

Kings Creek – A Water Trail Fit for Royalty

Saki

Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: Kayaking by invasive phragmites, April 2016

When Midshore Riverkeeper Conservancy’s 2014-2015 Chesapeake Conservation Corps volunteer Christine Burns created the Kings Creek Water Trail, her goal was to “connect people to our rivers and ultimately inspire them to help protect these special places.” I first kayaked on this peaceful, secluded waterway in 2006, nine years before the water trail was officially launched, and observed that the solitude, natural beauty, and diverse ecology of the area would make Kings Creek a water trail fit for royalty.

It is likely the creek was indeed named to honor the English monarchy. In 1683, "An Act for Advancing the Trade of Tobacco" established legal standards regarding tobacco trade in the colonies, and made the adjacent town, later recognized as Kingston, a major port...one of 31 tobacco import/export sites. Although the tobacco warehouse closed in 1796, Kingston continued serving as a landing for grain shipments, then later steamboats, until at least 1918. Now, the [Kingston Landing](#) launch site is a popular location for watermen looking to access the Choptank River and for paddlers like me seeking to unwind on the water trail.



*Figure 2: Kingston Landing boat ramp, August 2022*

The [mouth of Kings Creek](#) is an easy 0.35 mile southwest of Kingston Landing. Paddling upstream on Kings Creek, I quickly encountered a monitoring platform used to detect the presence of nutria, a semi-aquatic rodent from South America first released into Dorchester County, Maryland in 1943. These invasive animals damage marshlands and create significant erosion, consuming approximately 25% of their bodyweight daily. The monitoring platforms provide a stable surface where nutria leave traces of scat and hair, the latter trapped by a wire snare. Though still a problem on the Delmarva Peninsula, the Chesapeake Bay Nutria Eradication Project has employed detection methods such as this to help remove 14,000 nutria from the area between 2002 and 2017.



Figure 3: Nutria monitoring platform, August 2022

Continuing my journey, I kayaked past another invasive...dense strands of phragmites, a perennial grass capable of growing over 15 feet tall as it crowds out native marsh plants (see top photo).

As I paddled further upstream, I started to notice a greater diversity of flora, including many edible plants harvested by Native Americans. Perhaps the most unusual-looking is arrow arum, also known as tuckahoe, which produces drooping pods full of large, green seeds that some tribes would cook and eat like peas.



*Figure 4: Arrow arum pods, August 2022*

I passed by spatterdock, which various Native Americans used for food and medicine. Some, such as the Klamath Indians, collected the seeds and then popped them like popcorn...something I've tried myself without success.



*Figure 5: Spatterdock flower, May 2017*

A fallen black walnut tree lay across one side of the creek. While the Cherokee and Delaware Indians used various parts of the plant to treat numerous ailments, colonial carpenters made extensive use of its high-quality hardwood; although difficult to shell and strong-tasting, the nuts continue to be harvested today.



*Figure 6: Black walnuts, August 2022*

In the most upstream sections of the water trail, paw paws, the largest edible fruit native to the United States, dangled over Kings Creek. Ripe for picking starting mid-September, their size makes them easy to spot, while its more elusive flower, which blooms in April and May, is generally harder to find.



*Figure 7: Paw paw flower, April 2016*

Paddling on Beaverdam Branch, a low-salinity tributary off Kings Creek, I came across dense blooms of wild rice, once a food staple for many Native Americans. In the late summer, it is a delicacy for red-winged blackbirds, one of the most abundant bird species in North America.



*Figure 8: Wild rice dotted with red-winged blackbirds, August 2022*

In addition to red-winged blackbirds, the water trail is home to a plethora of other animals. While beavers are not so easy to spot, you'll definitely find proof they are near: lodges, dams, and gnawed tree trunks and branches.



*Figure 9: Beaver lodge, May 2017*

Great blue herons, bald eagles, and ospreys, also known as fish hawks, are all common sights on Kings Creek, though the latter migrate away from the Chesapeake Bay region in mid-August, returning early the following March.



