

Chesapeake Paddler



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Chincoteague Island Columbus Day Weekend 2011 Peer Paddle

Lodging for the second annual Chincoteague Island Columbus Day weekend peer paddle was a quirky Victorian house that suited the personalities of 10 paddlers, provided excellent sunsets, and access to Chincoteague Bay. This group originated from those who had attended the Prime Hook trip in June 2010, and did a similar trip last October. This year those who could attend included Mike Cohn, Linda Witkin, Marilyn Fisher, Suzanne Farace, Jim Allen, Jennifer Bine, Maryrose Whelley, Aht Viravaidya, Nora Connell, and Steven Jahncke. Marilyn planned and organized gourmet and truly excellent communal meals that also served to bring the group together as everyone participated in the cooking and cleanup. The paddle plans were done by group consensus. Whoever was in charge of the weather came through in grand style—sunny skies, warm (but not too warm) temperatures, and calm seas—perfect weather for the weekend.



Quirky Victorians, photo by Jim Allen

The group arrived Friday afternoon. Those who arrived early had time to explore the shops and galleries on Main Street or visit Chincoteague Wildlife Refuge to see the shore birds and elusive fox squirrels. One member of the group visited the Chincoteague Museum (formerly the Oyster Museum) to see an exhibit about Misty of literary fame. She was shocked to discover both Misty and Stormy there in the flesh (so to speak), looking somewhat the worse for wear. That evening Marilyn whipped up some cornbread to go with the Turkey Chili she brought from home and a delicious ginger cake for dessert.

The highlight of last year's trip was paddling with a pod of feeding dolphins near the south end of Assateague Island, so that seemed like a good place to start Saturday morning. As part of National Wildlife Refuge Week, entry to the Assateague Wildlife Refuge was free on Saturday. Normally entry is \$8 per day or \$15 for a one-week pass. Launching from the Tom's Cove side of the beach was the obvious choice. The beach had been rearranged by the 2011 storms, but the kayak launch site was unchanged.

We started off on a clockwise route around the cove. Light winds from the northeast created ideal conditions. We headed out into the Atlantic Ocean, and up the outer shore of Assateague Island. We decided to continue until we got near some fairly large breaking waves, and then turn around. We saw our first dolphins as we paddled back into Chincoteague Inlet. Our lunch break was on the cove side of Fishing Point. After lunch we collected seashells by the seaside.



Chincoteague Paddlers photo by Jim Allen

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Adorned with whelk shells, the flotilla paddled across the mouth of the cove toward the refuge. Because it was low tide, we could see birds walking around some sand bars, but other sand bars were covered by water. In order to maintain our course, a few paddlers hopped out of their boats and towed them along until we hit deeper water. On reaching the refuge, an eagle was there to greet us. We continued around to the west side of Assateague where we saw descendants of Misty and Stormy munching grass to the backbeat from the band at the Chincoteague Oyster Festival (another Columbus Day weekend tradition). We then paddled along the refuge shore, past the dilapidated oysterman's cabin, and returned to the ocean beach for a 10-mile trip total.

After returning to the house, Marilyn and Mike went fishing and came back with enough flounder for dinner. The best part was that a license was not required to fish at Gary Howard's seafood shop.

After a couple of happy hours hanging around the kitchen watching another spectacular sunset, the group feasted on flounder stuffed with spinach and mushrooms with a cream sauce made by Mike and Linda and an unbelievably delicious, fresh baked apple walnut cake made by Marilyn for dessert. After dinner we retired to the parlor to watch one of Maligiaq and Dubsides's Greenland rolling videos. As interesting as those two can be, putting anything on the screen after a day of paddling and an evening of good food and drink is going to put paddlers to sleep early.

Sunday we decided to start close to home. We had the option of a nearby city park or the bank behind the house. The park had a standard street sign on a pole that read KAYAK marking the preferred launch site (just in case we could not figure that out for ourselves). The banks at both the house and park were a little muddy, but once in the water the bottom was sandy and firm. To cut down on the launch site traffic, we used both sites, and were paddling counter-clockwise from the mainland side of the island at 9:30 a.m. Our objective was to prove that Chincoteague is actually an island.

Dolphins were sighted as we came around the southern end of the island. We stopped to watch their aerial show as they chased fish around the channel. We stopped for lunch at Memorial Park (about one third of the way around but the only good place to stop.) As we launched from the park to continue our journey, a fisherman on the pier wished us well and said "see you on the way back." He was surprised to learn we were not coming back. The next few miles were against an outgoing tide. By the time we got to the South end of Morris Island (about two-thirds way around) it was slack low tide. As we paddled in the channel, a large flight of migrating cormorants passed overhead in a formation stretched across the sky. When we rounded Morris Island, we could see what we thought was the tip of Chincoteague; however, there was another three miles of grass wetlands to paddle around before we could round the tip of the island and head back. We arrived back at our starting point about 4:30 p.m. after paddling somewhere between 18 and 20 miles.

It was not long before we were all back the kitchen, nibbling garlic shrimp prepared by Marilyn and waiting for her Chicken Marbella to cook. Marilyn was prepared to bake another cake, but the landlord, who was impressed by our paddling feat, brought us chocolate cake and snicker doodles. In the end we decided to walk to the Island Creamery for homemade ice cream instead. No lack of calories this weekend!

Monday seemed to come much too fast. Some of us had to return to reality and headed for home. Seven paddlers, however, stopped off at Middle Hooper's Island on the way home, and launched with permission from the bayside private property of a friend of Maryrose. We paddled out to and did a figure eight around Barren Island (it has a middle cut-through). For the first time that weekend, we encountered some wind and bumpy water. Barren Island is home to many, many birds, including the brown pelican. Six of the seven then stopped at the Jetty in Grasonville for dinner on the way home.

The group was unanimous that the weekend was a great experience; weather terrific; animal life cooperative; house funky and comfortable; food amazing; and the company a pure pleasure.



Low Flyer (Nora's pretty fast, too) photo by Jim Allen