

Paddleboarding through Nature in the Baltimore Area

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Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: Paddleboarder with young passenger on Dundee Creek

After writing [Paddleboarding Through Nature Around Washington, D.C.](#), I felt it would be good to follow up with an article about stand up paddleboard (SUP) trips within 20 miles of the heart of Baltimore that afford easy escapes into nature. Like Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Maryland is a densely populated urban area, which in 2010 was home to 620,961 people, making it by far the biggest city in Maryland. With a rich history in manufacturing, industry, trade, and transportation, one might think there are few places nearby to get out and get lost in nature on a SUP (or kayak). But such places do exist.

One location to explore just south of the city is Marley Creek. There is quite a bit of housing on the west side, but most of the eastern half and the southernmost (upstream) section remain largely undeveloped. When paddling here, I launch from [Solleys Cove](#), which I describe in [Paddling the Curtis Creek Ship Graveyard](#). Much has changed since I wrote that article in 2019; the county added lots of parking, a porta-john, and a pristine new boat ramp, dedicated in July 2021, to replace the eroded 120-foot carry to the water.

The most scenic part of Marley Creek, a place I call “muskrat alley” due to the large number of muskrat sightings, starts about 2.5 miles south of Solleys Cove and continues towards the headwaters. I’ve also seen plenty of waterbirds here, such as green herons. I suggest planning your trip on this portion so that the flood

tide pushes you upstream and the ebb tide helps you back down. This will ensure you also have maximum depth in the areas you need it most.



*Figure 2: Green heron on Marley Creek - photo by Sara Vermillion*

I typically appreciate wildlife from afar, but once I had an up-close encounter rescuing a cormorant dangling from fishing line on Marley Creek. I paddled up to the bird, untangled it, and then set it free. That was an experience I will always cherish.



*Figure 3: Rescuing a cormorant entangled in fishing line on Marley Creek - photo by Sara Vermillion*

North of Marley Creek is the Patapsco River. There is the “big” part that container ships travel through, and there is the “small” part upstream of the Hanover Street Bridge which is narrow and natural. I like to put in at [Southwest Area Park](#) and then paddle upstream on the small part near high tide to the shallow ponds just south of highway 895, or explore the easy-to-miss [narrow sections](#) just north of 895 on the west side of the river.

Paddle about 1.2 miles upstream of Southwest Area Park and you’ll enter the easternmost portion of [Patapsco Valley State Park](#) where you might see crumbling ruins, deer, interesting vegetation, and various waterfowl.



Figure 4: Kayaking on a tributary of the Patapsco River

Southeast of the city is one of the best places I've found to get deep into nature, [Black Marsh Natural Area](#). To get there, I park in [lot B](#) at [North Point State Park](#) and then cart my SUP about 500 feet to the [beach](#), where I launch into the Chesapeake Bay. Paddling about 1.2 miles northeast, I arrive at the [mouth](#) of a deep and narrow waterway that leads to the heart of the marsh. Here, I've found several snakes, a snapping turtle, least sandpipers, numerous muskrats, lots of red-winged blackbirds, and the only least bittern I've ever seen. This is a place I paddle slowly and quietly because there is a good chance of seeing a new critter around every bend. One word of caution about this area is that while Black Marsh is very sheltered, the Chesapeake Bay is not, so unless you are a skilled and experienced paddler, you should only venture out when the water is fairly calm. Wind, especially from the east or south, can create rough conditions, so check the forecast before you head out. Those with more endurance who seek a challenge can get to Black Marsh by paddling 2.5 miles from the [boat ramp](#) at [Rocky Point Park](#).



*Figure 5: Looking out from Black Marsh Natural Area to the Chesapeake Bay*



*Figure 6: Snapping turtle in Black Marsh Natural Area*



*Figure 7: An overhead view of Black Marsh Natural Area*

A large section of Baltimore County that offers many opportunities to explore nature from either land or water is [Gunpowder Falls State Park](#). [Dundee Creek Marina](#) is located in this park, providing public access to the east side of Dundee Creek [shown at top] from the small-craft launch area, a sandy beach where kayak and SUP rental is also available.



*Figure 8: View from a tributary of Dundee Creek with the Charles P. Crane Generating Station behind*

On the west side of Dundee Creek, one can get to the water via [Marshy Point Park](#). Just be aware that the floating pier, where folks typically put in, is about 550 feet from the drop-off location, so you might want to bring a cart. This park, which has numerous kayak and canoe educational opportunities, is the starting point of the 1.9 mile long [Dundee Creek Paddle Trail](#), Baltimore County's first aquatic trail. From about mid-June to mid-September, the area is home to large quantities of submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV), an ecological indicator of a healthy body of water. These underwater plants provide wildlife with food and habitat while improving water clarity. However, paddling through SAV can be a slow and cumbersome process since it catches easily on paddles and SUP fins.





Figure 9: SAV in Dundee Creek

Other natural paddling spots contained within Gunpowder Falls State Park can be accessed from [Mariner Point Park](#). My favorite is [Little Gunpowder Falls](#), a place I've been able to paddle upstream about 2.5 miles from where it drains into the Gunpowder River. Gunpowder River is big, open, and full of SAV in the summer, but Little Gunpowder Falls, which has significantly less SAV, is narrow, largely shaded by trees, and flows with refreshing cool freshwater to make a hot, humid summer day more enjoyable. Here, I've seen lots of great blue herons, osprey, green herons, and more bald eagles than I could count. But my favorite find was an immature little blue heron, which I initially mistook for a snowy egret.



*Figure 10: Bald eagle on Little Gunpowder Falls*



*Figure 11: Immature little blue heron on Little Gunpowder Falls*



*Figure 12: Paddleboarding on Little Gunpowder Falls*

Adjacent to Little Gunpowder Falls is Big Gunpowder Falls, a nationally renowned blue-ribbon trout stream which connects to [Days Cove](#) and the Days Cove Environmental Education Center, from which park naturalists sometimes lead canoe trips. A waterway at [39.402949, -76.365575](#) joins Little Gunpowder Falls with Big Gunpowder Falls, providing an option for a circuit route.

For many, Baltimore is a fantastic city to live and work. But when it comes to “getting away from it all,” there is no better place to unwind than the great outdoors, and if you have a small watercraft, you’ll discover a plethora of opportunities to find peace and tranquility without having to drive far from the city.

For more information, see

[Maryland State Archives – Maryland at a Glance](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Program – Underwater Grasses](#)

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources - Gunpowder Falls State Park Hereford Area Fishing](#)

[Sibley Guides - Distinguishing immature \(white\) Little Blue Heron from Snowy Egret](#)

[Maryland Department of the Environment – Gunpowder State Park – Days Cove](#)