

Creepy White House

By Catriona Miller

This is my first year following the spring CPA progression of beginners through SK101 and SK102. It's also my first year assisting with both. I see all the hopeful kayakers, their infectious enthusiasm, and contrast this with when I was first learning to kayak and how many lessons I learned the hard way. I'm happy that I can help a few people avoid learning things the hard way. This story is about a touring trip my partner Reggie and I took early in our kayaking careers.

After some initial local trips of increasing difficulty, it was time for our first touring trip. Some colleagues of mine were planning on camping on Chincoteague one weekend in July. In exchange for borrowing a lot of my camping gear, they agreed to drop us and the kayaks off at the south end of Assateague and pick us up in my car at the north end of Assateague the next day, while we paddled and camped that 22 mile stretch. We studied Google maps, the Forum trip reports, and showed up bright and early in Tom's Cove to get our backcountry permit for Pope's Bay. We diligently memorized the pictures of Pope's Bay campground, took the little paper map that the ranger gave us, and ended up staying on the beach most of the day playing with kites with my colleagues. Then my friends wanted to try out our kayaks. It was probably close to 4 pm by the time we had our kayaks packed and loaded for our first touring trip. I had a 15 foot long small Greenland style boat with barely any storage and Reggie had a 17 foot long Prijon Barracuda that fit an entire 2.5 gallon jug of spring water in the back hatch (literally, the ones you buy in the supermarket). My boat would spin on a dime and wasn't all that fast, Reggie's boat took serious work to turn but was very fast. Clearly, we were not well matched on this trip. By the time we set off, the tidal current we'd hoped to catch pulling us north, was now heading in the opposite direction. But it was okay, we only had 10 miles or so to go to reach Pope's Bay, fighting the current in fully loaded kayaks for the first time.

We knew we were running behind, so we basically paddled off shore and minimized sightseeing to save time. I remember passing a house on stilts at some point full of teenagers or college kids and asking them "How far to the stateline?" and them answering that we still had a ways to go. We exchanged looks of concern because it was approaching sunset. Regardless, we kept paddling on thinking, "It's a long island". If we can't get to our campsite by dark, we'll find a small section of beach and just put up the tent there. Those of you who have been to Assateague or been in a salt marsh or mangroves are now snickering. We'd obviously never ever been in a salt marsh before. It had been a warm July day, I had my hair in a bun and we both had been dumping salt water on my head to cool down. When we started seeing the landscape change mostly to salt marsh, we decided to head inland to start exploring the shore a bit to see if we could spot our campground. We studied our little NPS-provided map and judged that we must be past the state line. Yes, we didn't have charts, and we didn't have a GPS. After all, it's Assateague. How can you get lost on an island that runs straight north and south?

Now that we were paddling closer into the marsh, we started getting eaten alive by mosquitoes. Out came our cans of Backcountry DEET-based insect spray, and I initially gingerly sprayed my arms and hands. Two minutes later, I realized that I have to spray my hair, my face, my neck, and every square inch of skin. Ten minutes later, I realized that DEET keeps mosquitoes off for precisely 10 minutes on Assateague and then needs to be reapplied. So we both take a can of bug spray and spray ourselves down every 10 minutes till the next few mosquito bites become insufferable. When it's fully dark, we come to an opening in the salt marsh with an old house and a long dock jutting out from it. Reggie helpfully comments on how islands and houses like that are probably full of rats that will eat through our tent. Then he suggests we camp at the creepy white house. I very calmly and rationally tell him that I'm next to a long narrow beach island and I'm going to be camping on the beach tonight and not at the Creepy White House. His version of this story is that the drama queen started squealing about how she wasn't camping at any creepy white house. This house is basically the very definition of dilapidated.

We decided to explore the opening in the marsh. We got some flashlights out of our hatches, and decided that in the opening, Reggie would follow the left bank, I would follow the right, and we would discuss what we saw after we met up. Amazingly, we saw a lot of salt marsh and grass, but nowhere to land. We headed back out to the Creepy White House. It's now probably about 10 pm, and we still haven't had dinner. I pop out some sample packets of shot blocks I'd gotten in my latest REI order and we split them. This is when I realize that caffeinated shot blocks are a gift from the Gods. I still don't want to camp at the Creepy White House, but as we're discussing it, we start seeing flickering in the distance. We debated whether it was a thunderstorm or maybe fireworks from Ocean City. Of course, we didn't have a VHF radio so we couldn't check the forecast and my cell phone had no signal. We started talking about maybe just heading across the bay and camping on the mainland or on Chincoteague, so we struck out paddling for the opposite shore. After ten minutes or so, Reggie decided that it's really a stupid idea to go to the opposite shore and we should just head back for Assateague and find a beach. So we turned around and started paddling in the dark towards Assateague and magically end right back at the Creepy White House.

