

The Chesapeake Paddler



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Close call at Jug Bay, a cautionary tale



Rescuers from several nearby counties gather after sunset at Jackson Landing to assist in the rescue of a stranded kayaker in the nearby marsh of Jug Bay Natural Area, part of the Patuxent River Park. (Photo: Greg Kearns)

On December 5, 2020 a kayaker who had launched from Jackson Landing at Patuxent River Park became stranded when strong winds turned much of Jug Bay into a large mudflat. After attempts to rescue the kayaker by land and water failed, a successful helicopter rescue was completed.

The following hour-by-hour account is from those involved, including Patuxent River Park naturalist Greg Kearns and the rescued kayaker "Chris," as told to CPA member Dave Linthicum. Dave lives across the river from Jackson Landing and was a witness to the event. Thanks to Dave for putting together this report for all kayakers to learn from (Dave has changed some names to protect their privacy) - Ed.

"When is the tide coming in so we can get an airboat to

him?" the Prince George's County Fire Department commanding officer asked with concern. "With this wind, the water isn't coming back at all tonight," replied 37-year park naturalist Greg Kearns. "We're going to need a helicopter."

How it got to that point:

HOUR ONE: "I was trying to paddle back to Jackson Landing," Chris recalled. "The headwind kept getting worse, I got turned sideways, broadsided by a wave, and tipped into waist-deep water. It was between 2:45 and 3:15 p.m. I wedged the kayak under a big tree trunk out on the mudflats and figured I'd head toward shore." He was paddling with no lifejacket, solo, in a 17-foot sea kayak.

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Half-mile wide Jug Bay can appear placid, but during a “blow-out” 4/5 of that width is mudflats. Dec. 5th was a blow-out. Steady winds of 15 to 21 mph from the northwest and gusts to 32 mph were recorded every hour from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. two miles inland. The Patuxent had even stronger winds. Jug Bay’s shallows became mudflats. Deep mud. Two hundred yards of mud for Chris to cross.

“Trying to get to shore on all fours across the mudflats, I would reach out in front of me with my paddle, then scoot my knees to the paddle, and repeat,” said Chris. “Inchworming” was incredibly slow going. “I must have spent an hour and a half crawling through the mud. I finally got to the edge of the trees and tall marsh grass (phragmites) and thought I might have better footing. I didn’t.”

The problem with the wooded swamps at Jug Bay is that the various obstacles multiply each other. It’s not just the softest, “muckiest” mud, not just the briars ripping at you everywhere, and not just the maze of fallen ash tree trunks from the emerald ash borer outbreak. It’s all three, added together.

Chris knew things were getting serious. “I was starting to shiver and my legs started to not work. The sun was going down, the temperature was dropping, and I was thinking this might be it for me.” The actual temperature was 50 degrees at noon, 45 at three, 41 by sunset. Wind chills were in the 20’s.

HOUR TWO: Chris needed a lucky break. He got one. A third of a mile away, upriver, instead of heading home, Greg Kearns decided to drop off some equipment at the Jackson Landing shed. He ran into fellow park employee Ted Pietrucha locking up for the night.



A map of Chris’ route from Jackson Landing to his eventual capsize point, his unsuccessful attempt to crawl to safety and the spot where the helicopter hoisted him to safety.

“Greg, there’s a kayaker still out. I’ve seen him before. I know his car,” said Pietrucha.

“Out in this?” Greg asked incredulously. “It was gusting near 40 at Mt. Calvert.”

Out on the dock in the howling wind, Greg began shouting, “Is anybody out there?” Research Assistant Molly Janc stood next to him. On the third try, “Molly, did you hear that?... a faint ‘Help’?” It was nearly 5 p.m., ten minutes after sunset. The two jumped in their jon boat. Spotting what appeared to be a kayak silhouette against a log, Greg yelled, “Where are you?”

“Over here, by the trees” came a faint reply. Separated by 200 yards of deep, sucking mudflats, “We’ll try to get to you from land,” Greg yelled and motored back to

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Jug Bay includes the deeper water of the Patuxent River and large marshes on both sides of the river that can become expansive mud flats when the winds get strong, even at high tide. Photo: [Will Parson/Chesapeake Bay Program](#)

Jackson Landing.

“Ted, can you stick around? Molly, can you grab our chest waders? I’ll get two spotlights. Let’s see how close we can get on foot,” said Greg. Ten minutes later they were within 200 yards of Chris. But all 200 yards were wooded swamp.

