

Paddling in Paradise at Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary

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*Figure 1: Upper Glebe Marsh at Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary*

9,765,772! That's the population of the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area as of 2017. So, it is pretty amazing that just 20 miles away from Washington D.C. lies Jug Bay, a natural, serene paradise and one of the largest freshwater tidal systems on the East Coast. At the heart of Jug Bay lies [Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary](#). Operated by the Anne Arundel County, Maryland Department of Recreation and Parks, it consists of 1,700 acres of open water, tidal freshwater marshes, forested wetlands, upland and riparian forest, creeks, meadows, pine and sand barrens, and fields along the scenic Patuxent River. Created in 1985, the Sanctuary has been described as a haven to a high diversity of plants and wildlife. But I describe it as a little slice of heaven.

I started kayaking 20 years ago in part to get out in nature and enjoy the beauty of the great outdoors. It's no coincidence that one of the first places I paddled was Jug Bay. I've explored it on my own, participated in tours led by the Sanctuary, and organized my own group outings. I never get tired of this place, and always discover something new.

The mission of the Sanctuary is to provide environmental education opportunities to the public, to conduct ecological research, and to conserve Jug Bay's unique ecosystem. Exploring the place via its over 15 miles of hiking trails and boardwalks or participating in its numerous outdoor land-based programs is time well

spent. But if you really want an up close and personal experience with the tidal freshwater marshes of Jug Bay and its surrounding waterways, you need to get out on the water.

My most recent paddling experience at the Sanctuary was an organized event called "Evening Mysteries of the Marsh Canoe." This beginner-level trip commenced at the Wetlands Center with an orientation talk by Bob, the group leader. Most people drove there but my peers and I wanted to use our own watercraft so we paddled (0.7 mile) from the nearby [Jackson's Landing](#) at [Patuxent River Park](#). (The Sanctuary does not have public launch sites accessible by vehicle.)

All the Sanctuary's canoe trips start at the River Pier, which lies at the end of the historic Railroad Bed Trail. According to [Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary – Steam Age](#), "They called it the 'Honeysuckle Route' because the railbed was 'banked on either side with fragrant clumps of honeysuckle.' And its purpose was just as fanciful: to carry vacationers from Washington, D.C., to the popular resort town of Chesapeake Beach. This railroad passed right through the middle of today's Sanctuary. The railroad and resort ceased operation in 1934 during the depression and the railroad was dismantled soon thereafter and sold as scrap metal." A support for the train bridge still remains near the River Pier, a reminder of the old Honeysuckle Route.



*Figure 2: Paddling past the train bridge support*

After Bob and his co-leader, Blythe, got our group of nine launched, we started paddling upstream on the Patuxent River. Jug Bay is located near the mid-point of this 115-mile long waterway, the longest river contained entirely within Maryland.





*Figure 3: Trip leaders Blythe and Bob*

We passed [Mount Calvert Historical and Archaeological Park](#), then made our way up the Western Branch and then Charles Branch. Further upstream, the salinity of the water went down and we encountered more trees. Bob said that we were experiencing the transition from marsh to swamp. Along the way, we spotted a beaver lodge.



*Figure 4: Beaver lodge on Charles Branch*

I asked Bob how to tell the difference between an [arrow arum](#) leaf and a [pickerelweed](#) leaf. He found examples of both and then passed them around, pointing out differences in shape and vein structure. Both Bob and Blythe have taught college biology classes and are very knowledgeable about flora and fauna on the Patuxent River.

Stopped by a fallen tree, we paused briefly, closing our eyes to focus on the sweet sounds of Mother Nature as the sun started to sink low in the sky. I could hear the hum of insects, croaking of frogs, and calls of osprey in the distance. According to the [Baltimore Sun - Osprey pairs travel thousands of miles each March to reunite at Jug Bay](#), “The Chesapeake Bay is home to one of the largest osprey populations in the world, and more than two dozen breeding pairs nest at Jug Bay.”





*Figure 5: Osprey at north end of Jug Bay*

I always learn something new when I paddle with a Sanctuary naturalist. But if I want to see wildlife, there's nothing better than getting out on my own or with a very small group. So where are the best places to put in? In addition to launching at Jackson's Landing, I also recommend [Selby's Landing](#) and [Patuxent Wetlands Park](#).

Selby's Landing lies just south of Jug Bay and directly across from the scenic House Creek, where you will surely find beaver lodges. Like Jackson's Landing, it is part of Patuxent River Park.

Patuxent Wetlands Park is about 3.5 miles north of Jug Bay. It is one of four sections associated with the Sanctuary: [Sanctuary Proper & Wetlands Center](#), [Glendening Preserve](#), Patuxent Wetlands Park, and [Wootons Landing](#). Patuxent Wetlands Park is one of my favorite launch sites because its longer hours ensure I can be on the water near dawn and dusk, when wildlife is most active. Avoid low tide to prevent a muddy launch/landing.



*Figure 6: Otter at Patuxent Wetlands Park*

To get the full wetlands experience at Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary, I suggest paddling from Patuxent Wetlands Park to Selby's Landing. This can be done one way with a shuttle (5 miles) or as an out-and-back trip (10 miles). For the truly adventurous, extend your journey by taking the time to explore the east side of Jug Bay and a few of the smaller Patuxent River tributaries along the way. If you're participating in the [Patuxent Challenge](#), you can find three challenge signs along this [route](#). Note that you only need five to receive a prize!

Whether you're a beginner without a boat or an experienced kayaker, there's an adventure on the water waiting for you at or near Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary.