

Chesapeake Paddler



Publication of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association, Inc. Volume 21, Issue 1

February 2011

An Assateague Island Kayak Camping Trip

By Paul Fofonoff



Joy of Launching at Chincoteague photo by Paul Fofonoff

My friend Joy and I have long been fascinated by Assateague Island, and by the possibilities of kayak camping—exploring new places with the beauty of water, not to mention less strain on one's back and knees than backpacking. She persuaded me to attempt a trip from the town of Chincoteague, VA, to Pope's Bay, the nearest kayak campsite in the National Seashore, north of the MD-VA border, on the weekend before Thanksgiving. We stopped at the Visitors Center in Tom's Cove to get our permits. We took our boats to Memorial Park, Chincoteague, donned our wetsuits, and then loaded and launched.

We slid our boats into the cool water and paddled out of narrow Oyster Bay into the wider waters of Chincoteague Bay. We stopped for lunch near abandoned houses on Ragged Point, but we saw apparently well-maintained cabins on outlying islands.

As we proceeded, we faced the challenges of navigation along a low-lying marshy island with no definite landmarks, and lots of blind inlets. We were hoping to see a chain of buoys across the Bay, near the channel leading to Popes Bay. Possi-

bly, we didn't go far enough to see them, perhaps they were removed for the winter. We had an argument (still unsettled) as to whether it was better to stick to the open bay, and look for signs (reportedly few and scattered), pointing to the campsite, located far up an inlet) or to explore the inlets. The signs are set up for people paddling from the north, while we were coming from the south, so it's not surprising that we didn't see any. We explored several inlets, only to find them blind or too shallow. Eventually, as the sun neared the horizon, we pulled up to an abandoned house, and unloaded our gear. We were hoping for a lawn, but dense brush surrounded the house, and we wound up camping on a patch of saltgrass above the high-tide line. I based that on knowing that the

surrounding bushes and trees (Myrica gale, southern Wax-Myrtle, oaks and Loblolly Pines) don't tolerate regular flooding by seawater. Nonetheless, we moved our boats to the highest ground that we could find. The night was cold, and the ground was damp, and we huddled deep in our sleeping bags, and wore all our warm clothes at breakfast. Our campsite looks messy, because we were hanging our damp clothes, but we packed everything before we left.



Our commando campsite photo by Paul Fofonoff



Paul on Assateague photo by Joy

When we first got out of our boats, we wondered where all the horse-poop had come from and then remembered where we were. As we launched, two ponies came out to watch. Our paddle back to Chincoteague was surprisingly fast, but

(Continued on page 4)

Assateague Kayak Camper (Continued from page 1)

What ARE those folks doing?
photo by Paul Fofonoff

this time, we knew the way. We started around 8:30 and reached the launch site and our cars around noon. On the way back, we noticed a variety of birds, including Oystercatchers, Black-bellied Plovers (in their all-gray winter plumage), and large flocks of Brant, a small seagrass-eating goose. We unloaded the boats and loaded them onto the cars, and then enjoyed a lunch at a local café. This was a wonderful adventure, but also a learning experience. We probably won't attempt a trip like this again so late in the year—the water was a little cold for dealing with capsizing, and prolonged swimming or wading and the short days limited our exploration. GPS would help, but both of us are low-tech, and haven't adopted the gadgets yet. We'll try to avoid another unofficial campsite- we want a legal site with dry ground, picnic tables, and toilets. But we're thinking of another kayak-camping trip at Assateague in spring before the mosquitoes get started.

Editor's Note: Check out the backcountry regulations for Assateague National Seashore before you go online at <http://www.nps.gov/asis/planyourvisit/backcountry-camping.htm> Backcountry camping without a permit is prohibited. A \$5 fee per backcountry permit and a \$15 7-day entrance fee per vehicle is required. Fees are paid and permits may be obtained in either district of Assateague Island National Seashore: at the Ranger Station in Maryland or the Toms Cove Visitor Center in Virginia. Please note that the Toms Cove Visitor Center is **closed** Tuesdays through Thursdays from December through February. Due to sudden and severe changes in weather, advance reservations are not accepted. Permits are issued on a first-come, first-served basis on the day of departure. A map with the GPS coordinates of each campsite is available at <http://www.nps.gov/asis/planyourvisit/upload/backcountrymap2008.pdf>

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and the calendar at <http://www.cpakayaker.com/index.php?page=calendar>

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