

# Chesapeake Paddler



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## The Potomac Dash – Fast and light by kayak

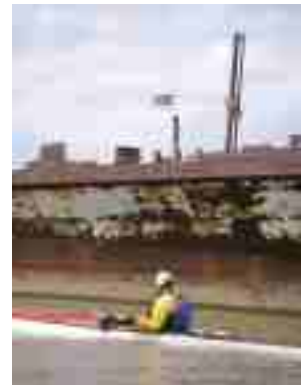
by Cyndi Janetzko



Cyndi in her Nemo photo by Brian Blankinship

Lately, I've been fixated on speed. It started off as an interest in efficiency and progressed into racing. But there is more to life than racing—really. I have always loved tripping – packing up my boat and taking off for two days, two weeks or two months (someday). It was only a matter of time until my love for speed merged with my love for tripping and resulted in a fast and light camping trip.

Last year I purchased a KayakPro Nemo – a racing specific sea kayak with the features of a touring boat. Since I didn't know how it would handle loaded, I decided to stick close to home for this experiment. The Potomac seemed the obvious choice. A good option seemed to be to paddle from Mason Neck to Camp Merrick one day and then continue down to Colonial Beach the next – a total distance of about 45 miles.



Brian Blankinship at Mal-lows Bay photo by Cyndi Janetzko

Trip in mind, I needed a paddling partner as this trip was not Dave's idea of fun. Fortunately Brian Blankinship also has a need for speed and was game. We decided to do the Potomac Dash, as I had dubbed it, on Easter weekend. The tides were ideal for pushing us down river, the moon was full, and Dave was available to pick us up on Sunday. Everything lined up nicely.

Fast and light got its start in backpacking in the 1990s as people discovered they could hike farther, faster, and with less fatigue when carrying less weight. For me, the appeal of going light is about having less to schlep, getting the most use out of each item, and keeping the loads light enough to get top performance out of your boat.

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## Another Successful Greenland Paddle Workshop

by Gina Cicotello with contributions from Len Thunberg



Nelson displays a sanding block as he explains the paddle carving process  
Photo by Gina Cicotello

The Greenland Paddle Workshop held in Carderock, Maryland on Saturday, March 22nd was successful and a lot of fun for the third year in a row. Nelson Labbé and I cooperate to throw this annual wood carving party; he contributes the hard labor of acquiring and cutting lumber to people's specifications, I just make sure everyone shows up. This year we had 29 participants, most of whom were starting with fresh new cedar blanks, and some who brought unfinished paddles from last year or blanks they had gotten on their own.

One of my favorite parts of this event is meeting the characters that it draws out of the woodwork (pun most definitely intended). This year we had one participant from West Virginia, and two showed up from as far away as Durham, North Carolina. Most were people I've never paddled with nor met at other CPA events. And this year just like all years so far, I've regretfully had to turn people away once we reached the limit of how many blanks Nelson can distribute. It's obvious that more and more people want Greenland pad-

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On this trip, the biggest weight savings would be the boat itself. I usually trip in my 65-pound poly Wilderness Systems Tempest. The Nemo weighs just shy of 40. Next on the chopping block was the kitchen. When Dave and I kayak camp we take lots of food, at least two stoves, a three pot set, the coffee percolator, a spice kit, a table, and complete set of dishes. For this trip I scaled back to my Gigapower stove, two small fuel bottles, a coffee mug, and one small pot into which nest the stove and fuel bottles. My entire kitchen fit in two small dry bags. The tent also got downsized from my lightweight but large 3-man tent to a MSR Hubba – a one person tent that weighs under 3 pounds. The two luxury items I brought along despite their size and weight – my crazy creek chair and a three serving box of wine!

Rain was forecast for Saturday but the bigger issue was that Saturday night was going to be cold – down to the low 30s. I ditched the lightweight summer bag I had packed in favor of my down winter bag and tossed in the second sleeping pad. Extra weight but I'd rather have the weight and be warm than freeze!

