

The Chesapeake Paddler



Volume 30 Issue X

Publication of The Chesapeake Paddlers Association, Inc.

Nov/Dec 2020

Paddling Virginia's pristine Barrier Islands



Looking across Cape Charles Inlet from Smith Island at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. The area is part of Virginia's Barrier Islands with miles of deserted Atlantic beaches and inland bays for numerous paddling opportunities.

By Bill Upton

Virginia's Barrier Islands contain a beautiful mix of paddling trips including protected marshes, open water crossings and deserted Atlantic beaches. Using [Kiptopeake State Park](#) as a basecamp there are several trip opportunities if the wind and weather cooperate. For me, it took two visits and dodging the remains of three tropical storms to get in trips to Wreck, Mockhorn and Smith Islands.

On the first visit I managed to get in a trip to Wreck Island. The trip description on the [Virginia Water Trails](#) site is a good guide but make sure you have charts and a GPS, too. Note that the mileage listed, eight miles, is one way. [Wreck Island](#) is closed in the summer but generally open from September 1 to April 14.

The trip starts with a launch from Oyster, VA, about 15

minutes north of Kiptopeake State Park. Oyster has a dedicated kayak launch area with a dock, concrete ramp and a small beach (click [here](#) for photos and maps).

Currents can be strong so timing the trip to ride out the ebb and return on the flood is best. The first three miles through Sand Shoal Channel are protected but things start to open up once past the northern tip of Mockhorn Island with Cobb Bay to the north and a large channel between Mockhorn and Man and Boy marsh to the south.

Past Mockhorn, and the last of three green channel markers, it's hard to distinguish between Wreck Island and Cobb Island in the distance. Wreck Island is more to the south and east. Channel marker #3 listed in the Water Trail description looks like it ended up on the

[See Barrier Islands on page six](#)

[Barrier Islands, from page one](#)

beach of Man and Boy marsh.

Once at Man and Boy marsh, at about six miles, it's a two-mile open water crossing to Wreck Island. This would not be an advisable crossing in heavier winds. Cobb Bay is a large expanse of water to the north and the channel between Wreck Island and Man and Boy marsh opens up to another large body of water, South Bay, to the south.

The landing on the bay side of Wreck Island is smooth sand and few oyster shells. Sand Shoal inlet right off the point was calm but there was a lot of surf about a quarter mile offshore, courtesy of Hurricane Paulette. Around the point there's nothing but deserted Atlantic beach for miles. My only company was a bald eagle resting on the sand.

After just a couple hours of incoming tide, the landscape on the return trip is markedly different. Crossing back from Wreck to Man and Boy marsh, pay close attention to your GPS and chart because it is easy to bear left into a channel between the marsh and Mockhorn Island instead of heading to the main Sand Shoal channel farther north.

Once back in Sand Shoal channel it's easy to retrace your steps to Oyster. If you see white plastic pipes stay offshore because they mark shallow oyster reefs (somebody is going to have some of my boat's gel-coat in their half-shells).

The remains of Tropical Storm Sally moved in the next



Military towers from WWII on Mockhorn Island make a good destination from the launch at Wise Point.

day so no more trips were possible on that visit. Besides a large rainstorm, high winds made Magothy Bay look like a washing machine. A couple weeks later I was able to return to get in two paddles to Mockhorn Island and Smith Island. This second visit, I had a rare light and variable wind both days.

Both trips start at the launch at Wise Point, just a few miles south of the park and part of the [Eastern Shore of Virginia Wildlife Refuge](#) near the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel. You can launch for free at a small area for kayaks (it's muddy) or pay \$10 to use the boat launch area.

Going north through the channel from the launch, after 1.5 miles you reach Skidmore Island. From Skidmore, it's a 1.25-mile crossing to the tip of Mockhorn Island. From there, you can follow the shore another four miles to two WWII towers.

Along the way, there's a stop at the remains of a former



The decommissioned Cape Charles Lighthouse on Smith Island that is now owned by The Nature Conservancy.

[See Barrier Islands on page seven](#)

[Barrier Islands](#) from page six



Pristine Atlantic beaches await on Wreck Island and other Barrier Islands on Virginia's Eastern Shore.

hunting lodge. You can land on the beach near it at max high tide, but at any other time it's a maze of rocks and concrete. Also, just before the towers there is a gut that gets you into the interior of Mockhorn Island for exploration.

The next day, the wind was still calm so it was off to Smith Island. From Wise Point it's about 1.75 miles across Magothy Bay to the decommissioned Cape Charles lighthouse.

At high tide, you can land on a small beach near the light but the island's owners, the Nature Conservancy, ask that you stay on the shoreline to protect nesting birds on the island (the largest group of Oystercatchers I've ever seen were in the shallows just offshore).

Just north of a pair of old pilings near the lighthouse there's a small gut that winds back into the marsh near the lighthouse and the old WWII towers. From the lighthouse it's about 1.25 miles south to Cape Charles at the southern tip of Smith island.

Landing on the bay side of the point it was a short walk to another stretch of deserted Atlantic beach. There were small spilling waves onto a long flat beach, perfect for surfing and surf landings.

On the return trip I followed the shore back up to the lighthouse and then across to Skidmore Island. Magothy Bay is surprisingly shallow, just a couple hours after high tide I was paddling in about 10 inches of water.

All in all, the Barrier Islands are a magical place to paddle but subject to frequent strong winds and large stretches of open water. If you are there in the fall and the winds are bad, bring your binoculars and stop by the [Hawk Watch](#) at the park to check out migrating raptors.

The watch is staffed from Sept 1 to Nov 30 and there's plenty of room for social distancing. Almost 200 kestrels, a large kettle of broad wings and numerous other birds went by on the day I was there.

Photos: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/ahEV9gSdAQZ7XoWt8>



If the winds are high, watching migrating raptors is an option during the fall at Kiptopeake State Park.