

Coastbusters

The Cross Currents Newsletter for Mid-Atlantic Paddlers

May 2022

Georgia's Barrier Islands:

Ossabaw Island by Sea Kayak

Dale Williams

It was really Kathryn's idea to team up for a trip to Ossabaw, one of Georgia's preserved barrier islands. As docents for the island, she and her husband Fran (Lapolla) were much more familiar with the cultural and natural history of the island than Debbie (Kearney) or I. Equally important, they understood the workings of the Ossabaw Foundation, the Georgia DNR, and the narrow spaces in between them that allowed visitation by kayak. Purely recreational visits are prohibited.

Debbie and I had visited the island in years past, but this would be our longest stay ever and we wanted to go back. It was not a hard decision. The question from day one was what kind of trip it would be - a full-on rough water experience (that's 80% of my mailing list) or something more relaxed, more in tuned with the resonance of old wealth and old growth.

As a State Heritage Preserve, all visitations must fall within educational, research, artistic or cultural parameters. And though much welcomed, the educational tours last 2-4 hours in a day, leaving an almost entirely uninhabited, preserved, and pristine barrier island to explore during the rest of the time...or not, if you prefer to sit on the porch of the bunkhouse beneath 200-year-old live oaks draped with Spanish moss, where time seems to stop or at least stop mattering.

Pristine Ossabaw

To expound a little on my meaning of "pristine", there are a dozen or so structures on this 14-mile-long island, parts of which date to the Pleistocene epoch (40-50,000 years ago). Save two docks, one on either end, the old mansion, two bunk houses, a few restored tabby structures (that once housed enslaved peoples and then tenant farmers), a small DNR maintenance compound, there has been no modern development of any kind: no golf courses, no houses, boardwalks, restaurants, marinas, water towers, or cell towers... no paved roads.



Ossabaw Shoreline. Photo:

There is no artificial night lighting, no industry, no streetlights or decorative lawn lighting and rarely any headlights. It's far enough away to avoid Savannah's "skyglow" (tropospheric light pollution). You can see the stars from early dusk until dawn. Except for the occasional night flying aircraft and all those orbiting satellites, it's pretty much the same view a native American would have had a thousand years ago. Ossabaw is and feels, wild and profoundly beautiful.

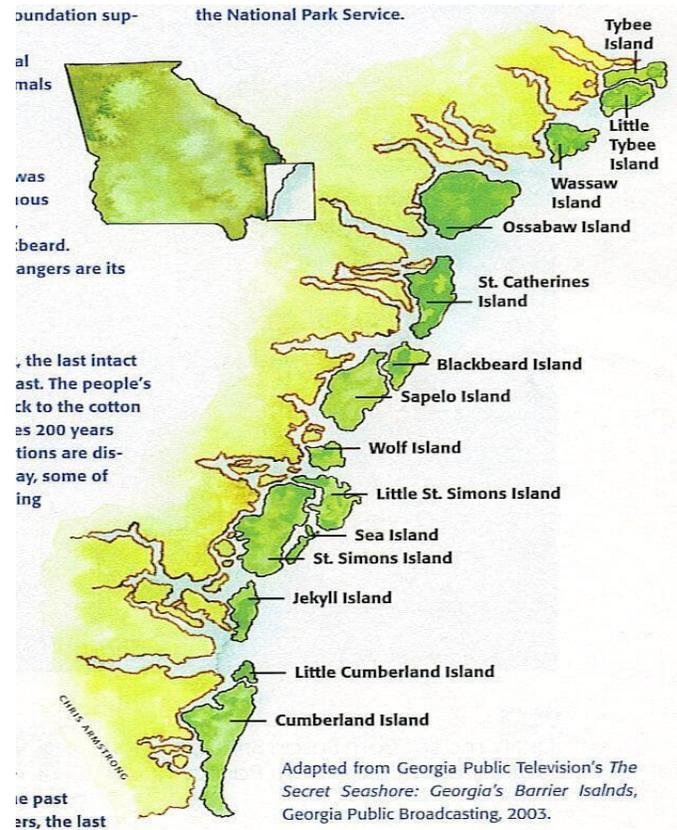
Humans

It is not without human impact. Guale (Wha-leh) Native Americans (part of the Creek tribes) lived here seasonally and then in small villages. After Europeans arrived, virgin oak and cedar were harvested for shipbuilding through the 18th century. Indigo and cotton were grown through the 18th and 19th century. Freedmen became tenant farmers who formed a close-knit Gullah-Geechee community here until they were able to buy land on the mainland at "Pin Point" in the late 1800's. Cattle were run here into the 1970's by the Torrey family. Several dirt roads, a few open fields and other bits of evidence remain.

There was a cultural/intellectual exchange project in the early 70's, financed by the island's owner, Sandy West, a bigger-than-life descendant of the John Baptiste Ford, founder of the Pittsburg Plate Glass company. Artists, scientists, writers, and architects of fame were invited to stay in the



Oaks and Spanish Moss



mansion, relax, converse and be inspired to further works of greatness. Remnants of a similar project for younger, less accomplished but presumably no less inspired visitors still stands at "Middle Place" on the island's southwest side.

Paddling Decisions

The rarely visited Atlantic Ocean side of the island has extensive sand bars and the tidal range is significant (6-10 ft). On a previous visit, Kathryn and Whitney Sanford had surfed the closest front side bar near Bradley Point on the north end, but even that is a 9-mile round trip from the closest put-in on the island, or from anywhere for that matter. That does not include the miles one might cover while surfing.

To explore the promising break that likely exists front side, south of Bradley Point, would require a much longer commitment, and at least one overnight. Effective communication with the rest of the



The graveyard. Photo:

group would be compromised. Cell coverage is good enough for text from the south end, but not mid-island. Line-of-sight-only VHF, though useful for coast guard rescue calls (due to their tall tower), would be useless for inter group comms. These factors combined preclude safe inclusion of inexperienced paddlers

So, would the focus be on long, front-side paddles through surf zones and tide races or back-side paddles through pristine tidal creeks? Tides and currents would be a factor either way but the commitment required for full island front side trips would exclude all but expert paddlers. Would the rest do explorations by foot, by truck, via creek paddles or would folks just relax? And would the



Photo:

front side paddlers get some of all that too? During our scouting trip I sat for too long in one of those rocking chairs and almost forgot what I had come there to do. There's a deep, meditative draw from this place that implores you to slow everything down.

In the end, we simply could not decide. Knowing we had the backup of motorboat transport and so many other options once there, we chose not to screen attendees by skill level. It all worked out. Lucky for us, though the eight guests had skill sets ranging from L-2 to L-5, the less skilled paddlers were not short on courage or resilience, (the first day crossing got pretty big for L-2), and those with greater skill, as it turned out, cared more about relationships than conditions.

We did manage to find an interesting tide race on the back side of Bradley Point that provided a fun, learning environment with less commitment required. But possibly the most exciting experience belonged to Neal Schroeder, on land. On his 14-mile run, he had to talk an 8-foot alligator off the trail so he could pass. Both coming and going.



Neal's Gator Photo:

Unless you're lucky enough to cross on a calm day, the skill set required to make the crossing may well exceed what's needed once there. But if you're a rough water paddler who isn't only about rough water, or a less skilled paddler who loves everything I've just described and can tough out a potentially difficult crossing, Ossabaw might just be a place worth visiting.

You need not arrive by kayak to visit Ossabaw. See ossabawisland.org for further details.

The Gullah Geechee:
From Slavery to the Sweet Fields of Eden

Kathryn Lapolla

The Gullah-Geechee people who inhabit some of the barrier islands and coastal areas of the southeastern U.S. are the descendants of African slaves. Because of their relative isolation in those areas, the Gullah-Geechee developed a distinct culture based largely on their African roots, but which was also influenced by European and Native American practices. Their unique language is the only African Creole dialect in the U.S. That culture continues today.

On Ossabaw, as on many plantations along the southeastern coast, enslaved peoples were often managed by an overseer with white owners (sometimes northerners!) residing elsewhere because of the summer heat and mosquitoes. Many of those sold into slavery in this area were from West Africa and valued for their knowledge of rice and indigo management.

Starting in 1763, slave labor was used on the island in “live oaking” for shipbuilding and in indigo production. By the early 1800s, ships were being built of steel rather than wood and chemical magic had replaced indigo with aniline dyes. Sea island cotton, prized for its long fibers, became important then and was grown on several plantations on the island until after the Civil War.

At the beginning of Reconstruction, the new freedmen had hopes of owning their own land, based on Special Field Order 15 (1865) which seized 400,000 acres of coastal land for redistribution to freed slaves. Some of those formerly enslaved on Ossabaw did receive land, and much more was given to the black former Union soldiers. But, as was the case with so many aspects

of Reconstruction, that land was taken away when President Johnson revoked the order less than a year later and allowed Confederate landowners to: 1) swear a loyalty oath and 2) reclaim their lands. On Ossabaw, the small number of freedmen stayed on as tenant farmers - but named their church the “Hinder Me Not” Baptist Church.

Often in relative isolation on the sea islands, those enslaved on plantations were generally less interfered with and more able to retain many aspects of their African culture, such as food, crafts, religion, music, and language. Much of “southern” food comes from these traditions via enslaved cooks on plantations. “Sweetgrass” baskets, woven using traditional African techniques using strands of sweetgrass, black needle rush, saw palmetto and longleaf pine needles, are in the collection of the Smithsonian.



Gullah Geechee Ring Shouters. Photo Courtesy of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Commission

A group of families together were able to buy land on the coastal mainland in Pin Point and Montgomery, GA in 1890. These groups formed tight-knit, self-sufficient communities based on crabbing, oystering, small boat building, and the weaving of fishing nets. The new church in Pin Point was (and still is) called the Sweet Fields of Eden Baptist Church.

This “Gullah-Geechee” culture has lasted until the present day, though many of the island communities have struggled economically and seen their young people leave for better work opportunities. However, many of those in Pin Point reversed their migration for work on Ossabaw. Through the 1970s, they worked for the wealthy northerners who set up hunting preserves and winter retreats or who raised cattle there.

