

# ***Coastbusters***

**The Cross Currents Newsletter for Mid-Atlantic Paddlers**

July 2021

## **Antarctica!**

***Chris Hipgrave***



*98% of Antarctica is covered in ice during their Summer. It flows towards the oceans, breaking into crevasses over steeper terrain, before dropping into the water.*

*Despite Antarctica technically being a desert, in places the ice is 2 miles thick and the water captured within it can be thousands of years old. Photo: Chris Hipgrave*



*A team of kayakers from Georgia Tech University paddle below the 7 Sisters, as we circumnavigate Doumer Island.  
Photo: Chris Hipgrave*



*Our home, the 254ft Polar Pioneer, safely got us thru the ice to some of most beautiful kayaking locations along the Antarctic Peninsula. Here she is dwarfed by glacier cliffs nearby. Photo: Chris Hipgrave*



@Kaspers\_Turgleder

*Perspective: those ice cliffs are hundreds of feet high. Photo: Kaspers Turgleder*



*When conditions are right, the reflections of the mountains and ice are simply stunning. Photo: Chris Hipgrave*



*Chinstrap penguins are the comedians of the Antarctic. Photo: Chris Hipgrave*



*Penguin highway routes develop overtime as the snow gets compacted down due to heavy use in penguin colonies, saving them effort and calories moving around on the ice. Photo: Chris Hipgrave*



*A Weddell seal stretches and snoozes the day away. Photo: Chris Hipgrave*



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*The Leopard seal has a fearsome reputation as one of the top predators in Antarctica, and are often seen near penguin colonies. Photo: Kaspers Turgleder.*



*We saw hundreds of Humpback whales over the course of our trip, some so close we needed to back up to avoid being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Photo Chris Hipgrave.*



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*Orcas are quite elusive in the wild so getting to witness a group of 25-30 of them from close by was a rare treat. Photo: Kasper Jaeger*

*In This Issue*

Antarctica! – *Chris Higgrave* ..... 1

Cross Currents 2021 Courses and Trips. .... 7

How Kayaking Makes Me A Better Boat Captain; and Vice Versa – *Tom Noffsinger* ..... 8

Shitstorm Redux – Sean Morley..... 11

Photos of the Month ..... 17

Paddking and Place: What’s the Nature of Our Connection? – Rick Wiebush ..... 20

Pushed to the Limit: BCU 5\* Training – Jed Luby ..... 22

Contributors ..... 29

**Cross Currents Summer - Fall Courses and Trips**

| Day/Date                   | Course/Trip                                    | Location              | Instructor   | Cost |
|----------------------------|--|-----------------------|--|------|
| Fri – Sun<br>July 2 - 4    | The Gathering at Tangier                       | Tangier Island,<br>VA | Rick Wiebush, Laurie Collins   | 425  |
| Sat July 24                | Intro to Open Water Pt I                       | Kent Island, MD       | Greg Hollingsworth   | 110  |
| Sat- Sun<br>Aug 7 - 8      | Intro to Open Water Pt II                      | Wachapreague,<br>VA   | Greg Hollingsworth   | 225* |
| Sun Aug 15                 | Incident Management                            | Chestertown, MD       | Paula Hubbard  | 110  |
| Fri – Sun<br>Aug 20 - 22   | Rough Water and Surf Skills                    | Cape Charles, VA      | Jeff Atkins  | 325* |
| Sat – Sun<br>Aug 28 - 29   | Intensive Intermediate Skills                  | Kent Island, MD       | Laurie Collins, Shelly Wiechelt  | 225  |
| Weds-Thurs<br>Sept 15-16   | British Canoeing<br>Sea Leader Training        | Cape Charles, VA      | Todd Wright  | 250* |
| Fri – Sun<br>Sept. 17 - 19 | 10 <sup>th</sup> Annual Kiptopeke<br>Symposium | Cape Charles, VA      | Dale Williams, Todd Wright, Tom<br>Noffsinger, Ashley Brown, Jeff Atkins,<br>et al | 350* |
| Fri – Mon<br>Oct 22 - 25   | The Low Country Gathering                      | Charleston, SC        | Ashley Brown, Jeff Atkins, Rick<br>Wiebush   | 395* |
| Sat – Sun<br>Oct 30-31     | SOLO Wilderness First Aid                      | Baltimore, MD         | Todd Wright  | 220  |
|                            | *Housing cost is additional                    |                       |  |      |

## How Kayaking Makes me a Better Boat Captain - and Vice Versa

*Tom Noffsinger*



*Helm Station – The bow looks different in a power boat, and there are lots of tools available to help with navigation, including a dedicated nav computer, chart plotter, radar, wind direction and speed, and depth. Photo: Tom Noffsinger*

A few weeks ago Amy and I were piloting our trawler through the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel channel and I realized the outgoing current was still incredibly strong, nearly two hours after slack low tide. The area is a compression zone – water from the James River and Elizabeth River system is forced through a narrow opening into the Chesapeake Bay, increasing the rate of flow and decreasing our speed over ground. Although the 380-horsepower diesel was still purring at 1600 rpms, our effective speed had reduced to nearly six knots.

