

RiverPalooza 2019 – Mattawoman Creek

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Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: Kayakers on Mattawoman Creek

According to the [Chesapeake Bay Program](#), “In the biennial ‘[State of the Bay](#)’ report, issued by the [Chesapeake Bay Foundation](#), the health of the [Chesapeake] Bay dropped one point, lowering its score from a C- in 2016 to a D+ in 2018.” The Bay is a far cry from its pristine state when Captain John Smith explored it in 1608. I’ve often wondered what things might have looked like had they remained untouched by Europeans. At the July 20, 2019 [RiverPalooza](#) event, I received my answer.

The [Potomac Riverkeeper Network](#) describes RiverPalooza as a “season-long annual event designed to provide families and river enthusiasts with memorable on-the-water experiences that build a deep and enduring appreciation for our rivers...[It is run] with a single goal in mind: the more people experience and enjoy our rivers, the more they will value them.” On July 20, 2019, I joined the American Indian [Picataway Kanoi Tribe](#) Paddle, a unique RiverPalooza event on Mattawoman Creek in Charles County, Maryland which focused on the history and culture of the area.

About 30 of us met at [Mattingly Park](#). It was a great turnout considering the forecasted high temperature of 99 degrees with heat index of 114. We were greeted by Dean Naujoks, the Potomac

Riverkeeper. Next we were introduced to our trip leaders: Francis Gray, the Piscataway Conoy Tribal Chairman, and Kimberly (Kim) DeMarr, the outfitter owner.



Figure 2: Kayakers on Mattawoman Creek

Paddling upstream on Mattawoman Creek, it didn't take long before we were in a place where we could appreciate the natural beauty of the area. According to the [Chesapeake Bay Program](#), "A tributary of the Potomac River, Mattawoman Creek sits just a few miles south of Washington, D.C., but is one of Maryland's healthiest waterways." It was here that Francis told us about the various native plants that his people once harvested for food:

- [Wild rice](#): Breaking off a stalk so we could examine the ripening grains, Francis mentioned that wild rice is not found on tributaries of the Potomac River more than a few creeks south of the Mattawoman, and was a valuable food and commodity for trade with other tribal communities to the north and south.



Figure 3: Wild rice

- [Arrow arum](#) (aka Tuckahoe): Some Native American tribes used dried, pulverized arrow arum roots as flour for making bread. The plant's fruits were sometimes cooked and eaten like peas.
- [Cattail](#): In addition to being used for food, the Piscataway used them for making arrow shafts and wigwams.
- [Arrowhead](#): All thirty some varieties or species of arrowhead, members of the Water Plantain Family, are edible, particularly the tubers.

This section of Mattawoman Creek is called a "breadbasket marsh" because of the high diversity and concentration of edible plants. Francis is working to pass on the identification and preparation of these and other edible plants to younger members of his tribe.



*Figure 4: Francis Gray, Piscataway Conoy Tribal Chairman, surrounded by arrow arum, wild rice, and cattails*

Francis also mentioned how the Piscataway fished for rockfish, smallmouth bass, and largemouth bass. Even today (according to the [Chesapeake Bay Program](#)), “the 30-mile [Mattawoman] creek is nationally-renowned for its fish habitat: fisheries biologists have called Mattawoman the most productive tributary of the Chesapeake Bay, and it is considered the best nursery for migratory fish in the Bay region.”

One plant that many of the kayakers found intriguing was the American lotus. According to the [Mattawoman Watershed Society](#), this is “the only site on Maryland's western shore with natural populations of the American Lotus.”



Figure 5: American Lotus

We paddled to the [Mattawoman State Natural Environmental Area](#) on the south side of the creek where Kim said some old barges lay just below the surface. I think our guides brought us there so we could rest in the shade. They did a good job making sure everyone was well taken care of.

Passing the islands near Nelson Point, I could see the 13-mile [Indian Head Rail Trail](#) just ahead. If seeing the Mattawoman from boat is not an option, catching a glimpse of it while walking or bicycling on the rail trail may be the next best choice.

In a small inlet, we saw the remains of a beaver lodge and further away, an osprey nest with occupants. Here, Kim gave us a lesson on osprey:

- On average, females are larger than males. Females also have a necklace of brown feathers across their chest whereas the male's chest is completely white.
- After hatching, it only takes about eight weeks for an osprey to become fully grown.

- They spend winters in South America and return in mid-March.
- Osprey generally mate with the same partner for life.
- Adults return each year to nest in the same area in which they were born.
- These raptors may be found on nearly every corner of the world, but the Chesapeake Bay region is home to the largest concentration of nesting osprey.

In addition to osprey, we saw a few egrets in the distance. We were hoping to see bald eagles but Francis thought that was unlikely given the high heat.

On the return trip, I found a few empty shells of [mystery snails](#), a non-native species from Asia along with a couple exoskeleton molts of dragonfly nymphs.



*Figure 6: Molt from dragonfly nymph*

Francis mentioned how, unlike several other waterways in the area, Mattawoman Creek has retained much of its scenic beauty, having changed little over the last 400 years. According to the [Mattawoman Watershed Society](#), it is as “near to the ideal conditions as can be found in the northern Chesapeake Bay” and “what a restored Chesapeake Bay would look like.”



The majority of the Chesapeake tribes, including the Piscataway, spoke [Algonquian](#) languages - a family of languages widespread among native peoples from northern Canada to the Carolinas. According to the [Mattawoman Watershed Society](#), the Algonquin name for Mattawoman has been variously translated as “where one goes pleasantly” and “a place to go quietly.” I would like to think that the peace and tranquility associated with the original name is as valid now as it was back then.