

Paddling in Otter Point Creek Natural Area

Saki

Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: Paddleboarding on the Anita C. Leight Estuary Center paddle trail

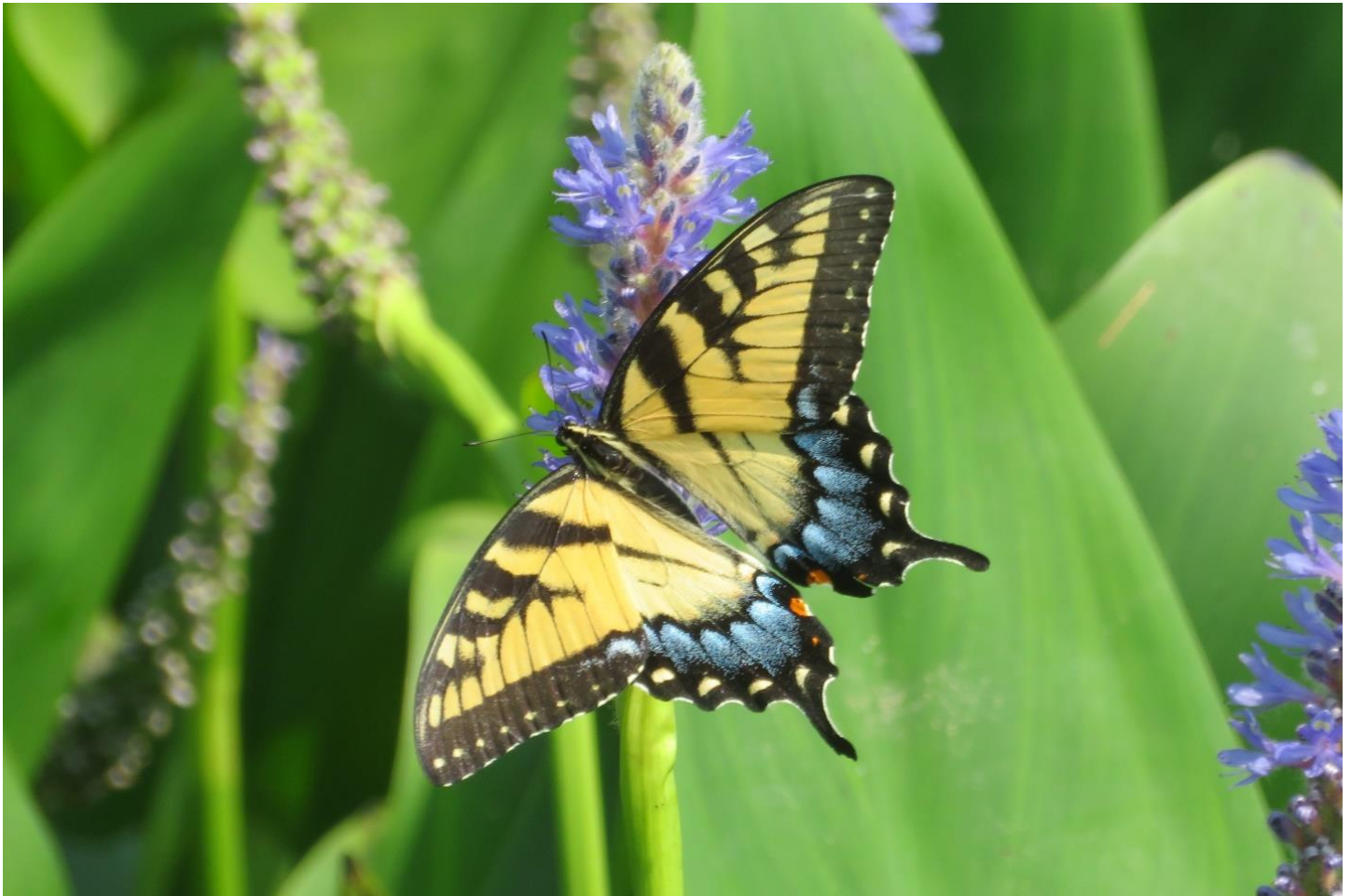
Paddle trails are at the top of my list of places to be surrounded with beautiful scenery while exploring areas via small watercraft. Also known as “water trails” or “blueways,” they typically have easy public access, an educational/interpretive component, and are located in undeveloped, protected places to ensure pristine, natural views. One of my favorite paddle trails, the 3.6 mile [Anita C. Leight Estuary Center Paddle Trail](#), is in Otter Point Creek Natural Area, one of the largest freshwater tidal marshes within the upper Chesapeake Bay.

The paddle trail begins at the [Anita C. Leight Estuary Center](#), then heads west and counter-clockwise around the upstream portions of Otter Point Creek. The Estuary Center is the research and education facility of the Otter Point Creek component of the Chesapeake Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve in Maryland. Named after a member of the family that donated the land they loved to Harford County, the Estuary Center is also a great location for kids and adults to get outdoors and learn about the estuary ecosystem from enthusiastic volunteers and naturalists, such as Lauren Pathoumthong, who told me about the creek during my July 2021 visit.

