

Parkers Creek – the Chesapeake Bay in Miniature

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Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: Paddling downstream on Parkers Creek

If a friend were to visit me for just one day and ask to see the natural beauty of the Chesapeake Bay, I would take him kayaking on Parkers Creek in Calvert County, Maryland. This wonderful “Chesapeake Bay in miniature,” as the [Maryland Department of Natural Resources](#) (DNR) calls it, is protected by the [Parkers Creek Watershed Nature Preserve](#) as one of the last remaining pristine watersheds on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay. Representative of some of the best that the Bay has to offer, Parkers Creek is described by [Bay Journal](#) as a “microcosm of ecosystems found in Maryland.”

Parkers Creek is a lovely place to paddle. Unfortunately, there are no public launch sites nearby. So, I was excited to hear that the [American Chestnut Land Trust](#) (ACLT) was leading a guided canoe trip that would start from [Warrior’s Rest Nature Preserve](#) (aka Warrior’s Rest Sanctuary), which lies just an eighth of a mile south of where the creek empties into the Chesapeake Bay. An “oasis” launch site, Warrior’s Rest is a 230-acre property administered jointly with the ACLT and the Nature Conservancy. There is limited public access to this property due to its sensitive ecosystem, which includes habitat for the endangered [Puritan tiger beetle](#) (*Cicindela puritana*).

After being introduced to our Master Naturalist guides Greg Montgomery, Jan Hurst, and Laura Berg, our group launched canoes, kayaks, and my standup paddleboard (SUP) from Warrior's Rest. It was a gorgeous, sunny day with calm water, light wind, and temperatures in the 70s. The trip was planned during high tide to ensure we could get as far upstream as possible and avoid running aground in the shallow areas. On that day, the tide was even higher than normal thanks to tropical storm Dorian.



Figure 2: Launching from Warrior's Rest

Out on the Chesapeake Bay, I looked down from my SUP and saw hundreds of 2-3-inch-long fish swimming in schools. Many jumped out of the water, even when none of us were nearby. Greg, our lead guide, said it was likely because they were trying to escape from a predator.

We paddled into Parkers Creek, receiving a strong push from both the [flood tide](#) and the [storm surge](#). About a quarter mile upstream, we saw an unnamed wooded island to our south that Greg said serves as a natural “seed bank.” Should the area be devastated by fire, the plants on the island will likely survive to help repopulate the marsh.

There was nobody else boating on the water, but we did see a few people on land, enjoying the 22 miles of [hiking trails](#) in the ACLT. The ACLT is a member-supported non-profit that protects more than 3200 acres, including the Parkers Creek watershed and its surrounding natural lands, waterways, and wildlife habitats. According to the [History of ACLT](#), this organization was established in 1986 and named after a “one-time giant of the eastern United States hardwood forest, the American Chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) because the Maryland State Champion surviving American Chestnut tree resided on...property which was the ACLT's first acquisition.” Unfortunately, a fungal disease known as [chestnut blight](#) (*Cryphonectria parasitica*), first detected in 1904, eliminated the American Chestnut as a mature forest tree to the point it is considered functionally extinct by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. For more information, see [American Chestnut Foundation](#).

Continuing upstream, Greg pointed out changes in the vegetation as water salinity decreased. He described various wetland plants such as cattails, marsh mallow, and phragmites. According to the [Maryland State Wildlife Action Plan](#), the latter arrived in the Parkers Creek wildlife management area in the 1980's. Phragmites threatens rare species living in the marshes of Parkers Creek, including several species of marsh nesting birds, such as the least bittern.

Paddling further, we saw an increase in the number of trees, though many were dead, especially the red maples. A few people at the ACLT suggested that sea level rise might be at least partly to blame.



*Figure 3: Paddling upstream on Parkers Creek*

Wildlife is abundant on Parkers Creek. Our group saw several bald eagles, osprey, great blue herons, and turtles. A few of us saw a snake swimming to the shore, and I spotted a muskrat. Greg mentioned that there was a beaver dam slightly upstream of where we turned around. It would have been nice to have gotten that far, but the creek was starting to get narrower than some of the boats, which would have made turning around difficult.



*Figure 4: Eastern painted turtle on Parkers Creek*

Paddling back downstream, we saw a few hikers on the North-South Trail, the newest trail in the ACLT. As the name implies, it connects the North Side Trails, based near Double Oak Farm, with the South Side Trails. These hikers were crossing Parkers Creek via a small wooden raft that links the two trail networks. Back in the 1930s, there was a bridge at this same location that connected the local communities. Looking down from my SUP, I could see remnants of the bridge pilings.



*Figure 5: Hikers crossing Parkers Creek on a wooden raft*

Paddling back downstream, I spoke with Jan, who told me about the [ACLT's Master Naturalist program](#), which trains citizen scientists dedicated to the care and conservation of Maryland's natural environment. Certified Master Naturalists like Greg, Jan, and Laura can share their expertise with the public, participate in research, and guide hikes and canoe trips. One of the requirements to maintain this certification is to volunteer at least 40 hours annually. The ACLT offers numerous opportunities for Master Naturalists and other volunteers to get out and support the mission of the organization. One such mission is to "provide environmentally sustainable public access to preserved properties for educational, scientific, recreational and cultural purposes." Maybe that's why their motto is "Connecting people with the land." After paddling through the pristine wetlands of Parkers Creek, I most certainly felt connected.