

Assateague Island in the Wind

by Greg Welker

Four hardy souls braved the winds to camp at Assateague Island the weekend of November 15. Although there was a small craft advisory posted, the park rangers gave us a back-country permit after admonishing us that they wouldn't come get us if the weather socked us in the campsites. Predicted winds for Saturday were 20 NW, increasing to 25 NW Sunday. Observable seas in the bay behind Assateague were 1 ft with some whitecaps. We exercised caution and selected the nearest camp site--Tingles--as our destination.

Neysa Narena, Brian Blankinship, Lee Gardner (newly arrived in this area from San Francisco) and I loaded the weekend's gear into our boats and were on the water by 10 a.m. After paddling out of the protected launch area we paused to assess the situation on the open water and make sure that everyone was comfortable with the conditions at hand. A brief push into the wind gave us enough of an upwind position to turn and head for the narrows and our campsite. Once at the site we set up camp (there are absolutely no wind blocks for a westerly wind except tree trunks) and headed back onto the water for a paddle farther south.

With the wind picking up on the open water, we passed through the narrows and explored some of the more protected bays to the south. With all the westerly wind and near high tide there was more than the usual amount of water depth, and we decided to seek the elusive inside passage from Pine Tree back to Tingles. Brian led the party into the backwater grasses, while Lee tried Telemark poling with the separated halves of his fiberglass paddle until we found deeper water.

In the lead, Brian gave a yell and darted out of sight into some bushes, to return with several dozen yellow and purple helium balloons. After attaching them to his rear deck, the parade continued: over water, over small dirt road, back into water, over telephone pole (ouch!) and finally back into the bay just south of the campsite. Back at camp we changed from paddling gear to hiking boots and took a several mile hike across the island and down the beach. Note for future trips: remember to mark where you come out onto the beach in order to find your way home later.

That evening was filled with pleasant conversation around the campfire as the wind died down and the sky clouded over....

I awoke that night to wind and sleet buffeting the tent. Visions of our paddling gear blowing away got me out of the tent and collecting items. I found Brian returning from moving the boats farther from the water's edge. We quickly got back in our tents and awaited the morning.

Sunday morning brought WNW winds at 25-30. Waves were only 1 foot, but whitecaps were omnipresent. We discussed our options and launched after making bailout plans. Neysa, and I struggled into the wind toward Great Egg Island. We watched Brian disappear toward the horizon, only to later learn that he had been unable to get his Glider to turn upwind to return to us. In fact, he portaged a

peninsula in order to get back to Ferry Landing. Making the lee side of Great Egg, the three of us pointed toward Ferry Landing and let the wind blow us downwind and home.

This was an interesting trip, as it allowed us to see the effects of high winds on loaded boats of varying designs. I think each of us learned something on Sunday.

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