Recent skyrocketing land prices due to extensive resort development on some of the barrier islands (e.g., St. Simons, Jekyll) have tended to push the Gullah Geechee off their traditional lands. They are fighting back via community organizing and court action.



Sea Island red peas, a Gullah Geechee staple, originally brought from West Africa. Photo courtesy Wikipedia

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Risk and Reward: An Unskilled Solo Expedition (Part 2)

Edward Rackley

Ed. Note: This is the second part of a two-part series that started in the March edition of Coastbusters. It's a story about the risks and rewards of novice solo paddling in mid-Atlantic coastal waters. The first installment covered events between the Rappahannock River, Mobjack Bay, and Hampton Roads, culminating in a capsizing in rough waters and a rescue near Norfolk and the mouth of the Elizabeth River.

These stories should be seen as a humble reckoning with lessons worth sharing, not as a glorification of backyard adventure by an unskilled, dangerous novice.

Into OBX: Lighthouses and Watery Graves

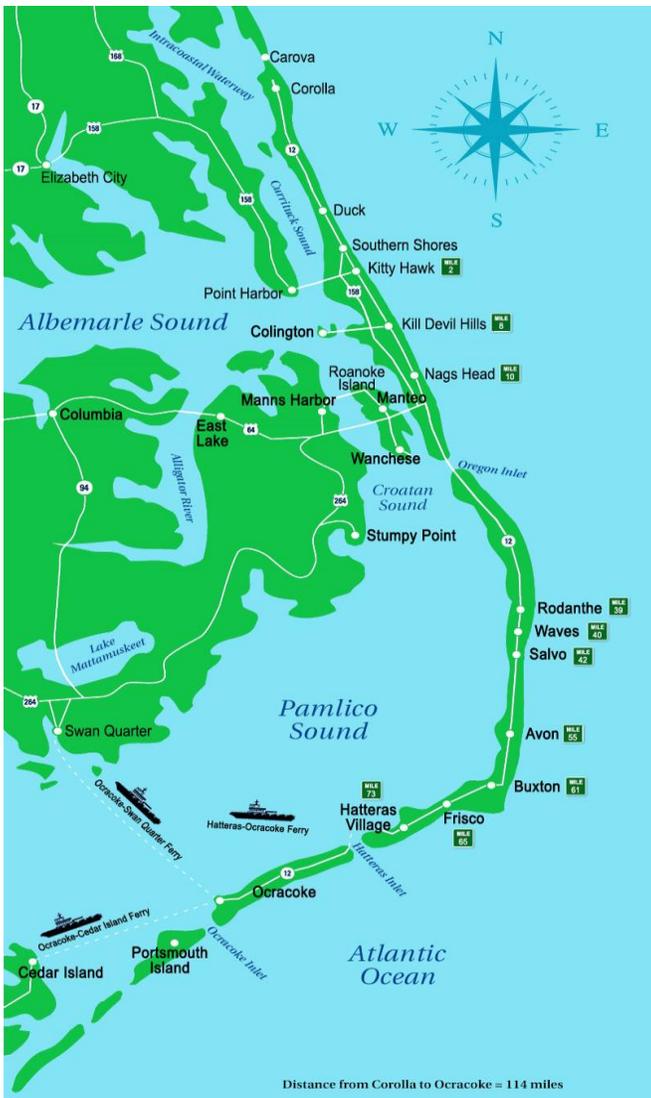
After a sobering open-water rescue in Hampton Roads by a passing motorboat I entered the Elizabeth River and the Intracoastal waterway, a man-made connection that flows toward North Carolina's Currituck Sound. I thought I'd seen the full consequences of my inexperience, a worst-case scenario with a dumb-luck happy ending. I'd hit bottom and survived, the expedition continued—what other grave mistakes were left to make? While my rough water skills hadn't exactly improved, i.e., I had no 'combat roll' or self-rescue, I now knew when I had to get off the water and wait for calmer conditions. Knowing my limits felt like good risk management, but was it?

Over the next week I passed into North Carolina's famous 'down east', passing through Currituck, Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds, each a vast tidal flat separating the Outer Banks—semi-permanent sand bars, not reefs—and the mainland. I passed Roanoke Island, site of the first colonial settlement, the 'Lost Colony'. I continued playing with tailwinds and following seas, trying to harness their power when conditions escalated.

A New Way to Deal with Trouble

At Cape Hatteras, 120 miles south of Norfolk, my cockpit was again flooded by high waves and the boat got tippy. I flinched at every wave, capsizing felt imminent. I felt miles from shore (impenetrable salt marsh), with no boat sightings all day. This time there'd be no rescue. I fought a few hours more, paddling downwind trying not to broach, but I had no real bracing, edging, or surfing technique. Again I was overtaken by conditions I failed to manage. My flooded cockpit was the ultimate rebuke, the slap of repeat failure. I lay the paddle across the nylon spray deck, waiting for the wave that would capsize me.

Without warning, the wind and waves seemed to die. Time stopped; my despair muted. I felt the sun's warmth on my arms. Waves were still hitting but the violent tossing had ceased. I looked around in disbelief, lifted my face to the sky. Buoyancy and rhythm had returned once I ceased my frantic exertions. No paddling meant less collision with current, waves and elemental forces. Drifting was the antidote to my panic and had saved me from capsizing. Which at the time seemed odd, because we associate drifting with laziness—far beneath any



serious kayaker. We're supposed to keep calm and carry on, to rage against the dying of the light. Now, my resignation had taught me something. With relief in my bones I yanked off the spray skirt to bail out the cockpit. Soon I was paddling again, confident but unsure exactly what lesson I'd learned.

I tracked the brown banks of salt marsh through the afternoon, avoiding deeper water and the risk of high following seas. It'd been five hours under a strong quartering tailwind, which gradually calmed with the orange hues of dusk and dropping temperatures. I'd seen no clearing in the dense reeds, no hard ground to beach the boat for a rest. The town of Ocracoke was another two to three hours south, given wind and tide. Alone with no moon, the prospect of pushing further in darkness did not appeal.

Stars Above, Mud Below, Mosquitos Everywhere

Low tide was draining estuary waters out a nearby inlet. I pushed against the ebb, feeling water levels drop below three feet. On these low flats with a neap tide, the depth could reach one foot or less. I had to get out of the boat, stretch my legs, clear my head. The sole option was to run the boat into a bed of reedy marsh and try dragging it to the dunes. I pointed the bow into the thickets and accelerated but was quickly blocked by the density of the marsh.

Clouds of mosquitos invaded my ears, eyes, and nose. I pulled myself forward by grabbing fistfuls of reeds from the cockpit. Was there solid ground below? I stretched my left leg out into darkness, prodding for firm footing. Shifting my weight onto that leg I sank up to my crotch in mud, my right leg still lodged in the cockpit.

With one leg vacuum-sealed in mud, the floating kayak offered no purchase for extraction. Swarming mosquitoes added to the mess, and I tallied the hours until high tide. My thoughtless gaze fell on my paddle laying useless in the reeds. Its potential as leverage came in a flash. With the paddle as purchase, I was back in the boat, dragging myself backwards with fistfuls of reeds. Mosquitos feasted on my face until the open water breezes dispersed them.

The cool air and placid conditions were welcome. The safest, surest route to solid ground, still manageable in the dark, was to track the Ocracoke lighthouse on the southern horizon. Not yet visible, I trusted its beam would soon appear, scanning the water every minute or so. That brief illumination would highlight sandbars and intrusive marsh to guide me. I couldn't follow the channel markers as they were unlit.

Paddling blind on the outgoing tide was strange but I found a working rhythm. The fast ebb rippled under the hull, resisting my efforts, but slack tide wasn't far off. A northerly breeze picked up, a welcome change from the afternoon crosswinds.

I reflected on the turn of events: an hour earlier I was encased in mud, thinking I was stuck for the night.

That afternoon I'd resigned myself to another humiliating capsizing. Neither calamity had occurred. Soon I'd no longer be paddling blind, with wind and tide in my favor. Improvisation and patience were not solutions in themselves, but could reveal a way forward, like the lighthouse beam that now pierced the night sky.

The watery slap of a jumping fish interrupted my thoughts. I set a course as the sweeping light drew across my bow. Navigating toward a lighthouse was absurd, to ignore its warning of shoals and shipwreck.

But from the sound it was a beacon of certainty, illuminating my surroundings, blinding me, then receding into featureless night. It was a strangely lucid moment, a reminder that shifting conditions and constant adaptation were the norms of any expedition, no matter our skill level.

Rewards of Going Solo

Apart from bustling Norfolk Harbor with its cargo ships and aircraft carriers, the Chesapeake coastlines had felt denuded and stunned, as if nature were reeling from the blows of humanity. An economic desert had replaced what were once vibrant riverine trade corridors with global reach. The era of the commercial waterway was over. I thought of my kayak, a tiny anachronism unphased by today's combustion engines and hypermobility. The contrast of my hand-powered minimalism and flashy powerboats made the kayak a stark exotic, a prehistoric revenant.

A week into this Outer Banks section of the journey I'd met no one on the water. Pushing south through the ICW, past the Great Dismal Swamp and into Currituck Sound, I felt the thorns of solitude. My thoughts circled back to the silent Samaritan on the morning I left. Our Kabuki greeting, his crucifix gift, a token of unspoken concern. The strangeness of it all captured the joys of traveling alone, despite the loneliness.

Early in the trip I'd underlined a line from a book: "In the desert, the loneliness is laid bare that actually exists everywhere" (Sven Lindqvist).

Traveling solo I was lighter, stealthier, and saw more wildlife as a result. But the absence of people in the coastal communities I passed felt uncanny, even staged. It was a desolation that didn't make for wilderness, the human footprint was everywhere. This coastline had been chopped up, bought, and sold. 'No trespassing' signs dotted the phobic shore, bereft of residents, let alone trespassers.