I began my adventure by carrying my stand up paddleboard (SUP) about 500 feet down a very steep, gated road to launch from the Estuary Center. Later, I was told that if the staff isn't busy, they will unlock the gate so one can drive down to the water and unload. Another option is to put in about a quarter of a mile southeast at [Otter Point Public Landing](#), which was undergoing renovations in July 2021 and slated to reopen by

the end of the year. A third choice lies about 0.75 mile southeast of the Estuary Center and across the creek at [Flying Point Park](#), which has two ramps, a beach, and plenty of parking.

Paddling upstream around high tide (avoid low tide), I stopped to admire the tiger and black swallowtail butterflies sipping nectar from the pickerelweed flowers along the shore. Slightly further west, at the pontoon boat pier, I found evidence of other insects...the exuviae (cast-off outer skin) of dragonflies and damselflies.



*Figure 2: Tiger swallowtail butterfly on pickerelweed*



*Figure 3: Damselfly exuvia*

I mostly followed the paddle trail markers, which number to 15, but occasionally I strayed to explore various tributaries such as the [Haha Branch](#) which flows from the north. Just thinking of its name puts a smile on my face. Here I found a buttonbush plant, whose flowers remind me of the dreaded Coronavirus.



Figure 4: Buttonbush flowers

My favorite deviation from the paddle trail was at marker #8 (shown at top). If you're following them in order, it will point to the left. But going right will take you to some really nice, wooded sections where I appended another mile of exploration to the paddle trail route. Here, I also found a pier where I pulled ashore and walked on one of the hiking trails in the Melvin G. Bosely Conservancy. The Conservancy is owned by the [Izaak Walton League of America](#), one of our country's oldest conservation organizations. I didn't stay long since Lauren warned me about the biting insects and suggested I return for a hike once the leaves start to die back.



*Figure 5: Daphne on a trail in the Bosely Conservancy*

During my first visit to the paddle trail, in May 2021, I saw lots of flowers such as yellow iris, tulip poplar, and the weirdly shaped golden club. But by July, some of the brightest colors were from dodder (aka "devil's shoelaces"), a parasitic plant lacking chlorophyll.



*Figure 6: Tulip poplar flower*



*Figure 7: Golden club flower*





Figure 8: Dodder

The biggest difference between paddling in spring versus summer is the submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) which grows dense enough during the warmer months to make paddling difficult. If you plan to get out on the water during this time, take advice from veteran kayaker Greg Welker: “Single blading [using a single blade paddle] works a bit easier, especially if you pause your stroke just after it exits the water to let the weeds slide off. Also, Greenland paddles work better than Euro blades since they have fewer curves to catch in the plants.” My suggestion is to not bring that any watercraft with a rudder, skeg, or fin which cannot be fixed in the fully retracted position.

While SAV can be an annoyance while paddling, it is critical to the ecosystem; it provides food and shelter to wildlife, sequesters carbon, increases oxygen levels in the water, absorbs surplus nutrients, decreases shoreline erosion, and helps sediment settle to the bottom. Native wild celery, with its almost five-foot-long ribbon-like leaves, was one of the typical plants I found growing in the creek. Unfortunately, hydrilla, called the “world's worst invasive aquatic plant,” was even more common. Native to Asia, it was first identified in the

Chesapeake Bay region in 1982, and has been found in 30 states. But like many SAV, it is an outstanding food source for waterfowl and provides an excellent habitat for fish.



*Figure 9: Wild celery*



*Figure 10: Hydrilla*

There was no shortage of fish or other wildlife on Otter Point Creek. I saw a muskrat swimming, several bald eagles, egrets, and great blue herons. While I didn't see any crayfish (aka crawfish, crawdads, mudbugs), I did find evidence of their presence in the form of crayfish mounds, which are sometimes known as crayfish chimneys.



*Figure 11: Muskrat*



*Figure 12: Bald eagle*



*Figure 13: Crayfish mound*

After paddling, I spent some time at the Estuary Center, exploring their approximately two miles of hiking trails. I saw that the fruits of the numerous native mayapple plants, which were green when I visited in May, were slowly ripening to yellow. The fruit is generally ripe in mid-July or August, but beware that, except for the edible fruit, all parts of the plant (including the seeds) are poisonous.



*Figure 14: Mayapple plant with unripe fruit dangling*

Otter Point Creek and the Anita C. Leight Estuary Center are terrific places that have a little bit of something for everyone: diverse flora and fauna, family-friendly outdoor activities, naturalist-led programs, hiking trails, and a scenic paddle trail where one can get deep into nature without having to paddle far. Enjoy your time in the Otter Point Creek Natural Area...it is how Anita C. Leight would have wanted it.

For more information, see

[Otter Point Creek Alliance – Anita C. Leight Estuary Center](#)

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources \(DNR\) - Otter Point Creek](#)

[University of Maryland Extension – Dodder](#)

[Chesapeake Progress – SAV](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Program – Wild Celery](#)

[Maryland DNR – SAV – Hydrilla](#)

[U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – Hydrilla](#)

[University of Florida – Weekly “What is it?”: Crawfish Mounds](#)

[Wisconsin Horticulture – Mayapple, Podophyllum peltatum](#)