

Kayaking with the Toads on the Patapsco River in the Daniels Area

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Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

March 24, 2022



Figure 1: American toad eggs

Most of the 39-mile-long Patapsco River forms the backbone of the scenic [Patapsco Valley State Park](#), Maryland's first state park. Upstream of [South Hanover Street Bridge](#) in Baltimore, the Patapsco is considered a "minor river," while downstream, it forms a large tidal estuary inlet of the Chesapeake Bay. The minor river section, what I call the "Little Patapsco," is almost entirely fresh water, narrow, wooded, and full of wildlife, particularly in the park. The best way I've found to see such wildlife on the Little Patapsco is via kayak in the early spring, but much of the water is shallow, rocky, or has a strong current, making it unsuitable for a leisure out and back trip. One exception to this is the area just upstream of the Daniels Dam. This small dam, the last on the Patapsco, creates a calm, deep stretch that is navigable for about two miles, even when the water level on the rest of the river is low.

On the south (Howard County) side of the river, there is a [small parking lot](#) with room for five vehicles near the [kayak launch site](#). A tenth of a mile north of the small lot, you'll find a [big lot](#) with room for up to 10 vehicles. Many people drop off their boat at the small lot and then park at the larger one. This is a very popular place for many outdoor activities, so the lots fill up quickly on the weekends. Just 350 feet downstream from the launch site is the Daniels Dam. Note that activity (e.g., paddling) is prohibited within 300 feet upstream of the dam.

While it may be tempting to get out on the water wearing a t-shirt and shorts on a sunny day, keep the water temperature in mind. I almost always wear a wetsuit while paddling through early May to prevent

hypothermia in the event I capsize. Wearing, and not just carrying, a personal floatation device (PFD) is also highly recommended since the dam creates deep areas on the river where drowning deaths have occurred.



*Figure 2: Kayaking on the Patapsco River with safety in mind*

For seeing wildlife, the best time I've found to paddle at Daniels is on a relatively warm day shortly after the vernal equinox, when Mother Nature awakens after a long winter's nap. Trees bud, flowers bloom, birds build their nests, reptiles bask in the sun, and amphibians focus on reproduction.

Though they are primarily nocturnal, I have been fortunate to find numerous American toads during the daytime in April, just upstream of Daniels Dam on the north (Baltimore County) side. After hearing the distinctive "trilling" calls produced by the males to attract a mate, I follow their sounds, and if I am lucky, find several on the shore puffing their throats.



*Figure 3: Male American toad puffing its throat and calling to attract a female*

Once the female toads arrive, a male will select one and wrap his front legs around her abdomen in an “amplexus” posture. Reminiscent of horseshoe crabs spawning, several smaller males may attempt to simultaneously mate with a single larger female.



*Figure 4: Several American toads mating*



*Figure 5: Pair of American toads mating*

The female then moves to a suitable location in the water to release her eggs, while the male discharges fluid with sperm onto the eggs. Once, after pulling ashore further upstream, I discovered such a toad orgy in a vernal pool.

A single female releases thousands of eggs in two separate spiral tubes strings, each of which, when stretched out, measure 20-66 feet in length.



*Figure 6: American toads with the female releasing eggs*

In 3-12 days, the eggs hatch, each releasing a tadpole (aka polliwog) which develops into an adult after 40-70 days. At about 2-3 years of age, they reach sexual maturity and the cycle repeats itself.

Slightly upstream of where I saw my first group of American toads, I spotted something large slowly swimming in the water. Paddling closer, I determined it was a beaver. Typically active at night, near dusk, or early in the morning, this one was unusual in that it was out in the early afternoon. I suspect it was a young beaver looking to claim a space away from its parents' territory.



*Figure 7: Beaver*

I turned around at the Eureka Train Bridge, two miles upstream from the launch site, where the water got shallow and the current strong. Here I saw an invasive red-eared slider turtle sunning itself on a rock, likely someone's former pet or the descendant of one. On the East Coast, their natural habitat only extends north to Virginia, though I have to wonder if climate change might be altering this.



*Figure 8: Red-eared slider turtle*

Other fauna I've seen while kayaking upstream of the Daniels Dam include Canada geese sitting on eggs, tiger swallowtail butterflies, northern water snakes, bald eagles, and amphipod crustaceans of the genus *Gammarus*.



Figure 9: Amphipod crustaceans of the genus *Gammarus*

For the more experienced kayaker looking to make this a 4.5-mile one-way trip, I suggest launching just northwest of Woodstock Road (route 125), taking out at Daniels, then car shuttling back to the start. There is no actual launch site at Woodstock, so expect to have to cart or carry your boat a tenth of a mile to the water after dropping it off at the [trailhead gate](#). Unlike the deeper out-and-back trip from Daniels to the train bridge, you'll only want to do the Woodstock to Daniels route before summer, unless it has rained recently.

By timing kayak trips with weather favoring animal activity, paddling slowly, practicing noise discipline, and being observant, I have always been able to find interesting critters in their natural environment at the Daniels Area. While this section of Patapsco Valley State Park is great for a lot of outdoor activities including hiking, mountain biking, and [exploring historic sites](#), the nature lover in me keeps coming back for the wildlife viewing.

For more information see

[Chesapeake Conservancy – Baltimore’s Crown Jewel – Patapsco River](#)

[Wikipedia – Patapsco River](#)

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources \(DNR\) – The Patapsco River and Valley](#)

[Maryland DNR – Patapsco Valley State Park – Daniels Area Paddling](#)

[Patapsco Heritage Greenway – Paddling the Patapsco](#)

[Animal Diversity Web – American Toad](#)

[NatureWorks – American Toad](#)

[Adirondack Almanack – Wildlife in Spring: Beavers on the Move](#)

[National Aquarium – Tis the Season for Turtles](#)