

Autumn Kayaking on McIntosh Run and Breton Bay

Saki

Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

November 7, 2019



Figure 1: Autumn colors on Breton Bay

They say that the only thing constant is change. Seasonal change was obvious as I launched my kayak at [Leonardtwn Wharf Park](#) and paddled from the brackish waters of Breton Bay to the scenic narrow freshwater sections of McIntosh Run. It was late October, and over the last few weeks, the sun had become noticeably lower, the days shorter, and the water colder. On the plus side, the autumn colors were brilliant, glowing in various shades of yellow, orange, and red.

Rather than take a direct route upstream on McIntosh Run, I decided to do a little exploring. I hugged the shoreline, edged with saltmarsh cordgrass, phragmites, and narrow-leaved cattail, as I scanned for evidence of wildlife. I did not see any muskrats, but I did count eight of their lodges, which are built from mud and marsh plants. Often confused with beavers, which weigh between 35 and 60 pounds and possess wide, flat tails, a large muskrat only weighs about four pounds and has a rat-like tail.



*Figure 2: Muskrat lodge*

McIntosh Run has been described as “one of the most ecologically intact watersheds remaining in Maryland.” On this pristine creek, I saw a few turtles, a couple bald eagles, and several great blue herons. But it’s what I didn’t see that got me wondering. Why were there no osprey or egrets, birds that I would typically find on many waterways in the Chesapeake Bay? It turns out they had already migrated south to warmer climates. Osprey typically grab fish that swim near the water’s surface, but as the water gets colder, the fish swim deeper. Bald eagles, on the other hand, are opportunistic predators, stealing from other animals or scavenging on carrion. And what is the reason that egrets (particularly great egrets and snowy egrets) migrate while great blue herons remain? I haven’t found an answer to that. My best guess is there just isn’t enough food to go around for all of them, so someone had to leave, and the egrets lost the coin toss.



Figure 3: Great blue heron on McIntosh Run

I timed my trip to take advantage of high tide and the rain that fell just a day prior, since the upper parts of McIntosh Run can get low, especially in the autumn. But even with my fixed-rudder boat, I was able to paddle upstream of Point Lookout Road (Route 5) without having to portage. This was an easy trip; I never had any problems with downfalls or tree limbs getting in my way thanks to the outfitter at [Port of Leonardtown Park](#). This park is an inviting rest stop or launch area with its gravel boat ramp, pavilion, and picnic tables. For those who want to enjoy the finer things in life, there's even a winery next to the park.

Paddling downstream, I spotted an unmistakable sight...a bald eagle nest. Weighing up to two tons, the average nest is 4-5 feet in diameter and 2-4 feet deep. Such nests and their occupants were rare in 1963, largely due to the pesticide DDT decimating the population to such a degree that only 417 nesting pairs were counted in the lower 48 states. Following a ban on DDT, bald eagles have made such a strong comeback that they are no

longer on the federal list of threatened and endangered species. As of 2016, there were more than 2000 breeding pairs in the Chesapeake Bay region alone!



*Figure 4: Bald eagle nest*

Back in Breton Bay, I paddled past Leonardtown, established in 1660 and named after Leonard Calvert, the first governor of Maryland. While Leonardtown may not be one of the most significant historical places in terms of politics or battles, it is a fine example of how tobacco shaped the Chesapeake Bay area, which mariners called the “Tobacco Coast.” As the primary cash crop of Maryland, tobacco exhausted the soil, causing plantations to spread throughout the countryside. But back then, land was plentiful, and while roads were not, there were lots of waterways to support the transportation of goods. In 1685, the Maryland Assembly passed the Town Act, designating only certain ports legal for trade to ensure more efficient collection of taxes. As one of these towns, the economy of Leonardtown prospered. But tobacco also made the town dependent on slave labor and fueled its citizens’ support for the Confederacy.

I pulled ashore and stretched my legs at [Camp Calvert Landing](#). Nearby, I saw a tree weighed down by Osage oranges (aka hedge apples or horse-apples). Strong and able to withstand rot, this tree's wood was once used for building ships used to navigate the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. More recently, it was used to build the 1768 replica of the [Schooner Sultana](#).



*Figure 5: Osage orange found near Camp Calvert Landing*

A little south of Camp Calvert Landing, I saw a sign indicating that I was at an "Oyster Recovery Zone" created by [Marylanders Grow Oysters](#). This program supports the growth of young oysters, called spat, in cages that protect them from smothering silt and many predators so that they can collectively filter up to 50 gallons of water per hour! Water quality is particularly important to the people who reside near Breton Bay, where it was announced in 2018 that Maryland would work with federal agencies to revive depleted oyster populations.

Returning to Leonardtown Wharf Park, I thought about the changes in scenery between Port of Leonardtown Park and Camp Calvert Landing. I also reflected on the changes that took place in Leonardtown

since it was established 359 years ago. But what left me smiling was thinking about future environmental changes that might bring a brighter tomorrow to the people that reside along the Tobacco Coast.

For more information, see

- [Chesapeake Bay Program - Muskrat](#)
- [Water Trails in St. Mary's County](#)
- [National Eagle Center – Eagle Diet and Feeding](#)
- [Chesapeake Bay Program – Great Blue Heron](#)
- [Chesapeake Bay Program – Great Egret](#)
- [Chesapeake Bay Program – Snowy Egret](#)
- [Chesapeake Bay Program – Bald Eagle](#)
- [American Eagle Foundation](#)
- [Visit Historic Leonardtown](#)
- [Historic St. Mary's City – The Lure of Sotweed](#)
- [Wikipedia - Maclura pomifera](#)
- [Chesapeake Bay Foundation – Oyster Fact Sheet](#)
- [Bay Journal - Breton Bay community rallying behind plans for oyster restoration](#)