



Paddling, Birding, and Nature Watching on Maryland's Pocomoke River

By Paul Fofonoff

The Pocomoke River is one of Maryland's natural treasures. It starts in Delaware and runs for 73 miles to its mouth on the border of Maryland and Virginia, on the Eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay. The lower 30 miles of the river is an arm of Chesapeake Bay with a tidal range of about 3 feet, and most of that length is freshwater, bordered with a swamp of hardwoods and Bald Cypress trees. It's North America's northernmost Southern river, where you paddle among majestic cypresses rising from murky brown water, as big turtles slide in with a splash, herons and egrets hunt along the shore, and Bald Eagles circle overhead. A 1939 survey by two botanists (G. F. Beaven and H. J. Oosting), found about 270 species of plants, and noted that the flora resembled that of southern swamps much more than that of northern bogs. True, it is missing Spanish moss and alligators, but it's nonetheless an exotic experience for those of us who live along the upper Bay and the Potomac.

Paddler birding on the Pocomoke River Photo by Paul Fofonoff

In late April, I and my friend Joy, joined a group from the Anne Arundel Bird Club (part of the Maryland Ornithological Society), for a paddling and birding trip on the river. It was Joy's first time on the Pocomoke. She's a seakayaker and CPA member too, but she keeps her boat in a boathouse on the Potomac, and it was easier for both of us to rent a double recreational kayak than for her to bring her own boat. We met at 7 AM and car-pooled from near the Bay Bridge to the Pocomoke Canoe Company in Snow Hill. Our leader, Larry Zoller, is an experienced birder, kayaker, and science teacher, and our group was mixture of people with widely varying degrees of bird and paddling knowledge. So our pace was relaxed, with lots of time for looking and learning, an ideal introduction to the Pocomoke.

We saw herons and egrets, Laughing Gulls (with black heads and high-pitched cries), many Bald Eagles (mostly all-brown young birds), many Belted kingfishers with their rattling calls, and heard many songbirds. One of the most numerous songs, 'Chee chee chee...', belonged to the Prothonotary Warbler, a spectacular bird that prefers Southern Swamps. Larry promised us that we'd all see a Prothonotary. Now and again we saw a flash of golden-orange among the leaves. In addition to learning birds, Joy was learning turtles—at least how to tell the difference between the Painted and Red-Bellied Turtles, before they dropped into the water. (The red bellied is larger, with a less-steeply domed shell, and much more red on its bottom shell.) And now and again we pulled into shore to investigate blooming shrubs, Black Haw, Shadbush, and Pink Azalea. The hammocks among the cypresses were fascinating themselves, patches of moss, grass, and sedges, covered with blooming violets, and surrounded by cypress knees (woody knobs rising from the long horizontal roots that keep the trees upright in the mud- the knees help the roots breath) poking out of the water.

We pulled onto a patch of drier, less swampy shoreline for lunch, and as it turned out, some of our best bird sightings. Larry played some bird-songs from his I-Pod, which brought Prothonotaries, Great Crested Flycatchers, and Yellow-Throated Vireos. One Prothonotary posed for pictures close to us, and a ruby-throated hummingbird buzzed through our group. When we returned to the Pocomoke Canoe Company, we went through the birder's ritual of counting up the total number of birds seen on the trip—it came to 48 species. We thanked Larry and the other expert leaders for the knowledge they imparted, and everyone for their good company.

The Pocomoke, with its many miles of flatwater, and many tributaries and bayous, and two nice campgrounds in Pocomoke State Park, offers lots of exploration and long-distance paddles. However, for a first visit, we can recommend a relaxed springtime trip with naturalists, birders, botanists, etc., or at least slowing down to look, listen, pull out the guidebooks, binoculars, and cameras, and enjoy the natural riches of this beautiful river.

[Editor's Note: You too can enjoy the Pocomoke, and a spectacular tributary, Nassawango Creek, almost entirely protected by The Nature Conservancy, on a car camper scheduled for June 19-21.

For more details.]

Some resources on the Web for naturalist paddles:

Pocomoke State Park <http://www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/eastern/ppspecialevents.html> and http://www.dnr.state.md.us/centennial/SouthernExposure_History.asp

Maryland Ornithological Society <http://www.mdbirds.org/activities/schedule/schedule.html>



Prothonotary Warbler Photo credit:

<http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/photogallery/birds/Large/SS-PROW.jpg>