

Paddleboarding through Nature in the Washington, D.C. Area

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Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: Mataponi Creek

In Spring 2021, someone asked me about stand up paddleboard (SUP) trips in or near Washington, D.C. that afford easy escape into nature. With 5,582,170 people, the population of the Washington, D.C.-Arlington-Alexandria metropolitan area is ranked seventh in the country. Yet despite all the urban hustle and bustle, there are numerous places within 25 miles of the center of our nation's capital where one can launch a SUP and appreciate the scenery, flora, and fauna that Mother Nature offers.

SUPs can launch any place a kayak can, and the trips I describe here are also well suited for recreational kayakers due to the short paddling distances and mostly sheltered waters. However, SUPs are not kayaks and they have their drawbacks...particularly the fin. A fin helps with tracking, but it also brings the paddler to a jarring stop when it collides with underwater obstacles such as submerged logs or rocks just below the surface...both of which are common in natural spaces. In contrast, kayakers have retractable skegs, rudders (typically retractable), or neither.

The original fin that came with my SUP protruded 9.5 inches below the board. I later switched to a 7-inch swept-back fin with a large surface area that made it easier to paddle in shallow spots while still maintaining good control. Eventually, I installed a retractable fin, which as of 2021, is uncommon. Fully extended, it is 11.5 inches long, but when it encounters an obstacle, it folds, creating a mere 3.5-inch profile. It produces more drag than a fixed fin, but it also allows me to easily paddle in places that I never thought I could.

For most paddleboarders, the best way to minimize this issue is to time outings around the high tide. This will help you avoid obstacles by being out when the water is at its deepest. There are many resources for tidal information, but my favorite is [Tidespy](#) because it is overlaid on a map.

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You'll definitely want to use the tide to your advantage if exploring Pohick Bay. It is a fantastic place for viewing wildlife, but it can get shallow. Launch from the [cartop boat launch](#) in [Pohick Bay Regional Park](#), Lorton, Virginia, and see how far you can paddle upstream against the current, from Pohick Bay to [Pohick Creek](#). Watch for cypress trees, beaver lodges, northern water snakes, and snapping turtles. If you don't have a SUP, the park will be happy to rent you one.



*Figure 2: Paddleboarders make their way upstream on Pohick Creek*



*Figure 3: Snapping turtle on Pohick Bay*



*Figure 4: A great blue heron on Pohick Bay feeds its fledglings*

A short distance from Pohick Bay is [Mason Neck State Park](#), also in Lorton, Virginia, where one can launch at the [cartop boat launch](#) and then paddle northeast in Belmont Bay to [Kanes Creek](#). Here you'll find pristine views, lizard's tail flowers, violet-blue pickerelweed, and if you're lucky, maybe you'll see white pickerelweed...something I didn't even know existed until I paddled there. You can rent kayaks (but not SUPs) at the park.



*Figure 5: Scenic view on Kanes Creek*



*Figure 6: White pickerelweed on Kanes Creek*

Another place that rents kayaks (and canoes but not SUPs) is [Patuxent River Park](#) in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. Renters and folks with their own watercraft can launch from [Jacksons Landing](#) and paddle upstream on the Patuxent River to the Western Branch, an area I describe in [Paddling in Paradise at Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary](#). One can also head downstream from Jacksons Landing to Jug Bay, a protected location designated an "Important Birding Area" by the National Audubon Society.



*Figure 7: Osprey at Jug Bay*

South of Jacksons Landing is a tributary of the Patuxent River called [Mataponi Creek](#) (top photo). This, and other great locations, are best accessed via [Selbys Landing](#), one of my favorite places to launch. Mataponi Creek serves as the demarcation between Patuxent River Park and [Merkle Wildlife Sanctuary](#), and is a superb spot for seeing wildlife and attractive scenery.



*Figure 8: Muskrat on Mataponi Creek*



*Figure 9: Paddling on Mataponi Creek*



The short but sweet [House Creek](#), on the opposite side of the Patuxent River from Selbys Landing, is a place where you'll want to investigate every nook and cranny so you can experience all that the marsh has to offer. The view is especially nice from a SUP since you can see above the vegetation.



Figure 10: Daphne and I on House Creek

About 0.8 mile west of Selbys Landing is [Lyons Creek](#), which serves as the border between Anne Arundel and Calvert counties. It is a nice trip for the paddler looking for a narrow waterway having a good mix of marsh and swamp.



*Figure 11: Paddling on Lyons Creek*

There is no shortage of natural places to paddle along the Patuxent, but if you want to be on the water at dawn or dusk, when wildlife is more active and Patuxent River Park is closed, then [Patuxent Wetlands Park](#) in Lothian, Maryland, may be a better option. Here, one can paddle upstream to explore [Back Channel](#), home to many red-winged blackbirds and lovely yellow flowers of the *Bidens* genus.



*Figure 12: Paddle Back Channel in September to see lots of yellow flowers of the Bidens genus*

Downstream of Patuxent Wetlands Park are various narrow tributaries on the west side, lined with spatterdock and arrow arum.



Figure 13: Spatterdock-lined tributary of the Patuxent River, south of Patuxent Wetlands Park

Other terrific natural wetlands to explore via SUP in the Washington, D.C. area are described in articles I've written over the last couple of years:

- [Exploring an Urban Green Space](#): Check out Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve, just off the Potomac River in Alexandria, Virginia, a place that the Chesapeake Bay Program classifies as a “globally rare habitat.”
- [Paddling the Anacostia – Washington, D.C.’s Forgotten River](#): The marshy area on the northeast side of Kingman Island is particularly natural, but make sure you time your trip with the high tide.
- [High Tide and Exotic Blooms](#): Explore Dueling Creek and Bladensburg Wetlands at high tide. Kayak and canoe (but no SUP) rental is available at [Bladensburg Waterfront Park](#).
- [Paddling Mattawoman Creek, “Where One Goes Pleasantly”](#): Visit between mid-July and mid-August to see the American lotus blooms at their peak.



*Figure 14: American lotus flower on Mattawoman Creek*

I can think of no activity more peaceful than paddleboarding in natural wetlands. Unfortunately, the long drive to get to some of these places can be stressful. But for people that live in or near our nation’s capital, there are numerous tranquil locations close to home where one can unwind, relax, and savor the natural beauty of the world from atop a SUP.

For more information, see

[Current Results – Largest Cities in the United States](#)

[The Seasoned Surfer – Best SUP FIN Types Every Paddler Should Know](#)

[Prince George’s \(PG\) Parks – Jug Bay Natural Area](#)