are a park ranger. Photo of Janes Island State Park by Melissa Acuti

noisy "fish hawks" building nests and fishing from spring to summer. Cow-nosed rays are often spotted in Lake Canoy, especially during mating season, but don't be fooled into thinking their "wings" are shark fins even if several years ago a local waterman caught bull sharks just off Point Lookout in a pound net in the Potomac! The fisheries folks have confirmed that it is not unusual for bull sharks to be in this area, especially in later summer months. Still, every year in early June, open-water swimmers cross the Potomac from Virginia to Point Lookout, each swimmer assisted by a kayaker. The Potomac River Swim is always in need of additional paddlers, so keep an eye out for this upcoming event.

Newtowne Neck State Park is one of Maryland's "newest" parks, located in St. Mary's County, just outside of Leonardtown off the Potomac between Breton Bay and St. Clement's Bay. The 700+ acre property was purchased by the state in 2009, and the master plan was approved last year. Over the next five years or so, the master plan for Newtowne Neck will begin to be put into place, but don't be surprised if you don't notice too many big changes. The overall plan is for the area to remain low-impact, re-using farm buildings that are already in place on the property and keeping parking lots on the smaller side. Plans call for paddling amenities to include two soft launch sites

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(one already exists), as well several paddle-in campsites, available by reservation. Newtowne Neck has more than seven miles of shoreline, plenty for a short paddle. For a longer day trip, you can paddle out to St. Clement's Island, which was Maryland's first landing in 1634. On St. Clement's Island, you will find a replica of the Blackistone Lighthouse, as well as a picnic pavilion, tables, grills, and composting toilets. There is no camping permitted on St. Clement's Island, so take a break and refuel before heading back to Newtowne Neck, or continue your way following the Captain John Smith Trail along the Potomac River.

If there were a park known as a paddler's playground, it would have to be **Janes Island State Park** with almost 30 miles of water trails. Located on Maryland's Eastern Shore in Crisfield, it is surrounded by water and certainly has some of the best sunsets. I've spent entirely too much time at Janes Island during my career wishing I could go for a paddle while I was there for work functions and trainings. However, a few years back I finally made it to Janes in late April for a paddling trip with a few friends. Let me first warn you that the mosquitos at Janes are some of the healthiest and hungriest on the Chesapeake, so early spring is a wise time to plan a trip. Janes has a large variety of camping accommodations, everything from a small conference center, to full service cabins that can sleep 6, to rustic 4-person mini-cabins, and a campground with water and electric. There

are also several more "primitive" paddle-in campsites only accessible by boat. We really enjoyed exploring all around the island and even checked out the old "fish factory" remains after settling in at our campsite. The beaches are beautiful and stretch on and on. This is truly a gem on the Chesapeake. Don't forget to stop in Crisfield for a crab cake and a slice of Maryland's state dessert, the Smith Island Cake, before heading home!

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The Chesapeake Paddler is published 10 times a year, with combination issues in Nov/Dec and Jan/Feb. The deadline for submitting copy is the 15th of the preceding month. Have an idea for an article, or is there information you would like to see in the newsletter? Contact news_editor@cpakayaker.com

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