Wilderness was out on the water. Its unruly surfaces and passages had been marked and mapped for navigation purposes, a battle against sandy banks and tidal flows that were constantly shifting. Amid all the private property, campsites were few.

I opted for an improvised, camouflaged approach, one I called 'ninja camping'. Impossible in a group, avoiding detection while camping on private land required stealth and darkness. It brought joy and reaffirmed the wildness of traveling alone.

I had learned that patience with danger—restraint instead of rash action born of panic—could open a path through threatening conditions.

I was now two weeks into the trip. Alone with no rough water technique, I had learned that patience with danger—restraint instead of rash action born of panic—could open a path through threatening conditions. With no training to rely on, fear destroys our performance when conditions escalate. The final week from Ocracoke to Atlantic Beach passed without incident. Over time I learned to control the effects of fear on performance and find a way by embracing the concept of play.

Playing: Lessons from a Gull

Televised nature programs of newborn animals such as bear cubs or young wolverines feature voiceovers as they learn to forage and hunt by imitating adults in the form of play. Play develops the physical and cognitive skills needed for self-sufficiency and survival. Riding high swell in a

kayak can be a magical experience, but with no stern rudder or edging technique, capsize is inevitable. My fears of overwhelming tailwinds and following seas were still sharp when on a later outing closer to home, a similar situation arose.

I put in at my usual Washington DC marina, a natural lee on the Potomac River. Fifteen minutes downriver I felt heavier tailwind gusts than were predicted. A brilliant winter sun filled a cloudless sky, with air temperatures around freezing. The fine spray that usually covered my deck and life vest was a glossy coat of ice. Capsize would risk hypothermia. Handrailing the lee shore would allow me safe exit if the boat swamped. With a new neoprene skirt, I felt more confident than with the previous nylon one.

Rounding the bend across from National Airport where the Anacostia and Potomac meet, I spotted a park service boat aiming for me. It drifted in range and cut the motor. An officer shouted, "You experienced in these conditions?" I said I was prepared and that I'd turn around if things got worse.

"I'm not picking your body up downriver. That happened last winter with a canoer. He'd been warned." He was right.

I nearly acquiesced. But I had planned this trip for some time and knew these waters. My resolve hardened. This was no fight or flight situation; the risks were manageable. "I'll paddle past the airport where the river opens up," I said. "But if conditions worsen, I'll turn around." He looked me over again, started his engine, and peeled away.

That was one problem solved. Within thirty minutes the river opened wide, creating a roaring downwinder of high tailwinds and speedy swell. Paddling fast as my stern lifted, I outpaced any broaching by moving at two to three times my normal speed. But the waves and wind kept building; paddling furiously wasn't sustainable. I was broaching and bracing more than I wanted. I tried another tactic. Instead of leaning forward and paddling hard down the face of the wave, I leaned back and hardly paddled. This shifted my center of gravity, elevated the bow, and slowed my descent

down the face. Waves crashed over the stern, the boat felt stable and didn't broach. I wasn't surfing, but I was back in control, which felt amazing. Panic had killed performance so many times before, but now I'd turned the tables.

Panic had killed performance so many times before, but now I'd turned the tables.

At eye level just to my right a pair of seagulls were keeping pace with me as I struggled. One carried a stick in its beak that it would release, dive, and catch before it hit the water. I watched for a moment, the analogy to my situation clicked, and I laughed aloud. The gull and I were doing the same thing: playing with techniques that increased our control of our environment. For the gull, this play made for mastery as an aerial scavenger. Trial, error, and improvisation don't always generate optimal technique, but can increase our confidence. We push through to the next level. Play can be a viable mode of discovering new ways of overcoming an obstacle and adapting to risk.



Paddling Solo and Risk

Ed Rackley

Over twelve years have passed since the trip described here. Sea kayaking is still as risky today because even with more skill, as paddlers we're naturally attracted to bigger sea states. Years in the cockpit gives you time to think about risk. Lately I've been watching how I become alert to risk as that point when surrounding conditions—suddenly or gradually—exceed my abilities. I notice how drastically risk can compromise my performance: mindset shifts, muscles tighten, fear is palpable. Unconsciously my paddling shifts from aggressive and confident to reactive and defensive. In that moment of weakness, I'm no different from a novice, because whatever the sea state, I'm overwhelmed and outgunned. Being alone means there's no one to rely on, no safety net. Paddling solo can indeed be the worst decision we make.

To novice paddlers, a flat-water, multi-day solo outing might appear low risk. Yet I did exactly that, and quickly found myself at risk. How these dangers arose, how my reactions could have been different, and what I learned are worth sharing. Some limit-testing experiences do generate learning and growth: we push past our limits and expand our skill foundation. But events that trigger panic or retreat should remind us that our limits are very real and inspire greater preparedness and caution.

We know that as beginners or experts, we all paddle alone, at some point, by choice or necessity. Solo paddling can be ecstatic, immersive, and instructive, but is far riskier than group outings. We can and should prepare, informally or via ACA/BCU trainings, with safety equipment and self-rescue practice to minimize the myriad risks of open water.



Leadership: The Influence of Biases and Heuristics on Judgment

Rick Wiebush

Outdoor adventure leaders have a major, overriding responsibility: keeping the people they are leading safe. How they do that depends in part on solid trip planning, and in part on good judgment. *Trip planning* involves dimensions of a trip that can be identified ahead of time such as the appropriate skill level of the people in the group, what clothing people should wear, what equipment they should bring, what the tides and currents will be doing, the most efficient route the group should take, the projected strength and direction of the wind, etc. *Judgment* involves an analysis of those factors to make decisions about for example, whether some people (e.g., someone whose skill level is unclear) should be allowed to go on the trip, or whether the trip should happen at all (e.g., the chance of thunderstorms is too great to take a chance on going ahead with the trip).

Judgment also involves making decisions about circumstances that arise that could not have been taken into account during the planning process, i.e. newly emerging risks. For example, everyone may show up at the launch site only to discover that the actual wind strength is much greater than was predicted. Similarly, part way through a long crossing, it's possible that unforeseen thunderstorms start to develop. In such circumstances, good judgment is critical. Can this group handle the increase in wind and waves? In the face of potential thunderstorms during a crossing, should we turn back and retreat the two miles toward the safety of land, or should we push on three more miles toward our destination in the belief that we can get there before the thunderstorms hit?

Such decisions rely on professional judgment, which in turn relies on philosophy, education, training, and, most importantly, experience. In general, the more training and experience a leader has, the more comfortable we are likely to be with the decisions they make. However, these risk-related decisions can be extremely complex, a difficulty that is exacerbated when the decisions are being made under the pressure that often accompanies important decisions.

Research has shown that leaders do not always make decisions in a logical way, regardless of their level of training or experience.

Type I and Type II Decisions

There is a considerable body of research on decision making that indicates that people, including outdoor adventure leaders, do not always make decisions in a logical way *regardless of their level of training or experience*. Daniel Kahneman's Nobel prize-winning research showed that people have two distinct ways of making decisions. Type I decisions are those that are primarily intuitive – they are spontaneous, in-the-moment decisions that are based on emotions, memories and experience. Most of our day-to-day decisions are made in this way. If we see a cat run out into the street in front of our car, we don't have the time or information to do a thorough analysis before making a decision.

Instead, we automatically put on our brakes to avoid hitting the cat. Similarly, a skilled sea kayaker doesn't spend a whole lot of time analyzing the situation when a four-foot wave is about to crash on her beam – she automatically puts down a brace and edges into the breaking wave.

In contrast, Type II thinking is characterized by careful, deliberate, effortful thought. It can take multiple factors into account and weigh pros and cons. The decision to call off a paddle the night before due to expected winds that are beyond the capabilities of the group is an example of Type II thinking.

One of the most important things that Kahneman discovered is that Type I thinking can influence our Type II process *without us being aware of it*. In other words, even though we think we are being methodical and deliberate when making the decision to turn back or continue the crossing, we are often strongly influenced by Type I thinking in the form of biases and heuristics.

The Influence of Heuristics and Biases on Decision Making

Heuristics are simple rules or guidelines for decision-making that are applied in unfamiliar situations or when decisions need to be made quickly. They are mental “shortcuts” that are based on intuition, experience and memories, i.e., they are Type I decisions. We use them all the time (brake for the cat that ran out in the street; stop at a stop sign) and *need* to use them since we can't analyze every situation that arises in the course of a day before making a decision. So, while they usually serve us well, they can also lead us astray, as will be shown below.

Biases are a variation of heuristics. They too are mental short-cuts that we use to make decisions. But *biases* are shortcuts influenced by *beliefs or interpretations* of experience and memory. Upon seeing a person capsize and come out of their boat in rough water, the heuristic would be “we need to get them back in their boat quickly”. The bias would be “yes, and they need to self-rescue in order to get back in.”



Thinking things through. Photo: Gail daMota

Heuristics and Biases in Paddling

Heuristics and biases can result in “traps” that may lead to errors in risk assessment and judgment in paddling and other adventure settings. Some of the common types are described below.

The *availability heuristic*: refers to the tendency to use information that comes to mind quickly and easily (i.e. it’s readily available) when making decisions. That information may come to mind because it’s related to a very recent event or a very dramatic event. A decision to not launch sea kayakers in three-foot surf today might be based on a series of capsizes that happened when launching in three-foot surf last month. But that powerful memory may not be the best basis for figuring out what it likely to happen this time if the previous event involved dumping surf and newish paddlers, while today’s surf is spilling and the paddlers are more skilled.

The *consistency heuristic*: this trap happens because making subsequent decisions is easier if consistency is maintained with the initial decision. The leader decided that today was a surf day, so that is what is going to happen, despite multiple indications it isn’t a good idea. I’ve done this one. We had planned to paddle to Watts Island in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay. That morning we had a 15-knot east wind. We went anyway and enjoyed surfing over to Watts in 2-3-foot following seas. I ignored the fact that we would have to paddle back against a 15-knot wind and through those same 2 – 3 foot waves. I got us in trouble because I wanted to stay with the initial decision.