“Do you have a phone?” Greg yelled. “No. And I’m really cold and wet,” replied Chris.

HOUR THREE: It had taken Greg, usually called “Mr. Marsh Walker,” five full minutes to go at best 15 yards. “I’m stuck...I’m not going to get any closer to him,” Greg shouted back to Molly, his six foot-three reach little advantage. “Molly, can you go back and guide the first firemen back here? And ask Katherine to help at the dock as the 9-1-1 guys arrive?” (Katherine Dami is a Patuxent River Park research assistant.)

Still up to his upper thighs in swamp mud, Greg called Ted. “Dial 9-1-1; tell them we’ll need a helicopter. I don’t see an airboat being able to get to him. Tell them we have the kayaker’s location pinpointed. Get a hold of Park Police.” It was pitch black when the first three firemen followed Molly down the trail to Greg (fresh from a 15 minute struggle extricating himself from the

swamp.) Soon a commanding officer joined them, agreeing about the helicopter, “This isn’t going anywhere on the ground,” he said.

HOUR FOUR: It’s now 6:45, and the PG Co. helicopter is leaving. With both a visible spotlight and Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR), it had been circling for a half hour. On the ground, Greg and rescue personnel had aimed spotlights. Pointing to Google Maps imagery on his phone, Greg said to the commanding officer, “We’re at the blue dot of course. He’s right over here on the swamp edge.” The helicopter had done a dozen big circles until, over the radio, Greg and the officer finally heard, “We’ve got eyes on him. He’s still moving some.”

By now, PG fire and PG Park Police each had multiple vehicles at Jackson Landing including an airboat. There was a four-person rescue team in orange survival suits and helmets. Charles County F.D. had an airboat, and Calvert F.D. was on site. At 7:15, an Anne Arundel F.D. Zodiac boat came upriver at high speed. None could get close to Chris.

HOUR FIVE: At 7:30, State Police Helicopter *Trooper 2* was on site. It had needed to return to Andrews to refuel

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after an earlier call. It immediately set up 125 feet above Chris (not much above the treetops.) To observers, it appeared to not move an inch, hovering steadily despite the winds over 20 mph, lowering a rescue technician with an aerial hoist “screamer suit.”

At 7:47 Chris and the rescuer were hauled up and the helicopter headed to Medstar Southern Maryland Hospital. At 9 Greg headed home for dinner.

Chris wrote on Dec. 14, “I was lucky to have no permanent damage. I was in the hospital for six days to recover from hypothermia and rhabdomyolosis (death of muscle fiber from extreme muscle strain and/ or prolonged muscle compression from long-term immobilization. It can lead to kidney failure, liver issues.)

“I’m not 100% yet but feeling better every day. Please accept and extend my extreme gratitude to those involved. It was a life-changing experience and when I am emotionally stable enough, I will return to personally thank my rescuers.

“I’m so lucky Greg decided to go to the shed at the end of the day.”

Footnote from Dave: [Patuxent River Park \(M-NCPPC\)](#), not ordinarily involved in rescue operations, is evaluating a potential policy change regarding kayaking in adverse conditions.

Suggested warnings could include :

- *Do not paddle if there is a 20 mph wind predicted from any direction. Such a wind from the north will result in difficult waves, a potential deep water capsize, and nearly inescapable shallow water and mudflats in Jug Bay.*
- **Wear personal flotation at all times.**
- *Don’t paddle without a wetsuit or dry suit if **either** wind chill or water temps are predicted below 50.**
- *Avoid paddling alone.*
- *Take a map and cell phone in waterproof cases and, if temps are below 60, a change of clothes in a waterproof bag.*
- *Check tides.*
- *Tell someone your paddle plan.*
- *Stay with your boat if you do capsize.*
- *Never underestimate the conditions.*
- *For emergencies: Prince George’s County Park Police, 24 hours, 301-459-3232.*

**CPA recommends following cold water paddling guidelines from the [National Center for Cold Water Safety](#) and treat water temps below 70F with caution.*

Potomac Riverkeepers target ‘Trash Island’



The [Potomac Riverkeeper Network](#), volunteers and local businesses have teamed up to target what has become known as “Trash Island” in Oxon Cove near Oxon Hill farm in Maryland.

The area, administered by the National Park Service, has accumulated large amounts of plastic and other trash, primarily from storm runoff.

The group obtained permission to remove the trash and has spent every Saturday in January, 2021 collecting it and arranging for it to be hauled away.

(photo: [Potomac Riverkeeper Network](#))