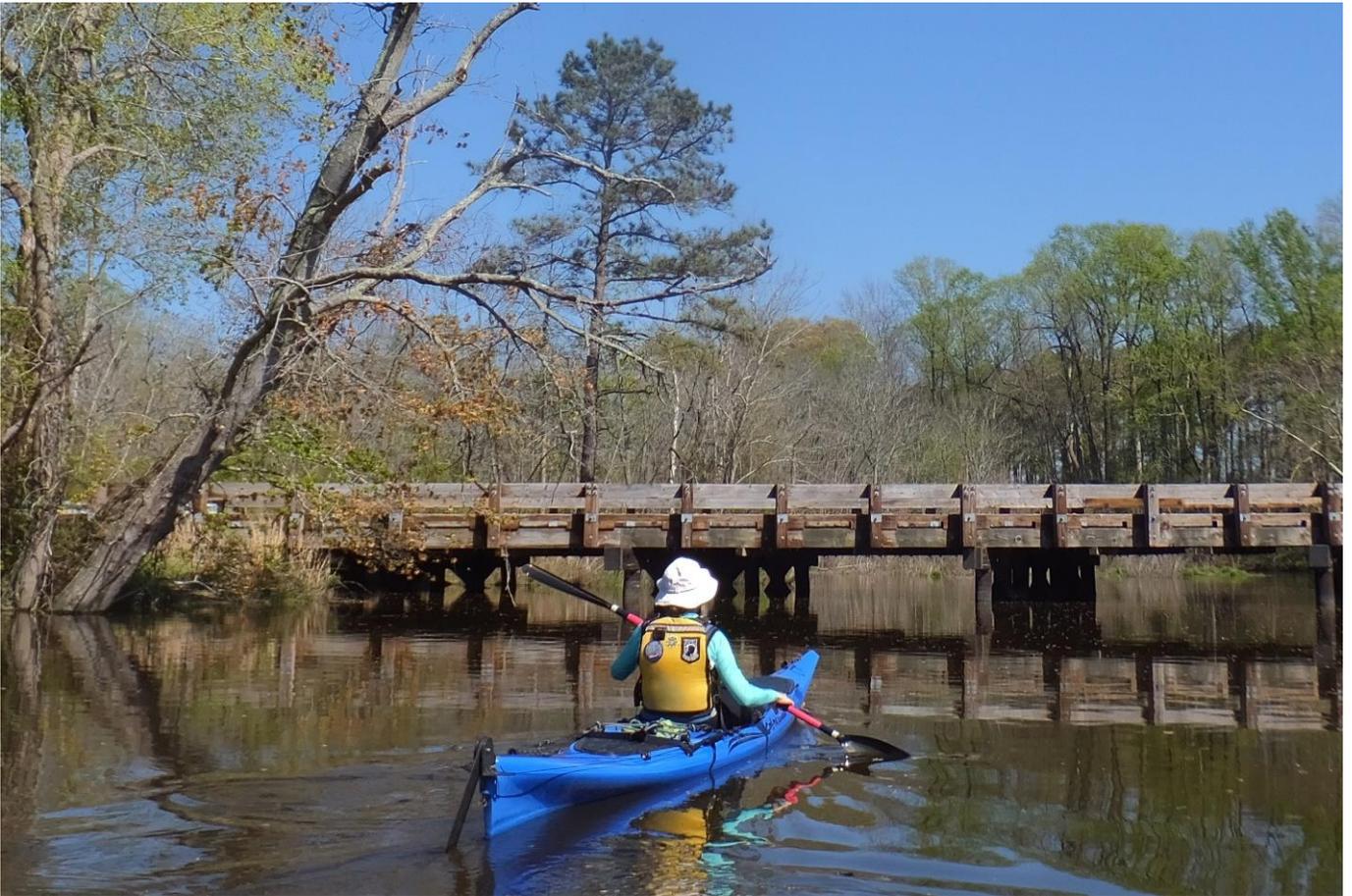
*Figure 10: Osprey, April 2016*

I made it 4.55 miles upstream on Kings Creek without having to portage. In previous years, I've made it even further. Pausing to absorb the beauty of the pristine landscape, I thought about what I was told by Matt Pluta, the Choptank Riverkeeper. He described how the headwaters of Kings Creek are under intense development pressure as Easton experiences an unprecedented building boom. More homes and residential areas are taking over the forests and farm fields that once made up the headwaters.



