

Plan Your Own Adventure on the Monocacy River Water Trail

Saki

Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: Kayaking on the Monocacy River Water Trail near the CSX train bridge

My first paddling adventure on the Monocacy River in Maryland was one I'll never forget. It was 2004 and the Brood X cicadas (the Great Eastern Brood) had recently emerged. As I paddled upstream on my surf ski kayak near the mouth amidst a swarm of flying cicadas, some landing on me and my boat, I found myself distracted from the beauty of this freshwater river whose Shawnee name translates to "river with many bends." Still, I got enough of a glimpse to know that the Monocacy was a river to which I would return for future exploration.

At 41.4 (some sources claim 41.8) miles long, I knew it would take me a few trips to see the entire [Monocacy River Water Trail](#). This prompted me to learn all I could about paddling this waterway. Unlike most locations I've paddled in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, this non-tidal waterway almost always has a downstream current of variable speed, which is something I wasn't used to. Pondering an unknown and exaggerated worst-case scenario, I knew I didn't want to spend an hour racing downstream in whitewater, make a judgment error, miss my take-out, and then spend the next three frustrating hours portaging my way back upstream. Filled with numerous questions about the river, I read things online, purchased books and maps, and did lots of reconnaissance on land. The knowledge I gained by searching for answers made me a better trip planner, and after a few solo excursions, I was confidently leading small groups.

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Perhaps the most important question is, “Where are the launch sites?” The [Frederick County Parks & Recreation – Monocacy Scenic Water Trail Map](#) is an excellent source to answer this and most other questions. While I might disagree slightly with how many vehicles can fit at each site, for the most part, I found the maps at this link to be very accurate. Still, they did not tell me everything I wanted to know, so I did comprehensive scouting expeditions to compare the different designated kayak launch sites. The following are details not described in the maps, listed in order of upstream to downstream:

- [Maryland Route 77 – Rocky Ridge](#): Be careful, the launch area here can get muddy and slippery after it rains.
- [Creagerstown Park](#): If you bring a pet that doesn’t like loud noises, you may not want to paddle near here because there is a shooting range nearby. On the east side of the ramp, you’ll find a small gravel beach about 12 feet wide. There is no restroom.
- [Devilbiss Bridge](#): Some mapping software shows the boat launch on the east side of the river but it is on the west.
- [Riverside Park](#): Just east of the paved boat ramp is [Rivermist Park](#), which has a lovely, 1.7-mile paved multi-purpose trail that parallels the north side of the river.
- [Pinecliff Park](#): This park has a nice, paved boat ramp.
- [Gambrill Mill at Monocacy National Battlefield](#): Mapping software might try to take you to a parking lot near the Corporal Kirk J. Bosselmann bridge where Urbana Pike (Route 355) passes over the Monocacy River, but the place you want to turn off is 0.2 mile south of this on the east side of Urbana Pike. Follow the road marked with the "Gambrill Mill Tour Stop 4" sign and park near the [boardwalk trailhead](#).
- [Buckeystown Community Park](#): There is a 160-foot portage to a somewhat steep and rocky soft launch. If you don’t mind doing a 250-foot portage, you can instead launch from a very [steep ramp](#) (not for vehicles) which has a heavy-duty eyebolt at the top. I believe this was designed to lower a boat down to the water with a rope, not supplied. On either side are narrow staircases.



Figure 2: Non-vehicular ramp with staircases at Buckeystown Community Park

- [Park Mills Road Bridge](#): There will be a small sign that reads “Monocacy River Boat Ramp,” which is confusing because that is the name of the launch site just downstream. There is little else to mark this Natural Resource Management Area (NRMA).
- [Monocacy Boat Ramp](#): At a signed split in the road, the right side leads to the ramp while the left goes to the aqueduct. Should the parking near the ramp fill up, you can always drop off your boat and then park in the spaces closer to the aqueduct.

With the exception of ADA parking, none of these sites are really accommodating for people launching with serious mobility issues. If that is a concern, I suggest sticking to the ones with paved boat ramps.