The *anchoring heuristic*: this is a trap that occurs when we rely more heavily on the first piece of information we learn when making a choice, even if it’s not the most relevant. When trying to decide whether to take a group surfing, we may make the “go” decision based on the fact that the surf is only three feet, but ignore the fact that there is a two knot ebbing current in the inlet and a 12-15 knot offshore wind.

The *scarcity heuristic* is operative when the goal of a trip is to get someplace that very few people have gone to due to the distance, level of risk, or other

factors. The draw of the unique is so strong that we may ignore factors that militate against going.

The *investment bias*: occurs when we have put a lot of time, energy and maybe money into a plan and - even in the face of evidence that we should not follow the plan – do so anyway because we have so much invested. I’ve been guilty of this one too. I put a lot of time, energy and psychic energy into making the five-mile crossing to Tangier Island. Moreover, I sell it as a great experience and get people’s expectations ramped up. On one occasion, I continued with the crossing despite looming thunderstorms primarily because I and everyone else had so much invested in getting there. It was a bad decision. Not because of what *did* happen, but because of what *could have* happened.

The *optimism bias*: in which leaders are aware of a risk, but dismiss it as something that only happens to other people. The leader of an intermediate group of paddlers says: “The surf is actually five feet, not three feet as was forecast, but we’ll be ok.”

Confirmation bias occurs when the leader looks for and prioritizes the information that supports what they want to do.

The *confirmation bias*: involves the leader looking for evidence that supports his/her views, while ignoring or minimizing contradictory information. “Yes, thunderstorms are forecast, but let’s launch anyway since it will be sunny until noon, there’s a 50% chance that the storms won’t hit us, and the weather forecast is usually wrong anyway.”

The *hindsight bias*: is what emerges when a leader takes people through a perceived or actual high-risk situation, and afterwards justifies the (questionable) decision by saying: “see, it was a good decision because no one got hurt”.

So What?

Wait a minute! If we aren't aware that Type I thinking may be influencing our Type II decision making processes, how are we supposed to avoid falling into some of the traps associated with heuristics and biases?

Basically, whenever we have an inkling of a doubt (e. g., the momentary knitted brow) about a decision we are in the process of making, or just made, we need to: 1) just be aware of the fact that heuristics may be influencing it; and 2) make a special effort to check ourselves against a list of the various types of traps we might be falling into. For example:

- Am I considering all the information I need, or just the information that supports the course of action I really want to take (i.e. confirmation bias)?
- Is my thinking influenced by the fact that everyone (including me) really wants to get out to that place, or do that route, that very few people have done (i.e., the scarcity heuristic)?
- If there are risks involved, to what extent am I assuming – or hoping – that everything will turn out ok (i.e., the optimism bias)?

- Are we putting in (or continuing the trip) in somewhat dicey conditions because I've been telling everyone for days that this is the trip we were going to do (i.e., the consistency heuristic)?

By taking the time to check ourselves, by attending to our biases and mental short-cuts, we may be able to avoid getting our group and ourselves into trouble that could have been avoided.



Photo courtesy of SKILS

Coastal Kayak is Hiring

Do you love the beach and own an RV? Coastal Kayak is hiring part time guides for the summer! Park your RV in our yard for free, do a couple of tours and lessons, and still have plenty of beach time!

Most of our tour locations are near Bethany Beach. We gear them towards vacationing families so we use recreational kayaks and keep the paddling time to 1.5-2 hours. For guides, with loading, etc. the tours last about 3.5-4 hours. CK Tour Headquarters (aka our yard) is about 7 miles from Fenwick Island and 9 miles from Bethany.

Although our tours are tame, opportunities abound for paddlers looking to improve their skills. Tag along on classes taught by CK owner, Mitch Mitchell, in the dynamic coastal conditions found in the inlet, the shoals, or in the surf.

Requirements: ACA L1 Kayak Instructor, or Trip Leader assessed, or a strong desire to become certified, as well as knowledge of the coastal wildlife/ecosystems or willingness to learn. Part-time weekends or weekdays. Email Info@CoastalKavak.com for more information.

Photos of the Month



The Everstuck

(Container ship run aground in the Chesapeake Bay for 2 months)

Photo: Deadrise Marine Services

Photos of the Month



Henlopen Dolphin

Photo: Keith Betts

Photos of the Month



Baja

Photo: Bill Vonnegut

Sea Kayaker Motivation Survey: Preliminary Results

Rick Wiebush

Many of you (over 400 in fact) participated in the Sea Kayaker motivations survey that I conducted earlier this year. Once again, thank you to all who participated!

This article presents very preliminary data on the survey results. We are just starting detailed analysis, but I think people will appreciate seeing some of the early and very basic findings.

The following focuses on: 1) the demographic characteristics of the respondents; 2) their paddling profiles; and 3) the motivation factors that people identified as most and least important to them.

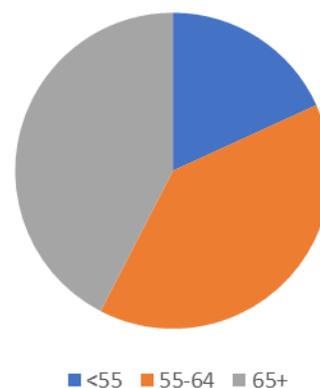
Demographic Profile

Two-thirds (69%) of the respondents were from the Mid-Atlantic states (NY, NJ, PA, MD, DE, DC, VA), while 16% were from New England and 10% were from the southeastern U.S. Four percent came from non-east coast states.

The majority of respondents were male (59%) and overwhelmingly white (93%). Eighty-four percent had college degrees and 51% had a graduate degree! Most were still employed (56%) while 42% were retired.

Two age groups were fairly equally represented. Those between the ages of 55 and 64 accounted for 39% of the group, while 42% were 65 and older. Only about one in five people (18%) were under the age of 55. See Figure 1.

Ages of Respondents



Paddling Profile

Duration. The paddlers were a very experienced group in that 61% had been paddling for 10 years or longer and another 19% had been paddling for between six and nine years. 20% had been involved for less than six years, and just 7% for less than two years.

Frequency. Two-thirds (66%) of the group paddles at least four times per month during their paddling season. (In that same group about one in 10 paddlers (13%) go out 10 or more times per month.) A relatively small group (51 people or 13%) are infrequent paddlers, going out just once per month. Another third (37%) of the paddlers go out 2-3 times each month.

Effect of Age on Frequency. We were interested in finding out if people paddled more or less than they used to as they got older. The results were interesting in that there were three fairly-evenly distributed groups. One-third (32%) paddled with the same frequency, 29% paddled less frequently, and 37% paddled more frequently than they used to.

Formal Training. This was a surprise: at the one extreme, 36% of the group had participated in formal skills training 10 or more times. At the other, just 8% had received no formal training and 15% had been involved in just one or two sessions.

Enjoyment of Rough Water/Surf. This was another, bigger surprise: a total of 271 people said that they enjoyed paddling “in rough water, or strong current, or surf”. That is almost two-thirds (64%) of the 426 respondents. I think maybe I should have provided a definition of “rough water” since that figure seems - based on my experience - awfully high.

Motivations

The tables opposite show the motivations that were most often selected by the 426 respondents as “important (score of 4 pts) or very important” (5 points), and the items that were most often selected as “not at all important”(0 points), or “not very important” (1 pt) or “somewhat important (3 pts). What’s shown is the average score for each of the items listed. So, a motivation item that had a mean score of 4.4 (for example), was an item that – on average – was marked as “important”. Conversely, at item that had a mean score of (for example), 2.3, was one that – on average – was “not very important” to the paddlers who responded to the survey.

Table 1 shows that in general, the strongest motivators were the items related to:

- Being in and enjoying nature
- Maintaining physical fitness
- Learning new things, and
- Developing skills

On the other hand (Table 2), the items that were not sources of motivation tended to be those that were about:

- Escaping family
- Seeking privacy or time for introspection
- Leading others/control
- Making a good impression on others
- Getting physical rest, and
- Risk taking

Table 1. Strong Motivators

Motivation Item	Mean Score (n = 426)
Viewing the scenery	4.5
Being close to nature	4.4
Enjoy smells/sounds of nature	4.3
Experience tranquility	4.2
Keep physically fit	4.2
Learning about things	4.1
Skill development	3.9

Table 2. Weak Motivators

Motivation Item	Mean Score (n = 426)
Escaping family	1.7
Getting physical rest	1.2
Chance to control others	2.1
Leading others	2.3
Seeking privacy	2.3
Chance for introspection	2.5
Taking risks	2.5

Note that these are very basic data presented in a very basic way, reflecting frequencies (demographics and paddlers characteristics) and means (motivation scores). No significance testing has been done yet. Also, yet to come are more refined questions such differences in motivations based on: 1) age and gender (e.g., older vs younger women; older vs younger males); 2) retired vs. employed, highly skilled vs less skilled, etc. Stay tuned.

Motivation Survey Prize Winners

Rick Wiebush

As part of the recent Sea Kayaker Motivation Survey, we offered a drawing for three different prizes. The random drawing included everyone who completed a survey and told me they completed it. Since the survey was anonymous, that was the only way I could know who did it.

The three prizes are:

- 3rd Prize: a \$50 REI gift card
- 2nd prize: a VHF radio (up to \$150 value)
- 1st prize: free attendance at the Kiptopeke Symposium (a \$500 value). This prize could be used for the symposium or any other Cross Currents trips/courses.

I will be contacting the winners directly to help claim their prizes. Once again, thanks to all 426 of you who participated!

Winners!!

First Prize: \$50 REI Gift Certificate

Suzanne Elliott (MD)

Second Prize: VHF Radio

Allison Palmer (NYC)

First Prize: Free Kiptopeke Symposium

Tom Kerbaugh (NJ)



Photo: Ginni Callahan

Incident Management

The Senseless Logic of the Wild*Jon Mooallem*

(Ed Note: This article appeared in the May 2019 issue of Coastbusters. The readership has almost doubled since that time and this article is so good, I wanted to make sure everyone had a chance to read it.)