*Figure 11: The upper section of Kings Creek, April 2016*

Heading back downstream, I stopped at the Kingston Road bridge (a good turnaround point for beginner paddlers) where I saw several barn swallow nests. These birds once nested in caves throughout North America, but now they nest almost exclusively on man-made structures. Another species of swallow, the tree swallow, is known to create magical murmurations in the autumn sky, swooping and diving in synchronization, right before plunging to the marsh for the night.



*Figure 12: Kingston Road bridge, April 2016*



*Figure 13: Barn swallow nest under Kingston Road bridge, June 2019*

Continuing downstream, I pulled ashore at a [pier](#) with signage indicating it is owned by the Nature Conservancy and open to the public for limited use. During my first visit, in 2006, visitors could walk a short distance south from the pier to a 2000-foot-long floating boardwalk leading to an observation tower in Kings Creek Preserve, part of a larger tract known as the Choptank Wetlands Preserve, established in 1978. In 2022, I spoke to Dr. Deborah Landau, conservation ecologist with the Nature Conservancy, about the now-decrepit boardwalk. With upkeep proving too costly, there were plans to give this property to the county with the understanding that they would maintain it. Unfortunately, the transfer fell through, and a few years later, the boardwalk was permanently closed.

Curious about Kings Creek Preserve, which borders the south side of the water trail, I left the water trail, kayaking out into the Choptank to explore one of the unnamed creeks that flows through the Preserve. With most of the vegetation no taller than me, I found myself wishing I'd brought my stand up paddleboard (SUP) so I could have a better view. Still, I saw a few interesting things.

There were lots of rose mallow (aka swamp hibiscus) flowers, both pink and white. Some were blooming and some were ready to seed, but the ones that caught my eye were those in transition. This plant was used by the Shinnecock Indians as a urinary aid and to treat inflamed bladders.



*Figure 14: Rose mallow, August 2022*

Perhaps the most unique thing in the preserve is [native phragmites](#), which Dr. Landau mentioned. I did not see it on my latest visit but I'll definitely keep an eye out for this rare plant when I return.

I continued paddling until I found the [boardwalk ruins](#), 0.6 mile upstream on the unnamed creek, then returned to Kingston Landing to complete my day's exploration.



*Figure 15: Boardwalk ruins, August 2022*

There are many factors that make a good water trail, sometimes called a “blueway” or “paddle trail:”

- Easy access
- Sufficient parking
- Suitable for novice or beginner paddlers
- Natural scenery
- Rich in flora and fauna
- Interesting history
- Restroom/porta-john

Kings Creek Water Trail has all but the latter.



For more information see

[The Talbot Spy – Riverkeepers Launch New Kings Creek Water Trail](#)

[Choptank River Heritage – Kingston Landing](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Nutria Eradication Project: 2017 Update](#)

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources – Nutria: An Invasive Species](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Program – Nutria](#)

[Plant Conservation Alliance’s Alien Plant Working Group – Least Wanted – Common Reed](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Program – Arrow Arum](#)

[Eat the Weeds – Spatter Dock](#)

[Maryland Department of Planning – Jefferson Patterson Park & Museum – Black Walnut](#)

[National Park Service – Chesapeake Bay - Plants](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Program – Wild Rice](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Program – Red-winged Blackbird](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Program - Osprey](#)

[All About Birds – Barn Swallow](#)

[Choptank River Heritage – Kings Creek Preserve](#)

[The Nature Conservancy – Choptank Wetlands](#)

[Maryland Department of Planning – Jefferson Patterson Park & Museum – Swamp Rose Mallow](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Program – Phragmites](#)