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How much water is needed to make a good trip? Signs at the launch sites read,

From the MD 77 Bridge, the [U.S. Geological Survey gauge at Jug Bridge in Frederick](#) should read 350 cubic feet per second (cfs) or show a water level of at least 2.1 feet.

From Devilbiss Bridge and below, the gauge should read at least 215 cfs or 1.7 feet.

In the following charts, taken from the above link, just before April 28, 2023, the river was flowing at a mere 310 cfs with a water level of 2.05 feet, the result of much lower-than-average precipitation from weeks prior.

This would have been sufficient for paddling at Devilbiss Bridge and below but not further upstream. Then between April 28 and May 1, 2.8 inches of rain raised the water flow and level to a high of 11,300 cfs and 12.34 feet, respectively.

## Monocacy River at Jug Bridge Near Frederick, MD - 01643000

April 27, 2023 - May 2, 2023

Streamflow, ft<sup>3</sup>/s ⓘ

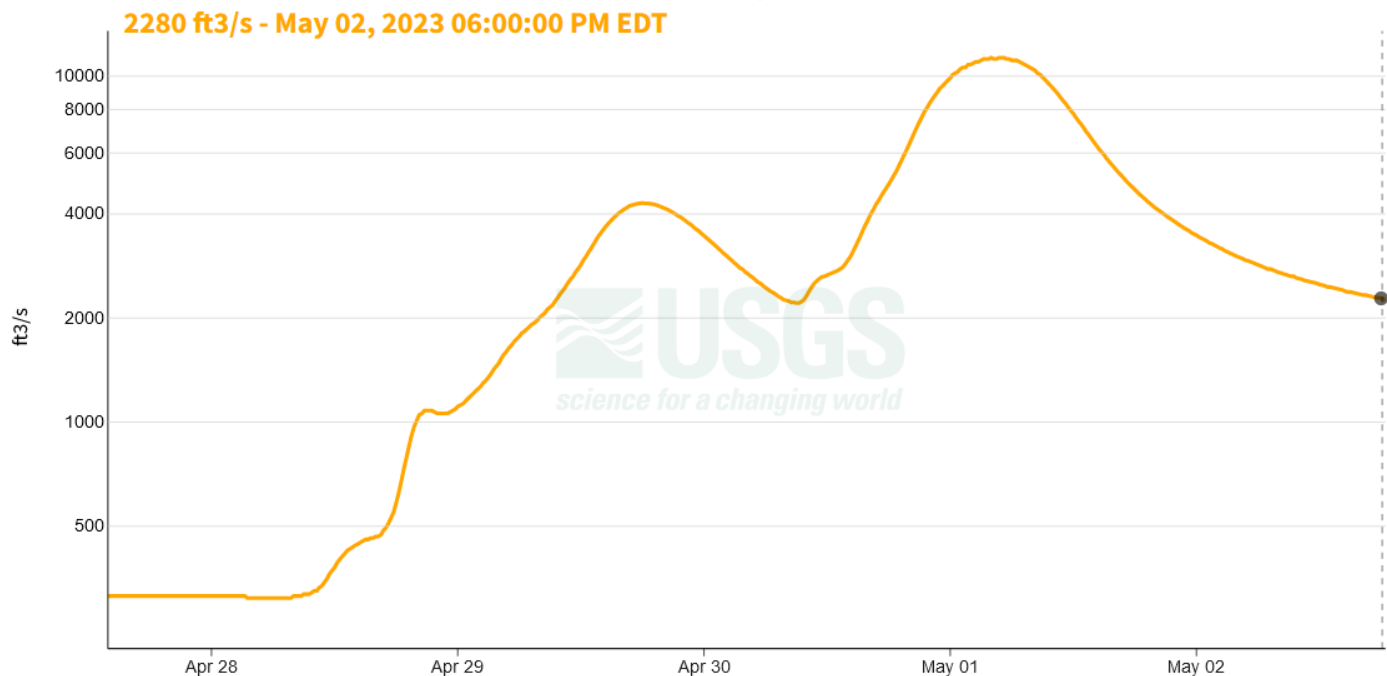


Figure 3: Streamflow on the Monocacy River

# Monocacy River at Jug Bridge Near Frederick, MD - 01643000

April 25, 2023 - May 2, 2023

Gage height, ft ⓘ

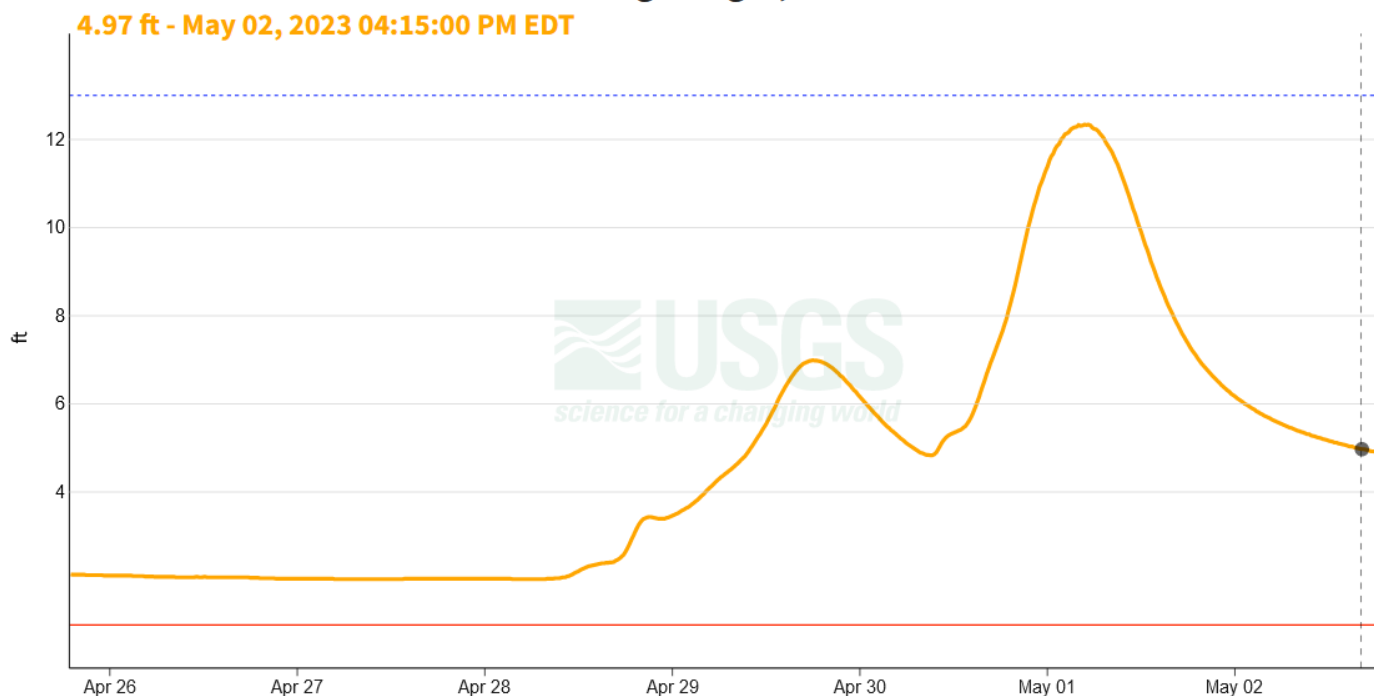


Figure 4: Gage height on the Monocacy River

What about too much water? Levels of five feet or above are considered hazardous for recreational use and should not be attempted.

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When is the best time to paddle? I recommend avoiding the Monocacy River Water Trail between mid-July and late fall, when water levels are often insufficient unless it has rained recently. This isn't a safety concern...just a way to ensure you have an enjoyable trip which doesn't involve schlepping your boat through shallow areas.

Other times of the year are usually fine for paddling, but keep in mind that the Monocacy River water temperature may be colder than the Chesapeake Bay. This might be refreshing on a hot summer day but in early spring or late fall, I wear at least a wetsuit.

During the autumn and winter, one should also be aware of waterfowl hunting season and that "sneak boating," which involves hunting from small, low-profile boats, is permitted on the Monocacy.

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Is a car shuttle needed? Since the average current is only 2 mph, doing an out-and-back trip is certainly feasible, but unless you only plan to paddle a short distance and don't mind portaging through shallow areas, I highly suggest finding someone else with a vehicle and doing a car shuttle. It will make for a much easier trip.

