

The Chesapeake Paddler



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Cape Henlopen: a park for all seasons



Bottlenose dolphins are a common sight when kayaking near the point at Cape Henlopen State Park. They arrive in early spring and stay until late fall.

By Bill Upton

Sometimes you hear them first. A “whoosh” of air as they break the surface. Some primordial connection kicks in and spurs a rush of joy and wonder - dolphins are near! As they go by, feeding or just playing, you sit in awe and appreciate how close to the water you are in a sea kayak.

And better yet, it’s right in our backyard at one of Delaware’s best parks, [Cape Henlopen State Park](#). A fellow paddler in my neighborhood first turned me on to kayaking there years ago and it’s been my go-to spot ever since.

You can choose to go out in calm conditions and dolphin watch or experience some of the area’s most challenging

surf conditions on an ebb tide at the point.

And it’s not just for kayaking. There’s a great rails-to-trails [bicycle loop route](#) from the park to Rehoboth. In the fall, you can spend time in the morning helping count migrating raptors at the [Cape Henlopen Hawk Watch](#) and then take your pick to kayak or bike in the afternoon.

The park sits at the mouth of the Delaware Bay and is a former military base. At the north end, a point juts out and separates the bay and the Atlantic Ocean.

Most kayakers start their trip at the park’s fishing pier on the bay side. The best spot to park is in the overflow lot

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The point and lighthouses at the north end of Cape Henlopen State Park mark the mouth of the Delaware Bay, left, and

near the pier. It has been closed because of Covid restrictions, but when open it has a path straight to the beach.

For an easy paddle, the best bet is to go when low tide is mid-day and launch about an hour before low tide. You can ride the last of the ebb out to the red lighthouse and then across to the point. By that time, the currents around the point subside and if conditions allow, you can follow the ocean beach down to the southern part of the park. If it's not too rough, you can surf land, have lunch and then ride the incoming tide back.

Most trips, groups of [bottlenose dolphin](#) are abundant. They arrive in early spring from warmer waters in the south and stay until October and November. There's a large shoal parallel to the shore on the ocean side that seems to funnel fish towards the point.

Often, the dolphins gather there to feed. It's the law to keep a safe distance and not harass them, so usually I just drift and watch them to go by.

A word of warning, currents at Henlopen can be treacherous. Until you get familiar with the area, go with experienced paddlers and avoid the strong currents on the outgoing tide.

Even coming back on the flood can get tricky, so use caution. One time when returning I passed an obviously unprepared group going out to the point during the ebb.

Not long after the Coast Guard arrived for a rescue.

Experienced paddlers can take advantage of the standing waves that form at the point on the outgoing tide. Currents upward of four knots create two-to three-foot waves that you can surf over and over.

Best times are spring and early summer when the point is closed to the public. There's a nice calm eddy near shore that makes a good rest stop when surfing. You can't get to it after August 31 when the point is open and there are lots of fishermen.

You can also take a nice side trip out to the white lighthouse at the far breakwater. It's best to have a VHF radio and monitor if the Cape May-Lewes ferry is leaving. It sometimes goes between the point and the lighthouse. It's not a fun place to be in a kayak when it does.

Junction Breakwater Bike Trail

Kayaking isn't the only opportunity to get out. When the wind is too strong on the water, there's an awesome [15-mile bike trail](#) that makes a loop between the park and the town of Rehoboth.

You can start at the fishing pier in the park, hook up with the [Junction Breakwater rail trail](#) in Lewes, take the trail to Rehoboth and then come back along the shore to the

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south entrance of the park. From there, you pick up the beautiful Gordon's Pond Trail and take the park's bike trail back to the start.

There's only one small section in Rehoboth where you have to ride with busy traffic. Otherwise it's all on a trail or a low-traffic street.

There are several parking lots along the Junction Breakwater Trail where you can park for free. If you bike into the park there is no entrance fee. The out-of-state day use fee is \$10. If you are 62 or older you can get a yearly pass for all Delaware parks for \$35.

When doing a bike-only trip, you can add a side trip to [Bombay Hook Wildlife Refuge](#) about an hour north from the park. They just paved the road through the refuge and if you go during the midweek, there's hardly anyone there. It's a great way to see the refuge and the wildlife moving through. Best time is early spring before mosquito season starts.

Hawk Watch

Lastly, in the fall thousands of raptors pass through the area. There's a vantage point in the park on top of one of the old gun emplacements where a naturalist and volunteers operate the [Cape Henlopen Hawk Watch](#). They count the migrating birds from September 1 through November 30.



In the fall, stop by to help count migrating raptors in the morning and kayak or bike in the afternoon.

The view from the Hawk Watch is across the mouth of the Delaware Bay to Cape May, N.J. so you can daydream about crossing by kayak while scanning for birds.

Camping at the park, especially midweek, used to be a nice option to spend a few days exploring. Since Covid, however, demand for local spots skyrocketed and the park is almost full all the time. I've gotten it down to a long day trip when I go.

No matter how many times I've done this trip, it never gets old and the thrill of seeing a group of dolphins coming your way is as strong as it was the first time I was there. Cape Henlopen is a treasure, we are lucky it's right in our back yard.



The Junction Breakwater trail goes from Lewes to Rehoboth and connects with other trails for a scenic 15-mile loop for bicycling.