

Something for Everyone at Westmoreland State Park

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Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: Sunrise at Westmoreland State Park

It is difficult to find a park with as many amenities as [Westmoreland State Park](#). Located on the Potomac River's Northern Neck in Westmoreland County, Virginia, this place truly has multi-faceted appeal. During the warmer months, visitors can cool off in the Olympic-sized swimming pool, launch from the boat ramp, relax at the beach, or rent a kayak. Exercise enthusiasts will love their 1.63-mile-long Conservation Corps Fitness Trail, and hikers will enjoy exploring the approximately six miles of wooded trails. Rangers keep things interesting with lots of outdoor activities, while a hands-on Discovery Center focuses on environmental education. Kids and the young-at-heart can look for shark teeth at Fossil Beach, and those exhausted after a busy day can pitch their tent or “glamp” in a log cabin.

In October 2021, glamping (glamorous camping) is exactly what about 40 of us did to celebrate the birthdays of two very special people. Some guests wouldn't have been up for “roughing it,” but everyone was willing to sleep in a climate-controlled log cabin with a kitchen, fireplace, and modern conveniences.



*Figure 2: Log cabin #10*

Arriving a little early, I heated up sausages on the outdoor grill for folks enroute, and then started a campfire in the fire pit. It was late enough in the year for the daytime temperature to be mild with cool nights and few biting insects. I wasn't expecting to see much in terms of wildlife, so I was thrilled to find a foot-long common worm snake in the vicinity.



*Figure 3: Common worm snake*

The next morning, two friends and I donned our wetsuits and launched our kayaks from the [beach](#) at the west end of the park. Here, the Potomac River is about six miles wide so it doesn't take much for the water to get choppy. We paddled east past the scenic 150-foot-high Horsehead Cliffs and then continued towards [Stratford Hall](#), areas known for harboring numerous fossils.



*Figure 4: Launching from the west end of the park*

Pulling ashore, I spotted several wharf roaches scurrying away. Also known as sea roaches or sea slaters, this isopod can grow up to 1.6 inches long. It is an invasive creature commonly found just above the high-water mark. Despite its name, they are more closely related to crabs than cockroaches.



*Figure 5: Wharf roach*

After paddling, I took my dog, Daphne, for a walk on Laurel Point Trail. Our first stop was Rock Spring Pond, where people fish for catfish, bream, bass, and crappie. Daphne enjoyed all the interesting smells around the pond, though she was never at ease with noise from all the explosions coming from the Naval Surface Warfare Center about 15 miles away. We continued our trek, exploring the Turkey Neck Trail, Beaver Dam Trail, and the boardwalk. Along the way, we saw countless paw paw trees and quite a few mushrooms, including puffballs and lion's mane.



Figure 6: Overflow dam at Rock Spring Pond

The next morning, we feasted on a potluck breakfast at [picnic shelter #1](#), which was easily large enough to accommodate our group. The site included an extra-large grill, fireplace, running water, numerous picnic tables, and a universally accessible ramp. Despite having easy access to the beach and parking lot, the elevation and surrounding foliage provided a sense of privacy.

In the afternoon, a few of us drove out to [Currioman Boat Launch](#) to look around and enjoy the pleasant waterfront vista. This area is home to a variety of fish including perch, spot, croaker, rockfish, and bluefish. During the winter, one might encounter arctic ducks and geese. I found a few small shark teeth and a [pink comb jelly](#), a relative and predator of the sea walnut. After talking to some kayakers, I figured it might be good to return another day and paddle the [Currioman Bay Water Trail](#).



Figure 7: Pink comb jelly

Many park-sponsored events were taking place during our visit, which coincided with “Halloweekend”: pumpkin carving, costume contest, creepy crawlies insect hunting, shark tooth necklace making, and monster rock painting. I participated in an owl prowl and fossil hunt, both led by Ranger Morgan.

For the owl prowl, Ranger Morgan told us everything we wanted to know about owls. Did you know that while most mammals (even giraffes) have seven neck vertebrae, owls have 14? That is why they are able to turn their heads 270 degrees. She also spoke about how they fly so silently, possess binocular vision, regurgitate [owl pellets](#), and have long legs with exceptional grip strength. After sunset, we went for a walk on Big Meadow Trail, making various stops where we stood silently and listened for owls. Unfortunately, we heard none.

The next morning, we met Ranger Morgan for a fossil hunt. She taught us that while modern shark teeth are typically white, they fossilize and absorb minerals in the soil that result in the colors we see today, which could be black, green, gray, beige, or orange. Those in the Westmoreland area are typically 20 to 25 million



years old, dating back to the Miocene period. We walked to Fossil Beach and searched for prehistoric remnants. While others looked for teeth, I found an interesting impression fossil, possibly containing the imprint of a giant oyster.



*Figure 8: Impression fossil found at Fossil Beach*

I also found some interesting teeth during my visit. Two of my favorites were from snaggletooth sharks.



*Figure 9: Teeth from snaggletooth sharks*

Other teeth include an upper tooth from a cow shark while my friend, Sara, found a lower tooth.



*Figure 10: Upper and lower teeth, respectively, from cow sharks*

The multi-day birthday celebration was a huge success due to the hard work of the organizers, the fun-loving attitude of the attendees, the nice weather, and of course the venue, which appealed to all. We had some nice group meals and other gatherings, but also plenty of free time for people to do things on their own. For some, this included wine tasting at a local winery, while others visited nearby historic sites like [George Washington's birthplace](#). My spare time was spent exploring the natural world. With such a big group, it was good to know there were plenty of interesting activities - but that was no surprise since Westmoreland State Park has a little something for everyone.

For more information, see

[Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation – Westmoreland State Park](#)

[Potomac River Guide – Westmoreland State Park](#)

[Wikinus – Ligia exotica – Sea slater](#)

[Virginia State Parks – Make Reservations – Westmoreland State Park](#)

[Chesapeake Bay Program – Comb Jellies](#)

[Florida Museum – Fossil Shark Teeth](#)