

Wye Island Circumnavigation

By Sue and Rich Stevens

Circumnavigations are always popular paddles as everything is new as you paddle along, as opposed to having to retrace your route. The trip around Wye Island on Maryland's eastern side of the Chesapeake Bay is no exception. My wife Sue and I lead two or three of these trips every year. They are always well attended, sometimes with over twenty Chesapeake Paddler Club members participating.

The faint call of an osprey will often greet kayakers preparing to launch from the popular [Wye Landing](#). The landing is located on the Eastern Shore, just below Wye Mills off MD 404 and not far from the historic seafaring town of St. Michaels. It is a scenic 13.7-mile kayak daytrip following the shoreline of the wooded island. This can be extended by further exploring the many creeks and coves along the way. There are lots of sights to see, sailboats, crabbers, geese, skates, and lots of birdlife. Bald eagles and osprey have made a dramatic recovery in the Chesapeake Bay area in the last ten to fifteen years. Osprey are everywhere before their annual migration to South America and I can't think of a single trip this year where I haven't seen at least several bald eagles. Great blue herons are also very common.

When we arrive, the crabbers are usually already out on the water and, regardless of uncertain forecasts, lots of boat trailers typically line the narrow road on the way down to the landing's full parking lot. In mid-morning, kayakers usually have the two double wide ramps to themselves, as well as a narrow slot of a sandy beach launch (2023 update: the sandy slot has disappeared into the shrubbery) alongside the pier for the ramps. Nearby parking spaces often become available after 9:00 am as some of the crabbers who had launched at o'dark thirty return to beat the heat.

The route around Wye Island is fairly well protected from the wind with most of the river being less than half a mile wide, although very strong east or west winds can make paddling a



bit of a slog. Tides average only about two feet, and while helpful, are not critical.

Having a predicted light NE wind and an outgoing tide, we chose to go around the island clockwise. It's a lot more fun going with the wind and tide in a kayak. The kayakers take off like a flock -or a herd of cats some say- as the shoreline



recedes. Along the way, there are many places to explore, creeks, coves, and the upper reaches of the Wye and Wye East Rivers. The wooded coves along the southern side of the island shield many anchored sailboats. Maybe they are going to be visiting the nearby town of St. Michaels where free protected anchorage is scarce, as is peace and quiet.

On a trip like this it is helpful for the lead kayak to allow the basic pace of the trip to slow down to keep everyone gathered up. It is always good to stop at convenient points to let everyone grab a granola bar or a drink of water, rest, and chat. Though it can be hard to keep track of even colorful kayakers' flashing paddles and shifting in patterns along the shoreline, it helps a large group to stay together by having at least a lead paddler and one or two sweep kayakers with VHF radios. Personally, especially for anyone leading a group or paddling on open water, I consider a waterproof radio basic safety equipment. The price has come down so far that there is really no reason not to have one. If not to help yourself and your group, it may enable you to help other boaters.

Along the way we were able to observe crabbers working their traps or trot lines. A trot line is a length of line, usually a few hundred feet long with shorter lines attached in about fifteen-foot intervals. The ends of the long line are anchored and have floats, while the shorter lines have various forms of bait attached, usually pieces of menhaden (an oily fish) or chicken necks. Hence the term "chicken neckers" for some crabbers. The crabber starts at one end of the trot line and slowly motors along. The boat has a device on the side of the boat that gradually brings the line to the surface, hopefully with a crab hanging onto the bait. He then snatches the crab

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with a net. Some enterprising crabber has recently invented a device that whips the bait around flinging the crab off into a fixed net, eliminating some of the skill required by the hand net. The Maryland blue crab is an essential part of Maryland maritime history. We always make sure to give a wide berth to fishermen and crabbers.



Background and History of Wye Island

Management of the [Wye Island Natural Resource Management Area](#) is overseen by the [Maryland Department of Natural Resources](#). The large majority of Wye Island is part of the NRMA, and as such almost all the shoreline is undeveloped.

There are several historic sites on Wye Island, some we can spot from the water while others sit far back from the shore. Most historic plantation houses did not want to be close to the water like today's big houses do. Their wharfs, now long gone, were used for commerce and shipping.

Across from the Wye public landing, we can spot the green fields of [Wye Heights Plantation](#). Its historic white brick plantation house sits on top of a rise and their flocks of Black



Welsh Mountain sheep can frequently be seen scattered

across its shady fields. The property features 10 acres of formal landscaped gardens which may be a bit visible from the water from Skipton Creek on the left.

For added paddling mileage, it is possible to start further up toward the headwaters of Skipton Creek. Another smaller Talbot County public launch is located at the end of [Skipton Landing](#) Road off US 50. A [Paddling.net](#) Trip Finder article, by a guest-paddler, provides a good description of this landing.

The next large creek to the south hides [Pickering Creek Audubon Center](#), a large working farm and nature center open to the public, which also has a small kayak /canoe launch at a dock. It's free to launch there but call ahead as they run classes for school children and parking is limited.