Going at it alone, I've also done bicycle shuttles, which are fun but take considerably more time and planning. This involves staging and locking up your boat or bike as you transition from one launch site to another. Fortunately, many of the roads along the Monocacy River are quite attractive for riding.

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What kind of boat should be used? Many boats types are suitable for paddling on the Monocacy River Water Trail. The big question is your comfort level for minor scrapes. Especially when the water is low, there are spots where rocks will probably make contact with your hull. Plastic boats can take the most abuse and while fiberglass, carbon fiber, and Kevlar boats won't likely suffer from structural damage, they might get a little scratched up. Because there are many shallow areas in fast-moving sections with rocks just below the surface, I do not recommend using a stand up paddleboard (SUP).

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Are there any challenging parts? The Monocacy River Water Trail is amazingly consistent in both width and river conditions. While there are many portions with riffles, there is only one natural set of rapids, a Class I segment called the [Greenfield Rapids](#). It is 5.5 miles downstream of Buckeystown Community Park and 0.4 mile upstream of Park Mills Road Bridge. I've seen folks with little kayaking experience do this brief section without difficulty. As you approach, you'll hear the turbulence. At that point, if you are concerned, I suggest heading to the right, then dragging your boat onto the big flat rock where you can see what lies ahead. If you choose to kayak through the whitewater, just be sure to align your boat to face it head-on and go straight through...it is that easy. If you're not comfortable with this, you can always portage around.



*Figure 5: Greenfield Rapids*

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What is there to see? I very much enjoy the scenery of the Monocacy River, but some folks call it the “Monotony River,” because the lovely tree-lined shores just seem to repeat over and over.





*Figure 6: Beautiful monotony on the Monocacy*

Despite the supposed monotony, there are memorable structures like the historic bridges:

- [LeGore Arch Bridge](#): This 248-foot-long stone bridge was built by James William LeGore around 1900. It stands downstream of the Maryland Route 77 – Rocky Ridge launch but upstream of Creagerstown Park.



Figure 7: LeGore Arch Bridge

- CSX train bridge: Shown in the photo at the top, this bridge lies downstream of the Park Mills Road Bridge launch and slightly upriver of the Monocacy Boat Ramp.
- [Monocacy Aqueduct](#): Built between 1829 and 1833, this has been described by historians as one of the finest canal features in the United States. It resides just after the Monocacy Boat Ramp.



*Figure 8: Monocacy Aqueduct*

Other striking features on the water trail are the numerous rock formations created by geologic upheavals, weather extremes, and gravity. They are part of the Piedmont and Blue Ridge Physiographic Provinces and contain geologic structures which include metamorphosed and sedimentary rock types.



*Figure 9: Kayaking by a twisted rock formation on the Monocacy River with duck decoy in tow*

My favorite thing to see on the water trail is wildlife, which is often abundant in the warmer months. I've spotted numerous bald eagles, several snakes, and even a barred owl, though none can compare to the memorability of the Brood X cicadas.



*Figure 10: Northern water snake*



Figure 11: Barred owl

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Since I first paddled the Monocacy River, I've explored similar freshwater destinations in the area like Catoctin Creek and Conococheague Creek, but none have matched the Monocacy River Water Trail in terms of accessibility, length, suitability for such a wide range of skill-levels, and being paddle-able for so much of the year. Perhaps this is why Edward "Boulderbuster" Gertler, canoeing guidebook author with over 60 years of paddling experience, describes it as "...one of the most reliably floatable streams...in this state of small creeks...a good retreat for a quiet day in the outdoors..." I invite you to plan your own kayak trip on this water trail and experience the splendor of this river with many bends. It is not that difficult if you have access to good information...and now you do.

For more information see

[Visual Crossing – Historical weather data for any location](#)

[Frederick County – Monocacy Scenic River – Water Trail Map & Guide](#)

[American Whitewater – Monocacy River, Buckeystown Park to Park Mills Road](#)

[eRegulations – Migratory Game Bird Seasons & Limits](#)

[Frederick County Government – The Physical Environment](#)