Kingsley Chan offered to drop us off at Mason Neck. High tide would be at 8:19 am and we wanted to make the most of the outgoing tide. We arrived at 8:00 as the park opened and began the quick task of packing the boats. Both the Nemo and Brian's Epic 18X have a lot of volume. With 18 feet of waterline and no skeg box to contend with, the challenge became how to keep the gear from sliding around inside the boats' vacant spaces.

By 8:45 am we were loaded and ready to go. A nice breeze was blowing from the north as we took off into Belmont Bay. Almost immediately we spotted our first eagle. Brian declared it a good omen. Turning south around Sandy Point, the waves grew into nice, consistent, two foot rollers – good surfing waves. The boats accelerated quickly, even with their loads. We would sprint, catch a wave and then with just one or two more stokes catch the next few waves as the boats glided along. The GPS routinely read 7, 8 or even 9 MPH. It almost seemed like cheating.

But sprinting to catch those waves still takes effort and with over 11 miles behind us we decided it was time for a break. We landed on the beach north of Mallows Bay for lunch. This was one of the biggest differences between how we paddled on this trip and others I have been on. Brian and I would move steadily for 10 + miles without ever stopping for a break. With camelback hydration systems we wouldn't even stop to get a drink.

Back in the boats I played tour guide as Brian had never been to Mallows Bay. It was mid-tide and many of the old hulls were just uncovering. We paddled carefully among the iron-spiked ruins ever aware that we were paddling boats with very, very light lay-ups.

Once through the wrecks, we eased into our cruising pace of about 5.8 MPH as the waves settled down. We were graced with an enormous number of bald eagles, both mature and immature, on this section. Their comeback gives me hope that maybe we can address some of our other environmental problems. The Potomac makes a slight bend to the southeast near Angel Towers and our tail/beam wind turned into a headwind. We also lost our tide assist and our pace dropped off, but we knew we were near camp and didn't mind the effort. We found the canoe launch at Lions Camp Merrick on Maryland Point as expected and pulled up the boats. It was 2:15 pm. We paddled 22 miles with a moving time of 4 hours and 5 minutes and two breaks.

Camp Merrick is awesome. I had written to the camp administrator about tent camping on the property prior to the trip. She was wonderful and for \$14 we had beach front property. We pitched the tents, hung the wet gear on the clothes line and went exploring. Mudas Marsh runs right behind the camp and there are several trails to overlooks on the marsh. One took us to a large brackish area with one of the biggest beaver lodges I have ever seen. We decided that it would be a great place to return to at dusk to see what kind of critters emerged.

Like frost on a pumpkin *Photo by Cyndi*



The ultralight theme continued into dinner which involved little more than boiling water. Brian boiled up a pre-made Indian meal which is always a camp favorite and I brought a "meal in bag" from Backpacker's Pantry. It was the Katmandu Curry and, believe it or not, when rehydrated was very, very yummy. Eating it straight from the bag meant no plate or bowl needed. Carrots and snap peas for appetizers, wine to drink and chocolate for dessert rounded out the meal.

Following an after dinner walk back to the marsh, we crawled, full and tired, into our tents. I burrowed down into my sleeping bag. The rain had passed, the sky was totally clear and the full moon shone overhead. It was going to be a cold night.

I awoke at 6 am and poked my head out of the sleeping bag. It was COLD! I threw on some layers and headed out. The boats were caked in an icy frost, my paddling shoes frozen solid, and the tent fly sparkled with ice crystals. Coffee was definitely the first order of business. I grabbed my stove and boiled up the water. Instead of my trusty percolator I brought instant coffee – the ultimate sacrifice. But despite my fears the coffee tasted fine once I added the little French vanilla creamer I picked up on a last minute stop at 7-11.

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intuitive. And not a little people boat. I need a boat that will fit me. I'll keep looking.

**Do you have a most memorable trip with the CPA which you can describe?** I like Marshall's Eastern Neck Trips. They have a nice mix of people. You can get varying conditions. Sometimes it's calm and another time it can be choppy. You can get a crew that is fast one time and then a crew that takes it's time on another trip and diddles around a little. I like these trips because they change so much. You never know what to expect every time and that makes it the most interesting.