The next named creek on the island is Granary Creek. We recently discovered a small hidden hand-carry DNR sand beach launch was built at the [Granary Creek Picnic Area](#) located at 632 Wye Island Road, 38°53'31.6"N 76°08'22.7"W. It was opened in July of 2018, jointly funded by the MD State Highway Administration, the DNR, the [Nature Conservancy](#) and REI. There is limited parking at the site, with some additional parking at a small lot approximately 1/4-quarter mile away. Please note, parking is prohibited along the road. There is also a Department of Natural Resources pier and launch near the mouth of this creek, but it is NOT for public use.

On the south side of the Wye River on the west side of the wide Lloyd Creek sits [Wye House Farm](#), another historic plantation with well documented archeology digs by the University of Maryland. The region's plantations widely used slave labor to produce most of their profits. The widespread effects of the cruelty of slavery were exposed by the abolitionist and scholar Frederick Douglass. The plantation includes an orangery and other older outbuildings. A similar brick and glass greenhouse is located at Mount Vernon VA, both were likely built and manned by slave labor. It is a rare survival of an early garden structure where ornamental/far eastern/ frost sensitive orange and lemon trees were cultivated, and it retains its original 18th century heating system of hot air ducts.

During its peak, the [plantation surrounding the house](#) encompassed 42,000 acres and housed over 1,000 slaves. It is still a working farm - owned by the descendants of Edward Lloyd. It is well known that [Frederick Douglass](#) spent a few years of his life on the plantation, around the age of seven and eight, and spoke extensively of the brutal conditions of the plantation in his autobiography, [Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave](#).

At the western end of the island, at about six miles, we leave the Wye East River and turn into the Wye River proper. From this point you can see the mouth of the Miles River to the south as well as the open Chesapeake Bay. To the north is Morgan's Neck with a privately maintained lighthouse at its tip. You don't want to go there on this trip. Remember, island

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to the right, island to the right!

From the western end of the island, it is two miles to our lunch spot at the tip of [Ferry Point](#). This lunch spot is



conveniently located at about the halfway point of our trip. There is a nice wide shady sand beach under some leaning Osage Orange trees and a handy picnic table. The [Osage Orange](#) tree is not named for its bright green bumpy fruit but for its tough orange colored wood. Osage Orange was once widely used by American settlers to exclude free-range livestock from vegetable gardens and corn fields, its tough dense shoots forming rows of thorny barrier hedge, hence it's other common name, Hedge Apple.

This small picnic area, located at the end of several wooded trails around the island, is a popular spot and the site is sometimes occupied by horse riders or a troop of scouts. If the beach is occupied, kayakers can pull out nearby in the



shade and walk along the sandy shoreline, there is plenty of room.

It's advisable to pull boats all the way up on the beach, the shape of this cove

tends to amplify boat wakes, at higher tides, waves can wash up the slope and overturn parked kayaks. Further up the main trail there is a pit-privy style elevated- concrete floored outhouse.

There is another small car top launch point across the river from this spot, [Bennets Point Landing](#), is located on the Queen Anne's County side of the river. A launching /parking [permit](#) is required if launching from there and parking a car! No permit required if simply landing there for a break.

After a royal repast, our kayak fleet continued up the Wye River for about two more miles and then turned right into the Wye Narrows on the west side of the island. Don't miss this turn! Island right, island right the trip sweep may yell! It's not another cove. You should see the only bridge to the island in about three quarters of a mile after you enter the Narrows. If you miss the turn, the Wye River continues north for about seven more miles almost to US 50.

Before you get to the Wye Island Bridge, best landmark ever, you'll see the historic Wye Plantation property. On the Wye Plantation the University of Maryland, College of Agricultural & Natural Resources, has managed a long term breeding program for a [Black Angus](#) herd since 1954. They introduced larger Angus cattle breeding commonly seen throughout the US thanks to a [land donation by the Aspen Institute](#). There is also a large conference/retreat complex, the Wye Island Aspen Center/Houghton House located on this point. The conference center consists of 1,100 acres on the island and in 1995 the Conference Center was the site for negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Authority which resulted in the [Wye River Memorandum](#).

The historic Wye Plantation once had been owned by [William Paca](#), who signed the Declaration of Independence and was governor of Maryland. His other [mansion and historic gardens](#) are in downtown Annapolis. William Paca was buried in 1799 at this family cemetery, though the original Paca residence burned down later in 1879. The current Wye Hall, built in the 1930s is not visible from the water, but we know it's there!

From there it's about 2.5 miles back to the landing, about a six-hour voyage in total. After the paddle we often relax and

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Share your paddling adventures!

Do you enjoy reading about the paddling adventures, local and distant, of other members? Do you like getting new ideas for paddling trips?

Are you advocating for paddling access or amenities in your area?

Have you pondered questions relating to kayak gear? Variety is the spice of life, and of newsletters.

Please write an article reflecting your thoughts, experiences, and discoveries to share with our paddling community.

We all become a bit wiser and excited to be on the water again. We need your input to make *The Chesapeake Paddler* the best it can be.

Submit stories or ideas to news_editor@cpakayaker.com. We look forward to sharing your story.