

Padding the Anacostia River - High Tide and Exotic Blooms

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Figure 1: Saki and his dog, Daphne, paddleboarding in Kenilworth Marsh

A variety of outdoor adventures awaits you just outside the eastern border of Washington, D.C. at [Bladensburg Waterfront Park](#). Here, one can access the 8.7-mile-long Anacostia River or the 25+ miles of walking and bicycling trails that comprise the [Anacostia Tributary Trail System](#). And if you're in need of a boat or a bike, you can rent them at the park. With so many choices, it may be hard to pick a single adventure. So, let me suggest my favorite...paddling from the park to [Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens](#) via the Anacostia River. On this trip, you'll explore narrow creeks filled with lush native vegetation, walk through a garden filled with exotic plants, and paddle in beautiful marshes home to a variety of animals.

On a mid-summer day, I launched my stand-up paddle board (SUP) from Bladensburg Waterfront Park. Even though it was a weekday, there were numerous people making use of the park for kayaking, bicycling, rowing, fishing, and just getting together with friends for a stroll. I paddled downstream (south) against the [flood tide](#) while cormorants flew overhead and eastern painted turtles basked in the sun. It was a great day to be outside.

After about 0.7 mile and just before coming to a public pier at [38°55'29.5"N 76°56'18.1"W \(38.924869, -76.938357\)](#), I entered [Bladensburg Wetlands](#), a 20-acre marshy area on my left (east side). I paddled another 0.7 mile in this serene, virtual maze lined by swamp hibiscus, pickerelweed, and cattails. It is hard to believe this lovely area situated between the Anacostia River and the [Anacostia River Trail](#) was once a landfill!



*Figure 2: Kayakers at Bladensburg Wetlands*

Returning to the main river, I continued downstream for about another 0.6 mile (1.3 miles total on the Anacostia), paddling under New York Avenue and a train bridge, then passing the mouth of Beaverdam Creek on the left (east side). Approximately 100 feet after that at [38°54'58.9"N 76°56'37.5"W \(38.916361, -76.943750\)](#) is an unmarked clearing (call it the Beaverdam Landing) where a small group can pull their boats ashore. Signs at a nearby trail intersection will point to the 0.75-mile unpaved River Trail which leads to the visitor center at the 700-acre Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens. If landing, I recommend doing so near [high tide](#).

Rather than pull over at Beaverdam Landing, I kept paddling south for another 0.4 mile (1.7 total on the Anacostia) until I reached Kenilworth Marsh on my left (east side). According to [Anacostia River Trails](#), “Parts of this marsh are 11,000 years old, while the rest of the river’s remaining marshes were constructed during the last few decades.” Staying along the north side of the marsh, I eventually landed at [38°54'51.8"N 76°56'42.8"W \(38.914389, -76.945222\)](#), near a bench along the Anacostia River Trail. Compared to Beaverdam Landing, which is located about 0.15-mile northeast, this one has a gentler slope to the water. If landing here, it is absolutely essential to plan your trip around [high tide](#). On my first trip to Kenilworth Marsh, I learned this the hard way when I had to walk about 40 feet through thigh-deep mud before I was able to paddle my way out. I recommend landing 1.5-2 hours before high tide and leaving 1.5-2 hours after.

After locking up my SUP and paddle to a tree, I walked about 0.9 mile (15 minutes) to the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens visitor center where I joined a 40-minute tour of the gardens led by Ranger Callahan. Many people visit Kenilworth in mid-July for the annual Lotus and Water Lily Festival which celebrates the Asian pink [lotus blooms](#) at their peak. American lotuses tend to bloom a little later.



*Figure 3: Asian lotus flower with pollinator*

Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens is also a haven to a variety of insects and small animals. Even though the lotus flowers, swamp hibiscus, and water lilies are the stars of the show, many of us (especially children) can't help but smile when we see a butterfly, turtle, or frog hidden within the flora.



Figure 4: Frog on lily pad

Leaving the gardens, I paddled about two miles around the perimeter of Kenilworth Marsh, exploring the upstream sections as far as I could. Paddling under a boardwalk, I found a small patch of American lotuses growing wild. On the southwest side of the marsh I spotted several great egrets. Be aware that wooden poles/stakes lie near the surface and may be hidden at high tide.

Back on the Anacostia River, I paddled upstream against the [ebb tide](#) for about 0.9 mile until I came to Dueling Creek on the left (west side). I turned around a little past Colman Manor Pier at [38°55'28.0"N 76°56'28.5"W \(38.924450, -76.941235\)](#), having managed to get almost a half mile upstream on this very scenic tributary lush with wild rice and dense foliage.



*Figure 5: Colman Manor pier on Dueling Creek*

How did Dueling Creek get its name? According to [Anacostia River Trails](#), “During the 1700s and 1800s, it was illegal to conduct a duel in Washington DC. Instead, people would travel the Anacostia River into Maryland and up this creek. Twenty-eight recorded duels were fought along its shores.”

I paddled 0.8 mile upstream on the Anacostia River back to Bladensburg Waterfront Park, staying well to one side to avoid getting in the way of the rowing shells and their crews that were out for their afternoon training. Fortunately, those are likely to be the fastest boats you’ll see on the river.

In my opinion, this 7.1-mile paddling route is one of the more interesting ones in the Washington, D.C. area. It is suitable for many skill levels and adaptable in that one can reduce the paddling distance down to 2.6 miles by just sticking to the Anacostia River and pulling ashore at Beaverdam Landing to visit the gardens, though you’ll miss some of the most scenic parts. So, pack a lunch, fill up those water bottles, check the [tide table](#), and go spend a leisurely day exploring the river, its tributaries, and the gardens. This is an adventure you’ll be glad you did.