**What season(s) do you most enjoy paddling in?** I like the summer because of the camaraderie and the friends and the more opportunity to get out there and play around, but I really like the winter too just because I have more of the river to myself. I like to paddle at night and see how pretty it is down stream; to experience things that you cannot during the day. I think I like all season for different reasons.

**I have not seen you do any type of kayak camping or destination trips, but I know you did other things like that in the past. Does that idea interest you?** Yep. I already have it in mind (and even on my calendar) to go on a trip to the 10,000 Islands. I have done backpacking and camping a lot in my past and am anxious to apply this to kayaking. It would be a way of merging two things that I have enjoyed. It seems like a good time to try this out.

**If you had a paddle philosophy, how would you describe it?** When I think I've learned it all, I am probably in trouble!

**Is there anything else about paddling you would like to add?** Well, I must say that I have gotten the most out of my membership with the CPA. There is something for everyone on in the club, whether you want to dink around with paddling or fully immerse yourself into it, head first. There are lots of opportunities.

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**Fast and light (continued)** Our picnic table provided a great view on the coming day. Two ospreys sat on the nest to our right and an eagle circled to our left. I sipped my coffee while watching the sky. Fortunately Brian was looking at the water. Something was swimming toward us very quickly. I was hoping for an otter. Sure enough, an otter he was. He kept straight toward us then proceeded to climb out of the water and up the trail. About 100 feet to our left he stopped, looked at us, and headed back to the river. It was definitely a sign of another great day ahead!

We finished breakfast and moved the drysuits, shoes, and boats to the sunshine to defrost as we packed up camp. We hit the water at 9:00 am. The river makes a hard turn to the east at Camp Merrick and again we found ourselves paddling into a headwind as we worked out the kinks in our muscles from the day before. The river was totally empty, it being Easter Sunday. We set our sights on Mathias Point. We pushed hard for those miles and I routinely saw the GPS hover at 6 or 6.2 MPH. Clearly timing the tides was helping us. Brian would pull away from time to time as he settled into a 6.5 MPH pace and then ease off while I caught up. At Mathias Point we had our first floating snack break – 12 miles into our day.

We stopped to stretch our legs on Persimmon point north of the Route 301 Bridge. The crescent shaped beach was just as I remembered it from my last visit and it was good to see at least some land hasn't been taken over by houses. I called Dave to let him know we had about 8 miles to Colonial Beach. It was noon and I told him we'd be there in about two hours.

Launching back into the river I felt a bit tired and told Brian that I was going to drop the pace. No more 6.2 MPH for me. But just as we got under the bridge we hit a sweet, sweet current. No we didn't hold 6.2. Instead we were holding 7 and then 7.2. I still don't know what caused it for according to the tide tables, we should have been fighting an incoming tide but we just sailed along. 7 MPH in loaded boats on mile 15 of the day and 37 of the trip – crazy! We stayed out in the center of the river riding the current. A large tug boat came up behind us and we surfed his wake into Colonial Beach hitting speeds of 9 MPH on the waves. Just as we came around a large fishing pier I saw Dave pull into the parking lot. We turned our boats into the beach as he came down to take our picture. It couldn't have worked out more perfectly.

In all, I'd say that the fast and light trip was a success. You can definitely trip in these racing sea kayaks as long as you take a little extra care. Carbon/Kevlar isn't poly and shouldn't be treated as such. Packing them is a cinch given their volume. Their quick acceleration helps you take advantage of waves that you couldn't surf in a slower kayak. A rudder is a necessity. Correcting a loaded 18 foot boat that is all waterline even with a rudder takes significant effort. Finally, the boats maintained their ability to cruise which really allows you to log the miles. I don't think I've ever seen 5 MPH on the GPS when I'm in my Tempest loaded let alone average 5.5 for 45 miles.

Could we have cut more weight? Yes, if we did it as a summer trip. Looks like we'll have to plan another Potomac Dash soon.



Brian and Cyndi with all they took Photo by Dave Biss