Whales!

The whale sighting happened right away, minutes into Day 1. Jon, Dave and I had just been dropped off on a remote Alaskan shoreline, an hour and a half by boat from the closest speck of a town. Jon was working as a sea-kayaking guide that summer in Glacier Bay National Park, and he had invited us up for a seven-day excursion during his week off. As the boat that delivered us vanished, the drone of its engine dampening into a murmur and then finally trailing off, it became unthinkable quiet on the beach, and the largeness and strangeness of our surroundings were suddenly apparent. It was a familiar phenomenon for Jon from the start of all his trips: a moment that people instinctually paused to soak in. To me, it felt like those scenes of astronauts who, having finally rattled free of the earth's atmosphere, slip into the stillness of space. Except we weren't in space. We were on earth — finally, really on earth.

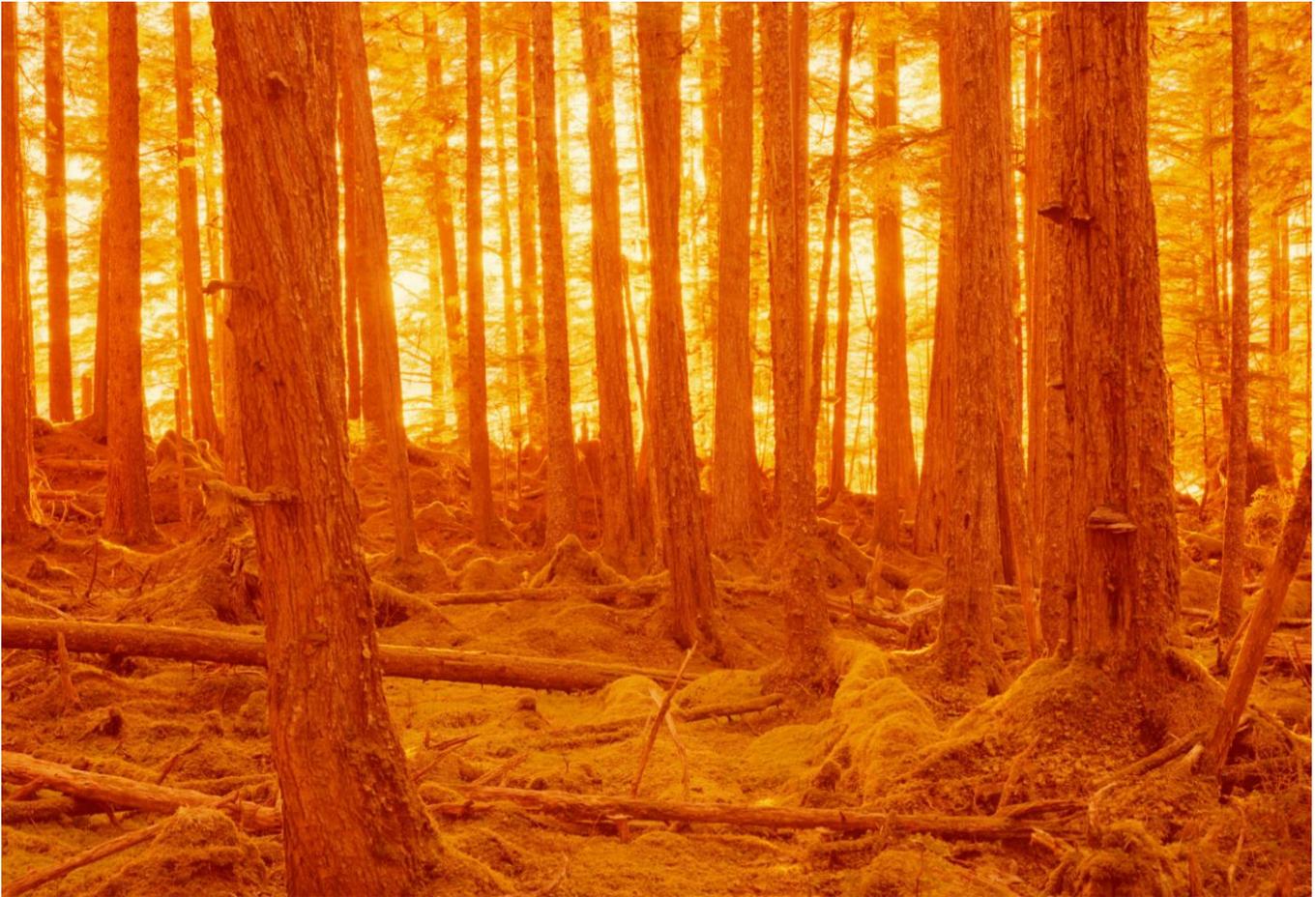
We were only starting to move around again, packing our gear into the kayaks, when we heard the first huff of a blowhole, not far offshore.

Jon was ecstatic. It seemed to him as if the animal were putting on a show, swimming playfully in the kelp, diving, resurfacing, then plowing its open mouth across the surface to feed. He took it as a good omen. Though I had no idea at the time, he was anxious that Dave and I might feel intimidated about making the trip; such a big payoff, so quickly, would get us excited and defuse any apprehensions.

For Dave, the whale-sighting had exactly the opposite effect. Once, when he was a kid, his dad took him scuba diving with dolphins. They were friendly, awe-inspiring creatures, purportedly, but they terrified Dave instead. He could still conjure the feeling of hanging defenselessly in that water while the animals deftly swirled around him, less like solid objects than flashes of reflected light, while he could move only in comparative slow motion. Ever since, he had harbored a fear of large sea creatures — a niche phobia, particularly for a young man who lived in the Bronx, but a genuine one still. And so, even as Dave understood that a chance to see whales up close like this was a major draw of a kayaking trip in Alaska, and though he feigned being thrilled, some second thoughts were kicking in: We were going out there, he realized.

The whale left me exhilarated and gleeful, like Jon; but deeper down, I also remember feeling shaken, like Dave. Nothing about the animal registered to me as playful or welcoming. It just appeared in the distance, then transited quickly past us, from left to right. My uneasiness had something to do with the whale's great size and indifference - its obliviousness - as it passed. Watching it made me feel profoundly out of place and register how large that wilderness was, relative to me.

It was mid-August 2002, and we were 23, 24 and 25. This was Jon's third summer in Alaska, and he'd worked his way up to leading expeditions, taking out vacationers for days at a time. Our trip, however, would venture beyond the typical circuit, into a remote corner of the park that he'd never been to. Jon had no serious concerns about our safety, but he felt he bore responsibility for our emotional well-being. To enjoy ourselves, we



The wilderness in Southeast Alaska. Photo: David B .Sherry

would need to feel comfortable, not just in the wilderness but also with him as a leader.

Bears?!?

I had never seen a wild bear, though I have backpacked in bear country a handful of times. I felt comfortable with the animals in the abstract. But here, the bears weren't abstract; they breached the material plane. There were bear trails everywhere, leading from the tree line to the water, and disquietingly close, I felt, to where we were pitching our tent. We found heaps of their scat. We saw trees where the animals had slashed off the bark to eat the inner layer, tufts of fur from their paws still plastered in the sap.

I pretended I was having fun. But that evening I grew increasingly petrified, almost delirious. My eyes tightened, scanning for bears. The sound of the wind became bears, and so did the mossy sticks

cracking under our feet. I gave myself a migraine, then phased in and out of sleep.

At sunrise, I woke feeling foolish. I reasoned with myself, privately, in a notebook I brought on the trip. Yes, some number of bears roved this landscape, I wrote: relatively tiny, independent blips, going about their business randomly, just like us. In all that empty space and confusion, a lethal collision of their moving blips and our moving blips would be an improbable coincidence. I'd been distorting those odds, mistaking myself for "the absolute focus of all bears' attention," I wrote. It was embarrassing, really. "To be afraid of bears," I concluded, "is to be narcissistic."

I was reminding myself that freakishly horrible things are, by definition, unlikely to happen. Even now, my reasoning feels sound.

If a Tree Falls in the Woods

We got up three or four hours later. The rain and wind no longer felt ferocious but were still too gnarly to paddle through; there was no question, Jon said, that we were staying put. By late morning, the storm seemed to have passed. We were antsy. We figured we would take a look around.

There were no trails. We'd been trudging for some time when we reached a fast-moving stream, maybe 10 feet wide. Jon was surprised; it wasn't on his map, most likely just a drainage bloated by the storm. We followed it downstream, looking for a way across, and eventually found it bridged by a hefty tree trunk. It seemed like an easy crossing. Jon stepped up and led the way, and Dave and I waited in a single-file line on the stream bank behind him. The creek was loud, like a factory with all its gears and rollers churning. Looking down, Jon realized there was more water than he'd thought.

That's when I heard the snap in the woods behind me.

After all my paranoia, I instantly understood that the many bears I'd thought I heard before were absolutely not bears — were nothing — because this sound was so unmistakable and crisp, so explicitly something. I turned and hollered, "Hey, bear!" then waited a beat. Maybe I said "Hey, bear!" again; I'm not sure. But I must have scanned those trees long enough to feel satisfied and safe, because I know I was turning my head, to go back to my friends, when I saw the dark shape rushing forward in my peripheral vision.

What I heard must have been roots popping. If a tree is large enough, you can apparently hear them cracking underground like gunfire.

The thud was seismic. The trunk crashed down right next to me. Mapping out bits of evidence later, we concluded that the tree must have been about 80 feet tall and perhaps two feet in diameter. It was some kind of conifer — a spruce or cedar. I screamed, involuntarily, "Look out!" then watched Dave, a few steps directly in front of me, dive

sideways and hit the ground. When I got to him, he was crouching, stunned but O.K. He looked up and said, "Go get Jon."

It hadn't clicked back in for me: There were three of us. The sight of Dave going down had canceled out everything else. I scrambled out over the creek, running across the tree that had just fallen, shouting Jon's name, then spotted him in the water, tangled in a snarl of sheared-off branches near the bank behind me — a cage, which kept him from hurtling downstream.