Reggie said "Look, we're meant to camp here." I said no, but he wanted to get out to stretch his legs at least. The dock is probably about 3.5 feet off the water. I muttered about how we're going to get up there since I'd never climbed out of the kayak onto



Not the creepy white house, but a similar one we passed around sunset, photo by Catriona

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something like that before. Reggie just pops out and hops up on deck on his one leg (his previously broken leg is still not weight-bearing at this point, but the cast is off). I gingerly tried to find a couple of square inches of the dock that is not covered with bird droppings and one of the cross beams of the dock breaks off as I tried to climb up. We walked around a bit and the only place to put a tent was the bird-splattered dock, but it's not quite wide enough for our tent. Reggie thinks we should maybe just camp, but I really don't want to camp at the creepy white house. We decided to paddle on, dropping back from the docks into our kayaks. We still saw the flickering, but convinced ourselves it was just fireworks.

It was a gorgeous moonlit night, there was a nice sea breeze blowing, and I was caffeinated on shot blocks. We paddle into every opening we saw in the salt marsh, exploring tunnels and looking for our campsite or just some dry land. As we went over shallow areas, our boat bottoms were bombarded by flopping schools of startled sleeping fish. Phosphorescent jelly fish or some creatures glowed in the water. I had fun exploring little inlets through the salt marsh, but they were much harder in Reggie's 17-foot heavily laden kayak. It was actually quite pleasant except for the mosquitoes that were still eating us alive. We kept splitting up, one going left and the other right as we entered bays or inlets in the salt marsh. About 3 am, we finally entered what we were fairly certain was Pope's Bay from the size of the channel. We split up: I followed the sound of the seashore for quite a long time, thinking that maybe I'd find a way through or some small cleared area. I saw Reggie flashing his flashlight at me and I flashed mine back and blew my whistle a few times and continued on my way. I didn't find any land and headed back towards Reggie, who was panicked because he hadn't seen my flashlight flashes or heard my whistle blows. We continued to explore the Bay a little bit until we came up to an Oyster house that's probably about 5 feet off the water with a dock around it. Reggie says "That's it, we're camping here."

It's 4 am and this house is not quite so creepy. Getting out of the kayaks onto a dock that's above my head is a pretty trick maneuver. Once we were on the dock, our kayaks and all our camping gear was still in the boats. Reggie hopped down to the kayaks, attached rope to the front and back and we hauled the kayaks up out of the water and over the 3 foot railings of the dock with Reggie hopping around on one leg. Neither of us could find the bug spray at this point, but Reggie grabbed his rain jacket and pants to put on. I looked for mine as Reggie told me there wasn't enough room for them because I packed too much stuff. So he'd taken them out. I'm getting eaten alive by mosquitoes and trying to go to the bathroom. I could see hundreds of mosquitoes swarming in the path of my flashlight. Needless to say, I was not a happy camper. We got the tent up, crawled in as fast as possible and spent the next 5 minutes smashing every mosquito that had managed to follow us in. We spent the rest of the night listening to the mosquitoes buzzing at the screen mesh of our tent. We didn't take the food in from the kayaks and I couldn't manage to get my hair unknotted. We just tried to catch what sleep we could.

When the sun began to heat the tent in the morning, we woke up, commenced being eaten alive by mosquitoes again, and broke camp. We lowered the kayaks back into the water and dropped down into them. We decided to give up on finding Pope's Bay campground,

but to find Green Run (further north on Assateague) and maybe take a nap or just cook some food since we'd gone without dinner the night before and just eaten a granola bar for breakfast. We never quite managed to find Green Run, it's not very well signed when you're coming from the south end of the island. By this point, neither of us wanted to see a salt marsh ever again in our lives (I have a special hatred of salt marshes still to this day), so we just paddled out in the middle of the bay and let the wind blow the mosquitoes away. This was my first experience with crossing the Sinepuxent Bay side of Assateague, and it's always just been an absolute slog against the wind coming up to the northern end of Assateague. This first time wasn't an exception.

When we got up to the take out spot, I walked over to the ocean side of the island to find my car and friends. Reggie was going to make us lunch, but was sleeping on a picnic table when I came back with the car. His camp stove pump had broken and lunch wasn't possible. We loaded up the car as fast as possible, trying to minimize how many more mosquito bites we got. When we got home, the only part of my body that wasn't covered in mosquito bites after that trip was what was underneath my PFD. I never did manage to get my hair out of the bun I'd had it in and ended up having to cut off about 2 feet of hair. We came back to Assateague that fall with GPS's, maps, and all sorts of things that would have been handy the first time around. We still have never managed to find the Pope's Bay campsite.

You can see pictures of Cat's disastrous first touring trip at <https://picasaweb.google.com/eyeofcatriona/Assateague>

