

The Chesapeake Paddler



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Marooned on a desert island

How to plan for those summer afternoon storms on the Chesapeake Bay



Monitoring the weather forecast and being prepared with extra clothes and a line to tie down your boat are keys to dealing with the frequent summer “pop-up” thunderstorms on the Bay. Above, the author ready to wait out a sudden storm on the beach at Dobbin Island near the Magothy river.

By Ralph Heimlich

I want to relate to you my experience marooned on a desert island. Okay, it was deserted, but I wasn't marooned. I was stuck on the beach waiting out a thunderstorm.

You should always be aware of the weather forecast in the area you are paddling and avoid paddling when the forecast calls for strong weather fronts to be moving through.

But in the Chesapeake Bay in summer, the forecast is usually “...temperatures in the high 90's, chance of a thunderstorm...” which doesn't give you enough specific information to be very useful. What we call “pop-up”

thunderstorms can happen anywhere in the later afternoon anywhere on the Bay. What should you do if you are caught in one?

Here's what happened to me. I was joining the Pirates of Arundell for a Wednesday evening paddle out of Spriggs Farm Park on the Magothy River, but I was running late. Four paddlers were already geared up and on the beach when I arrived, but I told them not to wait for me and that I'd catch up.

Fifteen minutes later, as I was setting out, the sky started to darken and the wind came up a bit. I paddled out toward Dobbin Island to catch my friends, but the wind

[See Marooned on page four](#)

Marooned, from page one



A “pop-up” thunderstorm over the Magothy river. While summer thunderstorms are frequent on the Chesapeake Bay, many are localized and short-lived and can be waited out under the right conditions.

picked up from the southeast and I hurried to round the eastern end of the island and get in the lee of the island to reduce my exposure to the wind. Nobody there.

By this time, the weather alert (I usually set the radio to scan channels 16, 69 and the local weather radio channel) had sounded for a large thunderstorm nearly stationary over BWI Airport with strong winds and heavy rains. The sky was getting darker and thunder began to mutter over to the west, upriver on the Magothy.

I decided that, caution being the better part of valor, I would land and see how things developed. Dobbin Island is private, but on the principle of “any port in a storm,” I’d rather face an irate landowner than a thunderstorm on the water. I secured my kayak to a sturdy post (does YOUR boat have a painter?) and pulled out my phone to monitor the radar.

Weather alerts started coming in one after the other for heavy thunderstorms over the Severn, flash flood warnings in Anne Arundel and Howard counties, etc. The alert was supposed to last for 45 minutes. As the sky darkened, thunder rumbled, lightning flashed, and the rain started to fall. I dug out my storm cag and settled in for a drenching (which never really arrived).

As the wind blew through, the water calmed a bit, and off to the west, the storm rolled on toward the north,

mostly bypassing me. Jeff Heneks called on channel 69 and said that the others had come back and wondered about me.

After about an hour, the sky in the south started to lighten and the thunder and lightning receded, so I called Jeff and told him I was leaving the island and heading back to Spriggs Farm. I paddled across without incident, and was glad the others were still there to help me get my boat up the stairs to the parking area.

Some lessons from this little Robinson Crusoe adventure:

- 1) Check the weather before you leave (didn’t help in this situation because this storm wasn’t forecast).
- 2) Be prepared with a VHF radio for weather alerts, a cell phone for radar, a painter on your boat to secure it, and rain gear (even on 90-degree summer days, rain drafted down in thunderstorms from the upper atmosphere can be very cold and will chill you in minutes).
- 3) It is better to be on the beach watching the storm, than be in the storm watching the beach, even somebody’s private beach. In the event, I never saw a soul on the island.
- 4) Never stay home because of a “chance of thunderstorms.” If you do, you’ll never paddle on the Chesapeake in summer!