He did not know he'd been hit by a falling tree. It had narrowly missed his head, struck his left shoulder, shearing it from his collarbone and breaking many of his ribs. Later, a doctor would explain that the downward force had been so powerful that it had probably squashed Jon's entire upper body, and all the organs inside, down toward his waist, momentarily compressing him like a bellows; for a split second, his shoulders headed in the direction of his bellybutton, before his torso sprang up again.

Jon had heard nothing, seen nothing. He was turning around to help Dave onto the log — again, feeling responsible for our safety — and the next thing he knew, he was in the water. He tried to reach out his left arm but could not make it move. He could not move his legs. He felt a bolt of pain down his spine.

Jon told himself he shouldn't move. He knew from his many wilderness first-responder trainings that moving a person with spinal injuries risks paralysis. Then again, he also knew that most of his body was submerged in cold water, and he recognized that he risked dying of hypothermia if he didn't move. "If I'm already paralyzed," he concluded, "I may as well move."

He somehow hoisted himself out of the stream before Dave or I got to him, using his right arm and his chin and biting into something loamy with his teeth, for additional leverage. He reassessed the situation: better. Also: worse. He now realized that

we were at least a mile inland from our camp. Suddenly, his body was walking; his legs just started working. Dave and I put him between us, supporting his frame. He was moving faster than we expected, but uncoordinatedly. Then he crumpled between us. We tried again; Jon was dead weight.

Dave noticed that his breathing was shallow and his voice was low — signs, Dave knew from med school, of a collapsed lung. He began battering Jon with a pep talk, telling him, firmly, that he had to get up, that we had to get out of here. Jon didn't need that explained to him; he was cogent and still trying to plot our next steps. He looked down to see why this log he was resting on was so lumpy and realized that he was, in fact, sitting on his left arm. The arm was slack, obviously broken; his sleeve, pierced up and down with devil's club. Jon had zero feeling in it. He found it amusing, this sensation of complete estrangement from one of his limbs.

Mayday!

Jon had been stressing that it was important to stay together. But this was another theory of wilderness survival that appeared to be breaking down in practice. Someone would have to get on the radio back at our camp. By chance, while marooned in our tent during the rainstorm the night before, Jon showed us how to use the device, though he did it almost as a formality; the hand-held VHF unit was merely a line-of-sight radio, he told us, meaning its range was small, its signal too weak to pass through most obstacles. You were unlikely to reach anyone you couldn't see, and we hadn't seen anyone since a faraway fishing boat, early on Day 1.

There was a moment of discussion, or maybe just an exchange of looks between me and Dave. I told Dave he should go. I didn't trust myself to find my way back. I also knew that I lacked the courage to try; whether I was being sensible or cowardly, I still don't know. Besides, I took for granted that Dave would make it. He was more capable in my mind, less likely to cinch himself in indecisive knots.

Now, as Dave sprinted away from me and Jon, his nerves rose up and rattled him. He worried he wouldn't be able to find the radio once he got back or know how to turn it on. What if he broke the radio, foreclosing whatever marginal chance we had of getting help? There were lots of ways to screw this up, Dave realized. More occurred to him as he ran.

He found the radio. He turned it on. Then, having solved these problems, he encountered another he hadn't anticipated: "What is the appropriate thing you're supposed to say?" he remembered thinking. On TV, you see a lot of people saying "Mayday." And so, Dave faced the open water and started broadcasting into the fog: "Mayday, Mayday." Even in that moment, though, alone on a beach in the middle of nowhere, he felt slightly self-conscious about it. This is so goddamn cliché, he thought.

Back in the woods, kneeling over Jon, I was having the same problem: I didn't know what to say. He was lying near a log on his injured side, his beard and glasses flecked with dirt and tendrils of moss. He seemed to be on the brink of losing consciousness. At no time would the possibility of Jon's dying surface concretely in any of our minds. Still, I knew I was supposed to keep talking to him, to tether him to the world with my voice somehow.

I started vamping platitudes: We were going to get out of here soon, and so forth. But I could feel myself treading water, even blundering, at one point, into a long-winded apology, worried I overstayed my welcome that one Christmas with his family. I was afraid that the helplessness in my voice might be counterproductive, unsettling Jon instead of steadying him. It was a tremendous silence to fill.

What can a person say? I had two literature professors in college who made us memorize poems. You never knew when some lines of verse would come in handy, they claimed. Jon and I would spend about an hour and a half together alone on the forest floor. I ran through everything in my

quiver — Kay Ryan, A.R. Ammons, Michael Donaghy — padding each poem with little prefatory remarks, while Jon said nothing, just signaled with his eyes or produced a sound whenever I checked in. I felt like a radio D.J. playing records in the middle of the night, unsure if anyone was listening. And here’s one about owls by Richard Wilbur, I would tell Jon, and off we would go.

The Coast Guard!

The Coast Guard Cutter Mustang wasn’t where it was supposed to be. The 110-foot patrol boat normally spent its time coursing through the Gulf of Alaska, inspecting halibut-fishing vessels, or circulating, as a terrorist deterrent, near the oil terminals at Valdez.

It was home-ported in Seward, hundreds of miles from Glacier Bay. But the crew was transiting to Juneau for a training when, a few days earlier, they were smacked by the same storm that later poured inland, over us. “We had gotten absolutely pummeled,” John Roberts, a petty officer on the Mustang, told me recently. For two days, the boat swished around in 15-foot-plus seas. Many on the crew had been hunkered in the mess deck, vomiting, while Roberts and a couple of his shipmates did their best to cover everyone’s watches. Finally, the Mustang slipped into Glacier Bay to find some protection. The weather started to ease.

That afternoon, as Roberts piloted the Mustang east, toward Dundas Bay, his pallid crewmates were finally staggering back up to the bridge, asking where the hell they were.

That was when Dave’s Mayday call came through. The signal on the Mustang’s radio was thin and faint, barely edging into range. Another of the ship’s petty officers, Eamon McCormack, explained to me that in retrospect the connection feels “mind-boggling.” Glacier Bay National Park extends over more than 5,000 square miles. Our signal would have covered two or three miles at most. And yet, a



The Mustang. Photo: National Geographic

boat — a Coast Guard boat, no less — happened to be passing through that exceedingly small window at precisely the right time. “I don’t know if, nine times out of 10, you play that over again and the outcome would be the same,” McCormack said. A moment earlier or later — seconds, potentially — and we might have slipped out of alignment. The moving boat would have cruised out of range, uncoupling from us forever.

It was 1:25 p.m. when the Mustang received Dave’s call, according to one of the subsequent Coast Guard reports. Roberts couldn’t believe it. “Come on, man, I’m tired,” he said aloud, wearily, to the receiver in front of him. Roberts waited for a moment, per protocol, on the off chance that the Coast Guard’s central communications center in Juneau would pick up the call instead. Then he turned and asked his watch commander to pull out all the standardized search-and-rescue paperwork. He was steeling himself, re-summoning his professionalism. “I guess we’re doing this,” he said.

Roberts was the crew member on the Mustang with the most current medical training; he would complete his E.M.T. certification the following month. As he started firing questions at Dave on the radio, he didn’t like the answers that he heard coming back: the shallowness of Jon’s breathing, the likelihood of a punctured lung. More

fundamental, Roberts remembered: “Any time a tree falls on somebody, it’s not good.” He was also unsettled to learn that Dave and I both lived in New York City — a red flag, he had found, when someone winds up in trouble in the wilderness.

We were 100 nautical miles from the nearest hospital; a half-day trip, even in ideal conditions. The Mustang requested that the Coast Guard Air Station in Sitka send a helicopter, but the immediate plan was for Roberts and three crewmates to peel toward shore in the ship’s Zodiac and track us down. Dave had found the flare in Jon’s emergency kit and now, at 2:20, with the Zodiac underway, the Coast Guard asked him to fire it. He was still in front of our campsite, facing the water. He’d never shot off a flare before. He aimed straight up, then watched as the bright tracer rose and arced somewhere far behind him, deep in the woods. He was uncertain whether this counted as a success. He started scanning the fog in front of him, but the Zodiac never appeared.

Someone on the Mustang caught sight of the flare near the end of its arc and immediately directed the crew on the Zodiac toward it, steering them far away from Dave to the opposite side of the little peninsula we’d camped on. And yet, this was lucky: they wound up coming ashore much closer to where I was waiting in the woods with Jon. Soon, whatever poem I was reciting was interrupted by whistles blowing and voices calling, and eventually three shapes, wearing hard hats and heavy orange rain gear, rushed toward us out of the trees.

First Response

Roberts was especially impressive, a reassuringly large Boston-area native with a booming voice. He knelt and took Jon’s vitals. The information was troubling: his pulse was 60 beats per minute; his breathing, fast and shallow. They put his neck in a brace and eased him onto a kind of truncated backboard, called a Miller board, to move him out to the beach. Dave had returned by then. He and I

crouched at one end of the board, near Jon’s feet, as someone — presumably Roberts — bellowed a count of three to lift.

A National Geographic television crew was embedded at the Coast Guard’s air station in Sitka, filming an installment of a thrill-ride reality series. The network had sent crews to other Coast Guard stations around the country too, though this assignment appeared to hold the most dramatic potential. Air Station Sitka was unique: Its pilots were responsible for 12,000 miles of coastline, a sprawling, treacherous wilderness riven with fjords, inlets and glaciers, often buffeted by implacably horrible weather. People who went into the backcountry in Alaska had a way of getting themselves into a different magnitude of trouble, too; as Roberts put it, “When stuff happens in Alaska, it’s big.” Still, this was the television crew’s eighth day in Sitka, and as the show’s producer, Annabelle Hester, explained: “I was having calls with my bosses at headquarters saying, ‘Nothing is happening!’ We were scrambling to come up with Plan B.” Then, the Mustang’s call came in at 1:42.

