

The Corsica River Water Trails – Preserving the Memory and Shaping the Future

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Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: Daphne upstream on Alder Branch

Like many water trails, the Corsica River Water Trails are easy to access, have lovely scenery, and provide many opportunities for spotting wildlife. That alone makes them a worthwhile place to paddle, but the thing which sets these trails apart from others is their history. All these trails connect to [Centreville Wharf](#), a place which was once a hub for trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. But other than a few information signs, little remains to remind people of the significance of this wharf through which tobacco, wheat, cattle, and even circus elephants once passed. These trails help preserve the memory of how the waterways in this area created Centreville, the largest town and county seat in Queen Anne’s County, Maryland.

The Corsica River Water Trails are comprised of three short water trails which can be paddled separately: Mill Stream Trail, Yellow Bank Stream Trail, and Alder Branch Trail. Described as following shallow, mostly sheltered, and meandering waterways, in my opinion, all are suitable for folks with little paddling experience, assuming mild weather conditions; conditioned, intermediate kayakers should be able to complete them all in one day. I’ve paddled these routes multiple times and feel that each is beautiful in their own unique way once you get into the narrow, upstream sections.

I typically put in at [Centreville Landing](#), which requires the purchase of a [Queen Anne’s County public landing permit](#). This permit can be bought at several locations for day or annual use, and allows one to park and launch at 18 landing facilities in the county. Centreville Landing has a restroom and concrete boat ramp while

next door, at Centreville Wharf, there is a [floating dock](#) at the end of a four-foot-wide walkway where one can launch for free so long as vehicles do not park in trailer spaces or spots reserved for boat slip renters.



Figure 2: Centreville Wharf floating dock

If you want to paddle all the Corsica River Water Trails in a single outing, I suggest allocating four hours and timing your trip so that high tide hits midway through. I like to start such a journey with the Alder Branch Trail which is documented as a 2.5-mile round trip route, but in my experience, if you want to see the truly picturesque sections, then this is at least a 4-mile round trip. The first and last 1.2 miles follow the Corsica River along an exposed section where you'll likely encounter power boat traffic. While this may not sound appealing, the voyage up Alder Branch more than makes up for it. On the north side of the branch, slightly upstream of the mouth, you'll see a photogenic great blue heron rookery which will likely be occupied from March to May.



Figure 3: Great blue heron rookery seen from the Alder Branch Trail

When I want to see a rookery, I generally have to head out early in the spring, before the trees are covered in leaves that make it hard to view the nests. But this rookery, comprised of about a dozen nests as of 2023, is situated in a way where one can spot many of them year-round. If wildlife photography is your passion, bring a telephoto lens, time your visit with the morning sun, stick to the south side of the branch, and look north. Avoid venturing ashore since much of the surrounding land is privately owned.



Figure 4: Close-up of great blue heron rookery seen from the Alder Branch Trail

Herons aren't the only things to see on the Alder Branch Trail. Keep your eyes peeled for movement in the water and you might be lucky enough to spot a snake or muskrat.



Figure 5: Muskrat swimming on Alder Branch

West of the mouth of Alder Branch is Fort Point, where an earthen fortification was constructed during the War of 1812 in anticipation of a British naval attack on Centreville which never took place.

The Mill Stream Trail is described as a 2.5-mile round trip, and I concur if the Centreville Road (Route 213) bridge is your turnaround point. On my most recent trip in the Spring of 2023, I would have had to portage to have gone further, but in previous years, I've gotten a half mile upstream of the bridge without much difficulty; it just depends on the downfalls.

If you paddle all three trails in the same day, the Mill Stream Trail makes a good middle destination because it is an ideal rest stop. Handholds fixed to a sturdy wooden post make taking out or putting in at the [Millstream Park landing](#) easy.



Figure 6: Landing at Millstream Park

At Millstream Park, which was once the location of the Centreville spur of the Queen Anne's Railroad Company, you'll find a [porta-john](#), picnic tables, and a nearly one-mile-long handicapped-accessible paved walking trail running alongside Mill Stream. This makes it a fantastic place to stop for lunch and stretch your legs with a brisk walk. One can also launch non-motorized vessels from this park, which doesn't require purchasing a public landing permit, but doing so will require a 160-foot carry to the water.



Figure 7: Kayaking on Mill Stream Trail

The Yellow Bank Stream Trail is described as a 3-mile round trip, and I've found this to be true if you turn around at the first portage. On this route, you will likely find [pickerelweed](#) and [lizard's tail](#) lining the shore. During one visit, I was also fortunate enough to find a dragonfly exuvia. Exuviae (plural of exuvia) are the cast exoskeletons left behind after the insects emerge. Because they are solid, they retain the exact shape of the full-grown nymph, a kind of death mask from that previous stage of life.



Figure 8: Dragonfly exuvia on the Yellow Bank Stream Trail



Figure 9: Daphne and I navigate through a fallen tree on the Yellow Bank Stream Trail; no portage required



Figure 10: At the turnaround point on the Yellow Bank Stream Trail

On the Yellow Bank Stream Trail, you'll pass under the Watson Road bridge, a popular angler destination, so keep a watch out for fishing lines. You'll also paddle near the original homestead of the 1670 Chesterfield land grant made to William Hemsley upon which the town of Centerville was established.

During my time on the three water trails, I never actually saw anything that appeared historic, but over 100 years ago, the Valliant Fertilizer Company and the Captain Clash warehouses stood beside the trail at Centerville Wharf. Today, much of the area is transitioning into a "living shoreline," a non-structural approach which treats the area between land and water naturally. Structures from the rich past which were once part of a busy commercial port have given way to a more relaxed and humble small-town setting, bordered by scenic natural surroundings.

The Corsica River Water Trails tell a story, not just of how the area came to be, but also where it is going. After over two centuries of development with little regard to the health of the river, it was officially designated “impaired” under the Clean Water Act in 1998. Four years later, this prompted the creation of a Watershed Restoration Action Strategy (WRAS). Put into action over the next several years, this strategy to clean up the river eventually resulted in the “Corsica River Preliminary Watershed Audit” describing the effort as “unequivocally successful” and stated that “the Corsica River is well on the way to becoming the first fully restored waterway in the Chesapeake Bay drainage.” While much progress has been made, there is still work that lies ahead, partly due to the fact that the upper portion of the tidal area can’t handle excessive nutrients resulting from runoff. Fortunately, organizations like the [Corsica River Conservancy](#), [ShoreRivers](#), various government and non-profit entities, and numerous volunteers are fighting to protect the river, its tributaries, and the water trails bearing its name. With their support, the Corsica River Water Trails will continue to be a great place to paddle for many years to come.

For more information see

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources - Corsica River Water Trails](#)

[Maryland’s National Register Properties – Centreville Historic District](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Magazine – Centreville, Maryland: Much More Than Middlin’](#)

[Queen Anne’s County – Public Landings Guide](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Program – Great Blue Heron](#)

[iNaturalist - Exuvia](#)

[Community & Environmental Defense Services – Corsica River Preliminary Watershed Audit](#)