

The Patuxent Challenge – Challenge Accepted!

Saki

Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

October 16, 2019



*Figure 1: Patuxent Challenge sign #16 is dedicated at Savage Fest 2019 by Dale Fixsen, President of the Carroll Baldwin Memorial Institute (third from left) and Howard County Executive Dr. Calvin Ball (third from right)*

I love a good challenge, so when I was asked to install one of the Patuxent Challenge signs in my hometown, I just had to learn more. This sign, #16, is located behind Carroll Baldwin Hall in Savage, Maryland. The challenge activity associated with it includes walking on Foundry Street, crossing the historic Bollman Truss Bridge and visiting the Savage Mill Trail, a former rail trail that parallels the Little Patuxent River. Do the walk, take a selfie photo with this sign, and you can declare this challenge met. Pretty simple, right? Well, none of the challenges are all that difficult, although it does take some time and effort to complete the 5, 10, or 15 activities required within a calendar year to earn a prize. Feeling motivated to explore, I threw down the gauntlet and declared, “Challenge accepted!”

The Patuxent Challenge is an initiative by the Tourism Workgroup of the Patuxent River Commission. This Workgroup was established to maintain, create, and encourage opportunities for river-related economic activities and encourage public access and recreational opportunities to the river and tributaries throughout the Patuxent River watershed.

The Challenge encourages people to get out and explore the areas around the Patuxent River, which was designated in 1968 as one of Maryland's most scenic rivers. Ironically, my first exploration was the last site, #16...the one in my town.

The hardest part of the Patuxent Challenge for me was all the driving. At over 115 miles long and with a watershed of over 900 square miles, the Patuxent River is the largest river completely within Maryland and covers a lot of territory. But all that driving was well worth it. I found new kayak launch sites, saw lots of wildlife, met some interesting people, and visited towns that I had only seen on a map. Here are a few highlights.

#15 Lower Marlboro Wharf and #10 Kings Landing Park: Launching my standup paddleboard (SUP) from Lower Marlboro Wharf, my dog (Daphne) and I paddled on the Patuxent River to Kings Landing Park. On the way back, I explored Tyverne Creek, where I saw a plethora of tiger swallowtail butterflies. I was able to paddle almost a mile upstream on this scenic, narrow waterway to a place best described as solitary

tranquility. The suggested activity for Kings Landing Park is to fish from their pier. But I don't have a fishing pole so I adapted the activity to paddleboarding which I felt met the spirit of the challenge.



*Figure 2: Tiger swallowtail butterflies on Tyverne Creek*

One mistake I made at Kings Landing Park is that I initially mistook a Patuxent Water Trail sign for a Patuxent Challenge sign. The former is a small white sign with blue lettering while the latter is a larger blue sign with white font.



*Figure 3: I was looking for a Patuxent Challenge sign but instead found a Patuxent Water Trail sign at Kings Landing Park*

#13 Historic Sotterley Plantation: I launched my surf ski kayak from Greenwell State Park and paddled to the plantation, where one can shop at their farmers market, learn sustainable farming, and tour the 1703 plantation house. Prior to finding the sign, I explored the shoreline around Sotterley Point. I noticed that the broken shells and rocks looked very similar to those in parts of Calvert County where I've found numerous fossils. So, I looked around for about 30-40 minutes and found six shark teeth!



*Figure 4: Shark teeth found at Sotterley Point*

A week later, I returned to Sotterley Point and found nine more shark teeth, pieces of ray dental palates, a fossilized bone fragment, and three crab claw tips. I also saw several hundred comb jellies. These are bioluminescent, transparent, non-stinging, jelly-like invertebrates which are also known as sea walnuts.



*Figure 5: Comb jelly at Sotterley Point*

#6 Governor Bridge Natural Area: I searched for a sign described as residing on the 0.75-mile Red Trail. But unlike geocaching, for the Patuxent Challenge the specific location is not always stated, so one may need to do a little exploration. While searching, I found paw paw fruit and various ponds dotted with small islands, providing wetland shelter to a host of flora and fauna. Eventually, I found the sign, after wading through a muddy section of Green Branch to get past an area where the trail had eroded. Fortunately, none of the other Challenge sites had issues.



*Figure 6: Garter snake at the Governor Bridge Natural Area*

#1 James and Anne Robinson Nature Center: I'd been to this place a few times before to tour the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum nature center, compete in a Bug Trivia Contest, and paddle on the Middle Patuxent River that passes by it. But this was the first time I explored the trails. I parked near the stone ruins of the pre-colonial Simpsonville Mill which served as both a textile and a grist mill. Then I walked to the Nature Center via the Mill Ruins Trail and the Sycamore Stroll Trail until I found the sign.

Having accomplished my goal of completing activities at all 16 locations, I declared, "Challenge completed!" About five weeks after submitting my photos, I received my prize...a box full of swag (11 items!) from some of the cities and counties through which the Patuxent River passes. Each sparked a memory of an area that I visited.

- A water bottle with the City of Laurel logo reminded me of the historic dam ruins where Daphne and I walked at (#5) Riverfront Park.



- A stuffed toy crab made me reminisce about blue crabs I saw scurrying through the clean water while kayaking to Myrtle Point Park (#14).
- A bottle opener with a heron logo from Patuxent River Park brought back memories of paddleboarding between fields of spatterdock on the freshwater tidal marshes of Jug Bay Natural Area (#9).

Doing the Patuxent Challenge was fun and at times exhilarating. The prize was nice too but it was really just something to make the accomplishment more tangible. It was the destination...the journey was the real adventure.

Daphne joined me for seven of the Patuxent Challenge activities. But she did not qualify for a prize because they only award one prize per address. Maybe she'll have her chance next year.

For more information, see

- [Maryland Department of Planning – The Patuxent Challenge](#)
- [Visit Howard County Maryland – Are You Up for the Patuxent Challenge?](#)
- [Historic Sotterley Farm](#)
- [Chesapeake Bay Program - Comb Jellies](#)
- [Archaeological Collections in Maryland – Simpsonville Mill](#)