

# The Chesapeake Paddler



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## Legendary Dismal Swamp intrigues and surprises

*Spanning two states and an imaginary space between fact and fiction are storied waters*

By Lois Wyatt

Great Dismal Swamp has haunted me for many years, piquing my curiosity and beckoning me to experience the place with the eerie name. Every autumn, I used the traditional folk tale, "Phantom Lovers of Dismal Swamp," for a Halloween reading in my classes. An inconsolable lover, after the death of his bride-to-be from swamp fever, refused to accept her death. To find her, he plunged deep into the swamp intending to

hide her from Death in the hollow of a cypress tree. He arrived at the edge of Drummond's Pond, saw the flickering of a lantern far out, fashioned a raft from fallen cypress boughs, and poled his way out to join her. Key elements of the story, like swamp fever and the hollow of a cypress tree, do indeed reflect features of this unusual area.

Other intriguing stories have a more solid foundation in history. Runaway slaves found refuge as residents known as Maroons or as a stop on the Underground Railroad. I once read that it had miles of roads good for cycling, so I took my bike there in the spring of 2004 but quickly discovered many downed trees blocking every road I tried, the result of Hurricane Isabelle's power the previous fall. My effort to explore and find Lake Drummond was thwarted.

Then there are tales of lightning strikes that set the swamp burning for months. Water is an inherent element of a swamp, so why does it burn? The Father of our Country is partly to blame. George Washington had ditches built to drain the area in an effort to convert



Photo/Ralph Heimlich

swamp into farmland. Though he learned peat soil is not good for farming, it and subsequent development projects lowered the water table which provided dry fuel. Because the peat is 6 to 8 feet in depth, it burns deep and hot, smolders for months, and generates a lot of carbon-rich smoke. One recent fire began Aug 4, 2011 and was not declared extinguished until Nov 23, 111 days later. Follow this link for dramatic photos:

[https://pilotonline.com/news/local/environment/article\\_6004928d-ad61-55fb-8bef-1134b03e680e.html](https://pilotonline.com/news/local/environment/article_6004928d-ad61-55fb-8bef-1134b03e680e.html)

The only way to fight this type of fire is to flood the area, to recreate the swamp. With legislation in 2013, the goal of hydrological restoration and management got a boost.

With stories of Great Dismal Swamp and my previous failed effort stuck in my head, I was delighted to see that destination on the CPA calendar for April. And I found I was not the only one under the spell of the place. Apparently, fascination spans international borders. From rural Ontario, Canada, Ron Miron flew south to borrow a kayak from his friend Don Monday and join us (and also CPA). I wondered if he was our first international member. No, I learned, but the only current one. He even created an ominous, custom-designed decal for us participants. The group also included our most active Tidewater member, Carolyn Sanford, whose wrist was broken last November on the Chickahominy trip when a limb fell on her during

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Not all in Dismal  
Swamp was dark  
and spooky.  
Arrow-straight  
canals, tall  
grasses, and  
sunshine  
contrasted with  
Cypress knees,  
shaded waters,  
and a fabled  
history.  
Photos/Ralph  
Heimlich



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the lunch stop, as reported in Bill Smith's column in the Jan-Feb edition of *The Chesapeake Paddler*. A complicated break that required surgery, her wrist is healing and we were glad to see that she is paddling well. We were paddling almost in her backyard.

Chilly weather was with us over the four days. As Ralph Heimlich and Greg Welker chose each day's destination, wind was the main consideration. The first day we launched onto the Northwest River from Baum Road, just around the corner from our campground, headed downriver, crossed the North Carolina state line, and on to Shingle Landing for our lunch stop. On our return, a spur leg up Indian Creek let us see where folks can rent boats in the park. That day held some of the atmosphere I was expecting, dense forest, dark water, and gnome villages, aka cypress knees. However, the overcast day likely was a better reason for this effect.



The second day our route was a loop. We departed from Lotus Garden on Sandbridge Rd to travel down Asheville Bridge Creek through lovely open area of phragmites, redwing blackbirds, and distant lines of cypress to North Bay. The wind turned out to be stronger than anticipated, so we cut short our time exposed on the open bay and headed up Hell Point Creek with a pullout at Indian Cove Resort trailer park for lunch. Connecting upstream, we turned into a channeled Asheville Bridge Creek and completed our circle. A few chose to pass through the culvert while most opted to portage across the busy road to our parked cars. Across from the launch we had an early dinner at Margie & Ray's Crabhouse before returning to camp.

Saturday we intended to hit Great Dismal Swamp but were thwarted by a road, and therefore access to the launch, closed for a memorial walk. We were mildly annoyed, but Plan B was a wonderful substitute, so we still enjoyed an excellent paddle. Retracing our steps toward the campground, we launched at Bob's Fishing Hole to head up the Northwest River, reaching

almost to Bunch Walnuts Bridge. Lunch was at Triple R Ranch, a camp facility, where we tried to be as unobtrusive as possible while large groups of kids participating in a weekend adventure were heading into the dining hall.

The last day, Sunday, we finally paddled the Great Dismal Swamp, as the name of this trip had promised. The day brought sunshine, clear blue skies, and arrow-straight canals leading us to a flat calm Lake Drummond. The Great Dismal Swamp canal is an alternate route of the Atlantic Intercoastal Waterway primarily used by pleasure craft. We passed a retractable bridge, a design I had never seen before. A 90° turn and a straight-as-a-western-highway feeder canal brought us three miles later to a weir and a portage. A short stretch later the water opened to the great flat expanse of Lake Drummond. What a contrast to the long-held images I had conjured up! On a sunny spring day in 2018, the area could not have felt less spooky, confusing, and ominous. I may have felt a twinge of disappointment not to have chills down my spine and moments of foreboding, but it was a great day. I have now satisfied my curiosity and had my own calm, clear, and bright Great Dismal Swamp experience. ♣



*The Great Dismal Swamp did not disappoint when it came to critters and birds.*