

Belle Isle, Virginia: A Watery World on the Northern Neck

By Ralph Heimlich

In early June, 12 CPA members joined me for a delightful weekend of kayaking and sightseeing on Virginia's Northern Neck. We base-camped at Belle Isle State Park, one of the newest parks in the Virginia system (opened in the early 1990s) that has a new camping facility with modern bathhouses only a few years old. The park is actually on a peninsula surrounded by Tidewater coastal marshes near Morattico on the northern shore of the Rappahannock River. The park and Georgian style mansion were operated in the 19th century as a plantation. The property was acquired in 1692 by John Bertrand, and the Belle Isle mansion was built around 1760 by Raleigh Downman and restored in the 1940s. We had unusually good weather all weekend for our trip. Temperatures were in the 80's with fair skies and gentle winds all weekend long.

As paddlers began to arrive around noon on Friday, we set up camp and then repaired to Belle Isle's canoe launch on the western end of the peninsula, overlooking Mulberry Creek. My wife Beth and I launched our tandem sit-on-top, and we were quickly followed by Dick Rock, Jesse Aronson, Susan Green, Michael Cohn and Linda Witkin, Sue and Rich Stevens, Rosemary Wallace, Jim Allen, Steven Jahncke, and Wayne Lipscomb. We paddled a surprisingly long way up the creek, after we found the correct channel, and then reversed course and paddled along the creek past Moraticco, out onto the Rappahannock as far as Curletts Point and Lancaster Creek before returning to the launch. For those interested, the state park has recently established a paddle-in campsite on Brewers Point, at the extreme western end of the peninsula, that can be used for kayak camping.

Dinner Friday evening was up to individuals, but there was a great deal of visiting back and forth between campsites in the small campground. On Saturday, we traveled out of the park to paddle around Fleets Island and Windmill Point. Located at the northern mouth of the Rappahannock, the paddle around Fleets Island is one of my favorite in fair weather because of the vistas out on the open Bay, the long sandy beaches, and lovely, clean, clear water. We launched from the public beach access at the end of Windmill Point Road (VA 695) and turned east toward the open Bay. We rounded Windmill Point and paddled north along the beaches up into Fleets Bay. Conditions were fine, with only a gentle breeze and soft waves lapping on the sand. Rounding into Little Bay, we came on a host of sailboats anchored for the weekend and landed for lunch on a sheltered beach just inside Oyster Creek. Part of the group, led by Rich and Sue Stevens, wanted to complete the circumnavigation by ascending Oyster Creek and wending through the inland passages of Fleets Island, passing under the road and exiting through Little Oyster Creek to finish at our original launch. The rest of us retraced our paddle back along the outer beaches, landing back at the launch.



The canoe launch at Belle Isle State Park

Photograph by Beth Heimlich



The launch on Fleets Island at the end of Windmill Point Road

Photograph by Ralph Heimlich

On Saturday night, we drove to the historic Lancaster Tavern Bed and Breakfast for dinner. In 1790, Henry Hinton was granted permission by the Court at Lancaster to build a tavern, "... 30 yards from the east door of the Court House." The building appears much as it must have so very long ago: a two story house with huge hand hewn timbers visible in the basement as the remnants of an early wine cellar. The tavern's selections of seafood, chops and steaks were excellent, and everyone enjoyed dinner and the summery drive back to camp in the gathering darkness.

Sunday morning, after a leisurely breakfast and packing up, we drove west along the neck to Carters Wharf boat ramp at the end of VA 622. We launched and paddled up the Rappahannock along the impressive Fones Cliffs. These four-mile cliff formations along the eastern side of the Rappahannock River, midway between the Route 301 bridge in Port Royal and the Route 360 bridge in Tappahannock, contain diatomaceous earth and are visible from miles away due to their white color. Diatomaceous earth was formed millions of years ago, when all of this territory was underneath the sea and the cliffs are another part of a large ancient reef that formed off the coast of the then Atlantic

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Coast. Sharks teeth and large sea scallops (the Virginia state fossil) can be found in these cliffs. Other outcroppings of the same formation are at Westmoreland State Park on the Potomac, and the Calvert Cliffs.

The Fones Cliffs formation is recognized as having one of the highest concentrations of bald eagles on the East Coast, and is highlighted in the National Geographic map "Treasured Landscapes of the Chesapeake Bay." Fones Cliffs has its own place in history, too: in 1608, the Rappahannock Indians attacked Captain John Smith as he navigated his shallop below the cliffs. Nobody attacked us as we paddled along below the cliffs, craning our necks to stare up at them. We peeked into Brokenbrough Creek, and up PeeDee Creek, a little farther up river, before returning to the launch. Everyone loaded up the boats and gear and headed for home.

We had a great weekend exploring the water world of Belle Isle and left feeling that we had to return another time to hit all the great paddling locations on this part of the Northern Neck. My thanks to all the participants and to Bill Dodge for pioneering this great Virginia kayak camping location.



Beautiful water and beaches on Fleets Island
 Photograph by Ralph Heimlich

My pictures online at <https://plus.google.com/photos/102459087707170525949/albums/6022725307996208337?banner=pwa>

Jesse Aronson's (with GPS tracks) at

<https://plus.google.com/photos/104764324610301945404/albums/6023463269086881073?authkey=CL773ZrKpv2WGg>

And Rich Steven's of Mulberry Creek:

<https://plus.google.com/photos/100456121536050404533/albums/6023432251508385473>

Fleets Island:

<https://plus.google.com/photos/100456121536050404533/albums/6023437159717039537>

and Peedee Creek:

<https://plus.google.com/photos/100456121536050404533/albums/6023442568251320593>

Pier 7 Pirates Go A-roving!

Starting July 23, 2014, the Pirates will be returning to an old tradition of kayak-roving to new launches within Anne Arundel County to explore creeks and coves along the Chesapeake Bay.

The Pirates will not be gathering to launch on to the South River from the Pier 7 Marina location, which is now under new ownership and policies. They will now require fees of \$10 per vehicle to park and \$10 per kayak to launch.

There are new launches to try out, which are part of the Anne Arundel County Department of Recreation & Parks string of new pocket parks. Check out the locations: <http://www.aacounty.org/RecParks/launch/index.cfm#Sites>. These sites have car-top launches and give basic and decent access to the water – HURRAH!

PLEASE look for more info on the CPA Forum as to where and when we will be launching since we will be moving to new locations each Wednesday to meet and kayak! AND our NEW NAME – how about the "Pirates of Arundell"?

July 23 – The Pirates of Arundell will meet at Galesville Wharf Kayak launch 4847 Riverside Drive, Galesville, MD. We plan to launch around 4:30-5 PM. There are several nearby restaurants to check out after our paddle! Here's the link: http://www.aacounty.org/recparks/parks/community/galesville_wharf.cfm#.U8lk5CxOV1s.

JULY 30 – The Pirates of Arundell will meet after the ribbon cutting at the new Shady Side Park kayak launch, which is located behind the ball field: 1355 West Shady Side Road, Shady Side, MD. We plan to launch around 4:30-5 PM and kayak till dusk: <https://www.google.com/maps/dir/1355+E+West+Shady+Side+Rd,+Shady+Side,+MD+20764/@38.845294,-76.5182558,17z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m8!4m7!1m0!1m5!1m1!1s0x89b78b17b881c40d:0xbb6ff3ecc063bd16!2m2!1d-76.51611!2d38.845294>.

Announcement by Sue Stevens, Pirate Captain