“What type of injuries are we looking at?” asked the dispatcher. “Probable broken ribs, a definite broken arm,” said the man on the other end. Then his voice faltered, seemed to give up: “And whatever else would happen to you if a tree fell on you,” he added.

The dispatcher retrieved the appropriate paperwork and scribbled “Tree fell on person” on one line. She read the current weather aloud: “30 knots wind, 300 ceiling, heavy rain and one-mile vis.” That would soon be revised: the ceiling had dropped to 100 feet. Entering the weather conditions on one of the Coast Guard incident reports, someone would write, in a kind of nihilistic catchall: “Extremely terrible.”

Helicopter?

The Coast Guard’s policy was to deploy a helicopter within 30 minutes of the initial request, but the Air Station’s operations officer, Cmdr. Karl

Baldessari, informed everyone that this mission would take longer to plan. Baldessari was a 25-year veteran of the Coast Guard, a fast-moving, sinewy man in a blousy flight suit, with a tidy mustache and spiky hair. His role at the air station was that of a firehouse chief. He was responsible for the safety of everyone working there, which meant making judicious decisions about what warranted sending them hurtling through the sky.

That calculus got knotty in conditions like these, though there was a baseline volatility to flying in Alaska at all. The Coast Guard didn't let its helicopter pilots fly lead out of Sitka, no matter how much experience they had at other air stations, until they practiced difficult landings at specific locations in the region and got their egos battered a little by logging a full winter in the state. Visibility in Alaska was frequently poor; conditions changed quickly.

Baldessari gathered the two pilots on duty that afternoon and the Air Station's flight surgeon, then unrolled a large paper map. He pointed to our location, explaining: "That's probably one of the lousiest places we fly in and out of. This Inian Pass, right here, is the worst place we could possibly go."

Inian Pass is a slim channel near the center of the Icy Strait, the long, interconnected system of waterways stretching through Glacier Bay. Conditions in the Icy strait can be bad 300 days of the year, Baldessari recently told me; wind, rain and storm surges all push through it fast from the open ocean. But Inian Pass is a narrow keyhole at the center of the strait — a mile-wide opening between a few uninhabited islands and a rocky point — where all that weather speeds up. The only way for the pilots to reach us would be to fly straight through it.

He's Getting Worse: Blood-tinged Vomit

Lying on his backboard like a burl of driftwood, Jon was conscious and cognizant of his pain, but he had started to feel somehow buffered from his body, uninterested in connecting with the world beyond it.

He would later describe himself as a "thinking blob. It was a very passive experience." He didn't know what was happening but could tell our momentum had stalled. He was confused and felt impatient. In his mind, the three of us had solved the impossible problem: We'd managed to get help. This was supposed to be the simple part, when everyone rushed him to the hospital. Instead, his condition deteriorated. Within 10 minutes of reaching the beach, Jon threw up. I'd never seen anything like it, a kind of dark purple gristle. I took out my wool cap to wipe his face, and he retched a second time, straight into my hat.

"I got that all over me," John Roberts told me recently. He'd seen vomit like that before; it meant Jon had ingested a fair amount of blood and signaled internal injuries. It made Roberts anxious. He had been on the Mustang for two and a half years at that point but had spent the previous four years in Palm Beach, a busy but less extreme posting that often involved rescuing weekend boaters from relatively close to shore — and where, Roberts pointed out, the water is warm and won't necessarily kill you if you go in. Moreover, the bulk of the Coast Guard's training is for maritime rescues, not rescues on land. Counterintuitive as it sounds, Roberts's comfort level and confidence had dropped significantly once he hopped off the Zodiac and set foot on the beach.

He reported back to the Mustang that Jon had thrown up, then soon radioed again, explaining that Jon was going into shock. He kept giving and requesting updates, trying to gauge how long this might take, and eventually started erecting a makeshift shelter out of plastic sheeting and medical tape, hoping to keep Jon out of the rain. Out of earshot of us, Roberts explained to his crew mate Eamon McCormack what the vomit meant: The possibility of Jon dying, here under their care, was real. At one point in the National Geographic footage, as Roberts's calls are relayed to the air station in Sitka, you can see where the dispatcher clearly writes on her form: "E.M.T. does not feel comfortable."

By this time, the air station's flight surgeon had received enough information to be alarmed. "It sounds like he's got a pretty significant chest injury," he told Baldessari. Baldessari understood they would need to launch a helicopter but warned the Mustang that the aircraft might not make it through the weather; ultimately it would be the pilots' call, once they veered off their last track line and tried to shoot through Inian Pass.

They would go and give it a look, Baldessari explained over the radio, but the outlook was iffy. The guys on the beach, he said, must be prepared to get Jon back on their cutter and haul him to a hospital themselves, as fast as they could.

The possibility of Jon dying, here under their care, was real.

One evening this winter, my phone rang, and it was Karl Baldessari. Long retired from the Coast Guard, he was teaching aviation at a community college in Oregon, where I left a voice mail message earlier that day. I didn't expect any of the Coast Guardsmen I was cold calling to remember that day. However dramatic it remained for me, I assumed it would have been obscured in a years-long wash of more sensational incidents. But everyone I spoke to did remember it, immediately and in detail. Baldessari had been involved in hundreds of rescue operations during his 30-year career, and yet, as I stood at the stove on the phone that evening, he told me: "The moment I listened to your voice mail, I knew exactly the case! It was almost like it was yesterday."

There was something about the supreme freakishness of the accident that left a lasting impression. For those who came ashore, the experience was also marked by a feeling of subtly escalating chaos and the pressure to surmount it. McCormack told me that ours was a story he retold

endlessly, often to the younger Coast Guardsmen he was eventually tasked with training. In it was a lesson about "not taking situations that look impossible at face value," he said. "When things start to go wrong, don't panic or lose sight of what resources you've got." Keep working the problem until its absolute end — even, McCormack added, if it means deviating from official policy.

McCormack was not supposed to be landing an inflatable boat on an unforgivably rocky Alaskan shoreline, for example. But there he was, anyway, beaching the Zodiac as gingerly as he could, so that Roberts and the other men could load Jon aboard. They slid him in on his side "like a folder into a filing cabinet", as Jon put it, and started motoring through the chop, very cautiously, back to the Mustang, about a mile away.

Oh, shit!!!

About 10 minutes into the trip on the Zodiac, Jon heard one of those voices say, "Oh, shit, we're losing air."

A section of the Zodiac's sponson — the inflatable fender that wraps around the boat — had punctured. One side was completely deflated. "It's a big deal," McCormack recently explained to me, sounding surprised that I had to ask. The sponson increases the boat's buoyancy and stability, as well as keeping water from cresting over the side; under normal conditions, a Zodiac with a broken sponson would have been taken out of service automatically. Instead, McCormack found the puncture and wedged the nozzle of a small pump inside. Then — steering the boat with one hand, operating the throttle with the other — he started working the pump with his foot, essentially doing leg presses, to keep the fender partly inflated. The ride was already bumpy in four-foot seas. Now McCormack began tracing a slow, zigzagging course, doing what he could to tamp down the turbulence and the violence to Jon's spine, as well as to guard against the

possibility of the injured man's suddenly bounding over the side on his backboard.

Roberts and the other Coast Guardsmen on the Zodiac leaned over Jon to shield him from the splash. The pain was heinous; Jon seemed to be passing out. Roberts talked to him, held his hand.

Roberts felt crushed, he told me; he was torturing this guy in order to save him. When they finally reached the Mustang, rather than hoist Jon off the Zodiac, they swung the ship's crane around and simply lifted the entire boat out of the water, level with the deck, and then carried him aboard, to keep from joggling him anymore.

McCormack eventually returned for me and Dave, and a half-hour later we were reunited with Jon in the Mustang's athwartship passageway, a cramped, steel hallway, like the space between two cars of a train. Jon was still battened to the backboard, wedged up to keep the weight of his body on his less-painful side. They had cut off his clothes, though he'd murmured a plea not to — he was wearing a brand-new Patagonia jacket that he had borrowed from a friend — then swaddled him in a hypothermia blanket. Dave and I knelt and rubbed his feet.

Rescue!

The helicopter was going to make it. I don't remember there being a grand announcement. I'm not sure we were ever made aware of the possibility that it wouldn't. Now the crew got busy below: tying down anything that could be blown off by the rotor wash or stashing it in the mess. I also don't remember hearing the helicopter when it finally arrived. Instead, I remember only a heavy door to our left swinging open to reveal, like a scene from an action movie, the silhouette of a man in a blue flight suit, feet planted shoulder-width apart to steady himself as the ship rocked sideways. The cable he'd been lowered on drew back into the ocean spray and fog behind him. "I'm flight surgeon Russ Bowman," he said and stepped inside.

Bowman took Jon's vitals and gave him several, successive shots of morphine. Soon, everyone was working to squeeze him back through the narrow doorway and onto the deck where the helicopter, an MH-60 Jayhawk, was idling overhead.

The helicopter hovered 30 or 40 feet over the boat, mirroring its speed and trajectory, while both vehicles moved slowly forward. "Looks like you're heading for a rain squall," the co-pilot, Chris Ferguson, radioed the Mustang at one point, and asked the ship to adjust its course, to keep them in as forgiving weather as possible. Soon the flight mechanic was calling out instructions to tuck the aircraft into alignment: "Forward and right 30. Forward and right 20. Forward and right 10." Then, finally — speaking, in the flight recordings, with an almost galling air of imperturbability — the lead helicopter pilot, Rich McIntyre, radioed the flight mechanic to begin the hoist.

Plucking someone with a spinal injury off a moving boat and hoisting them into a moving helicopter is a pretty insane thing to do.

We Normalize What Isn't Normal

The whole procedure, from our vantage point, seemed seamless and routine. In a way, it was: After the agonized deliberation at the air station, the pilots exited off their GPS route into fairly manageable conditions around Inian Pass. The winds were workable; the water wasn't excessively choppy. Ultimately, scooping Jon off the deck of the Mustang would resemble a standard exercise that the pilots drilled in their trainings.

"Not to dumb it down," the co-pilot, Chris Ferguson, told me — plucking someone with a spinal injury off a moving boat and hoisting them into a moving helicopter is a pretty insane thing to do. "But we normalize what isn't normal."



Video stills from National Geographic Image Collection

Jon was rushed into surgery at the hospital in Sitka that evening. He'd punctured both lungs, one to the point of collapse, sustained multiple fractures on eight of his ribs, broken several vertebrae, shattered his left shoulder blade and snapped his brachial plexus nerves. His spleen had been macerated into countless flecks. After awakening from surgery, Jon was disappointed that the doctors had swept those shards into a bag and thrown his spleen in the trash; he wanted to get a look at it, maybe even keep it preserved in a jar, alongside his cyborg-banana.

We Saved His Life?

Once back in Gustavus, Dave and I realized that we would need to call Jon's parents in Switzerland. I didn't have to push the job on Dave this time; he was adamant. He felt he would need to face conversations like these if he was going to be a doctor. It was Jon's father who picked up, and after absorbing the news, he paused and caught Dave off guard. "Thank you," he said solemnly. "You guys saved my son's life."

Dave's stomach dropped. "I remember thinking about it," he told me recently, "and realizing, Yeah. I guess, logistically, we did." I had the same reaction when Dave hung up the phone and, clearly shaken, relayed his conversation to me. Until that moment, the idea that we saved Jon's life had never

occurred to us, possibly because the idea that Jon might have died still hadn't occurred to us. We had zero sense of accomplishment, or even agency. In our minds, all we did was avoid screwing up until help could arrive and save him.

But Jon hadn't absorbed the story that way. From the instant he willed himself out of the water, he felt all of us locking into that same seamless flow of order steadily displacing chaos that Dave and I only experienced once the Coast Guard arrived. It was amazing to him how the three of us managed to generate solutions for each successive problem. Even my reciting those poems, which to me had always felt like a moment of utter helplessness, became, in Jon's telling, a perfect emblem of that streak of serendipitous problem-solving. "You conveyed a calmness," he told me recently. "I remember it being this nice moment."

The surgery in Sitka was only the first of half a dozen, and it would take several years for him to regain 60 percent of the use of his arm, wrist and hand. He was in good enough shape to go back to Alaska the summer after the accident — repairing boats in the company's warehouse and occasionally helping out at the bed-and-breakfast — but he struggled. He could repair kayaks but needed help lifting them. He was unable to wrestle the mattress corners into the fitted sheets when he made the beds. After that, he started working at a recording studio in Portland and he now runs his own audio-mastering company: Spleenless Mastering.

Eventually Jon seemed to have recovered from the accident without any conspicuous disabilities. But his life has been quietly corroded by chronic pain and, almost equally, by the stresses of navigating the doctors, medications (and their side effects) to manage it. About two years after the accident, he learned he had PTSD. The trauma wasn't the falling tree, but his experience of powerlessness as a perpetual patient in the American medical system. It manifested as a kind of unbearable empathy for anyone who was suffering. Jon found himself shouting at doctors, on his own behalf but also on

behalf of strangers in waiting rooms who weren't being seen.

What to make of all this?

The morning after the accident, Dave and I traveled back to Dundas Bay to pack up our campsite and collect the kayaks we abandoned the previous evening. We were shuttled there from Gustavus by the same boat captain who dropped us off three days earlier, a forbiddingly taciturn commercial fisherman named Doug Ogilvy.

Dave told me he'd had a strange feeling on the ride out, as if we would discover that an even more massive tree had fallen on our tent since we last slept there and that all three of us would have been crushed and killed if we'd spent another night in Dundas Bay, as planned. That is, he half-expected to find evidence that the accident had been fortuitous somehow, that there was a reason, or redemptive value, behind it. My mother had the same instinct when I called her the night before. On the phone I strained to emphasize for her — she was only two years into her cruelly premature widowhood, and I was new at being the overprotective son of a widow — that Jon was going to be all right, and that Dave and I were safe. She told me that my dad must have been up there looking out for us somehow.

I resented all the supernatural thinking. If it comforted other people, fine, but I'd somehow known right away that I didn't need a reason for the accident. It was senseless, but straightforward, as unequivocal a fact as my father's death had been. A tree fell in the woods. It might not have, but it did.

Jon could have died, but he didn't. As strange as it sounds, it was years before I realized that the tree could have hit me — and only after a friend pointed this out, as I told the story around a fire one night.

And it was only a few weeks ago, while on the phone with Jon, that it occurred to me that the tree could have hit all three of us — we were standing in a single-file line, after all, waiting to cross the creek — and that we all might have wound up clobbered and scattered in that river, dying slowly and watching each other die.

It's also probably true that I helped preclude these possibilities by being so feverishly paranoid about bears, wheeling around at the sound of the snapping roots. That's what allowed me to see the tree coming, just barely, and scream that infinitesimal heads-up for Dave. And so, the real meaning of the accident, if I felt compelled to find one, might be that it validated my most exaggerated fears. But instead, it somehow helped cleanse me of them. There was comfort for me in accepting the arbitrariness of what happened, in regarding it as a spasm of random damage in time and space that, just as randomly, a small number of human beings got the opportunity to repair. We were more capable than I had understood. We were also far more helpless.

Note: The article from which this was excerpted originally appeared in the NY Times Magazine 3/10/19



Coast Guard boat that was not part of the incident described here. Photo: Rick Wiebush

2022 Cross Currents Courses and Trips

Day/Date	Course	Location	Instructors/Guides	Cost
Fri - Sun May 13 - 15	Outer Banks and Cape Lookout	Emerald Isle, NC	James Kesterson, Rick Wiebush	\$325 + housing
Sat - Sun May 21 - 22	Intensive Intermediate Skills	Kent Narrows, MD	Laurie Collins, Denise Parisi, Shelly Wiechelt	\$225
Sat June 4	Intro to Kayaking	Spa Creek, Annapolis MD	Paula Hubbard	\$125
Sat - Sun June 4 - 5	Greenland Skills	Rocky Gorge	Mike Hamilton	\$225
Fri - Fri June 3 - 10	Outward Bound Staff Training (Private)	Lower Chesapeake Bay	Rick Wiebush	n/a
Sat - Sun June 18 - 19	Paddle Smarter: Women's Skills Weekend	Chestertown, MD	Paula Hubbard	\$225 + housing
Sat. June 18	Rolling School: Video Analysis	Rocky Gorge Reservoir	Mike Hamilton	\$100
Fri - Sun June 24 - 26	Rough Water Skills (L4, BC Sea Leader)	Cape Charles, VA	James Kesterson	\$325 + housing
Tues - Sat June 28 - 30	L3 IDW + Update	Metompkin Inlet, VA Eastern Shore	Rick Wiebush	\$125/day + housing
Fri - Sun July 1 - 3	The Gathering at Tangier	Tangier Island, VA	Rick Wiebush, Laurie Collins	\$325 + housing
Sat July 9 + 23 + Aug 6	Rolling School Series: Three Sessions	Rocky Gorge Reservoir	Mike Hamilton	\$175 (for all three)
Sat July 16	Intro to Kayaking	Spa Creek, Annapolis	Denise Parisi	\$125
Sun July 24	Incident Management	Chestertown, MD	Paula Hubbard	\$125
Fri July 29 - Sun July 31	Women's Adventure Weekend	Metompkin Inlet, VA Eastern Shore	Ashley Brown, Laura Zulliger	\$325 + housing
Tues Aug 2 - Fri Aug 5	ACA L4 ICW + Update	Metompkin Inlet + Smith Inlet, VA Eastern Shore	Ashley Brown	\$150/day + housing
Sat - Thurs Aug 6 - 11	Cape Cod Exploration	Harwich (mid-Cape), MA	Paula Hubbard, Rick Wiebush	\$525 + housing
Fri - Sun. Aug. 12 - 14	Rocks and Ledges	Newport, RI	Ken Fandetti, Rick Wiebush, Paula Hubbard	\$325 + housing
Sat. Aug 20	Intro to Kayaking	Spa Creek, Annapolis	Denise Parisi, Shelly Wiechelt	\$125
Sat - Sun Aug 20 - 21	Intensive Intermediate Skills	Spa Creek,, Annapolis	Laurie Collins, Luci Hollingsworth	\$225
Fri - Sun Aug 28 - 29	Gathering at Rehoboth Bay	Camp Arrowhead, DE	Jeff Atkins, Mike Hamilton, Rick Wiebush	\$295 + housing
Fri - Sun Sept 23- 25	10th Annual Kiptopeke Symposium	Cape Charles, VA	Dale Williams, Jeff Atkins, Ashley Brown, Tom Noffsinger,,inter alia	\$375 + housing

Contributors

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Edward Rackley - is a rough water paddler and cyclist. He designs, runs and assesses overseas disaster relief projects. A philosopher by training, he's interested in how adventure evolved from exploration to today's extreme sports - what's been gained and lost?

Rick Wiebush – runs *Cross Currents Sea Kayaking* and is the editor of *Coastbusters*. He is an ACA L3 IT and British Canoeing 4* Sea Leader. Rick lives in Baltimore.

Dale Williams is an ACA L5 ITE who lives on Tybee Island, GA. He runs Sea Kayaking USA, importing and distributing SKUK/NDK kayaks, Celtic paddles and Reed clothing and gear. Dale teaches high-end surf and rough water classes and provides L4 and L5 instructor training.

Coastbusters welcomes submissions of trip reports, incident descriptions and analyses, skills and “how-to” articles, boat and gear reviews, book and video reviews, and sea kayaking-related photographs. We are interested in receiving submissions from all paddlers. It just so happens that some of this month's contributors are instructors. That is not a requirement.

Articles should be limited to about 1,000 – 1,500 words and submitted in Word. Photos should be submitted in .jpg format. Please send your submissions to Rick Wiebush at rwiebush@gmail.com.

Coastbusters is a publication of *Cross Currents Sea Kayaking*