### Knowing what to expect

I smiled when I saw the speed decreasing on the instruments, because I knew it was going to happen. I could easily predict the impacts of a strong ebb even so long after low tide, because of my years of kayaking in inlets and tidal rivers. Even better, I knew that just a mile away, we would start regaining speed as we progressed upriver and away from the narrow area near the bridge. And that's just what happened – our speed increased to 7.5 knots and soon we were at eight again as we reached an area of true slack – low water and no current flow.



*Tom at the helm of the 34-foot American Tug, Anomaly  
Photo: Amy Noffsinger*



*Anomaly. Photo: Tom Noffsinger*

There is no doubt kayaking has made me a better captain. Although I grew up on and around small boats, it is kayaking that exposed me to effectively using a chart and compass, planning a route that accounts for current, understanding the difference between tidal rise and fall (rule of 12ths) and tidal currents (50/90 rule), and the benefits of keeping a close eye on the sky and an ear on the weather radio. Kayaking helped me understand the effects of wind and tide on a vessel and the water conditions, and how to properly use a VHF radio.

This knowledge and practical experience plays out dozens of times on a given outing – checking the wind and current speed and direction as I enter the marina and make a plan for docking, for example. I know that I may need to start my turn into the slip earlier if the wind is from the northwest, and later if it is from the southeast. I know there is a small eddy at the marina entrance at max ebb, and I need a bit of a ferry angle when entering from the south during max flood. I know I need to put out a bit more anchor chain during spring tides, and how to judge the current by looking at the water around buoys and pilings. I regularly see and meet boaters who are in a state of unconscious incompetence about such things, and that plays out when they miss their timing entering a slip, or don't appreciate how the wind is going to blow them off course when they initiate a slow-speed maneuver. I'm far

from perfect myself, but thousands of hours and miles of kayak seat time has given me an education most will never experience.

### A Better Paddler

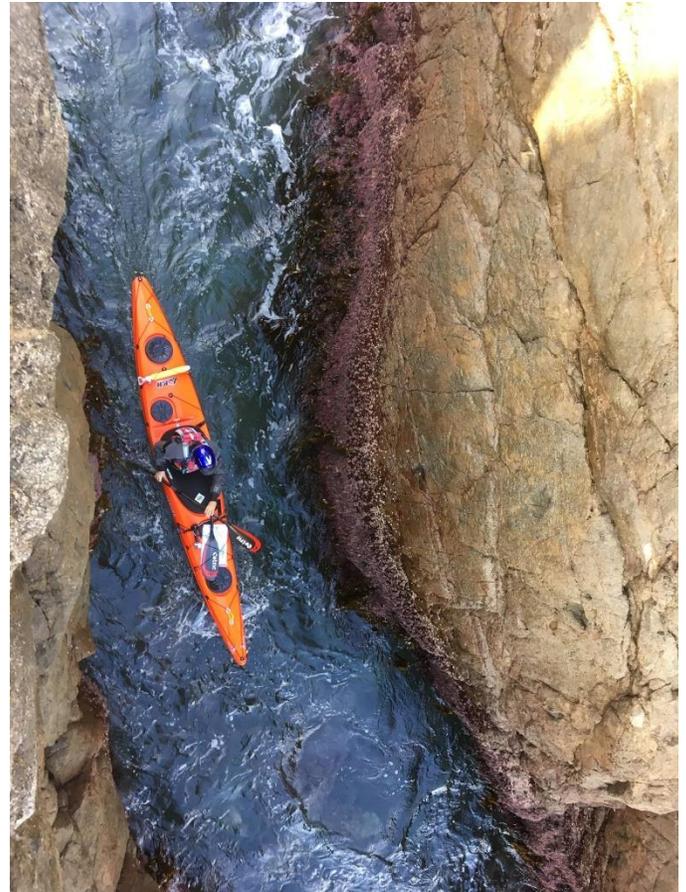
The reverse is true as well – I’m a much better kayaker after spending hundreds of days at the helm of sailing and power boats, including living full-time on a sailboat for the better part of a year. I knew theoretical and occasional VHF radio use from kayaking, but nothing like the experience of listening to and using a VHF in the busy port of Norfolk, VA, where I regularly hear real-world Coast Guard interactions, communicate with tugs and ships about their intentions, and place calls to bridge tenders and marina staff.

And while I knew that current can still flow for hours after high or low water and have experienced it in a kayak, seeing and feeling the dramatic effects from the helm of a 34-foot 20,000-pound trawler gives me new appreciation for water movement, and how tides and geography can impact a planned paddle. Not to mention how long current can still flow after high and low tide.

I use a chart plotter every time we take the boat out, as well as when planning trips. As a result, I’m much better at using a chart when paddling or planning a kayak destination. I now regularly use boating resources like [webapp.navionics.com](http://webapp.navionics.com) and [activecapatain.com](http://activecapatain.com) to explore kayaking routes – they are a powerful tool in combination with Google’s satellite view. I thank boating for lots of practical experience working with charts.

Finally, I have a far greater appreciation for actual wind speeds, and the effects on the water. My boat is equipped with a wind indicator that shows the direction and wind speed, both true and apparent. Because I so often see the actual measured wind speed and what the water looks like at different velocities, I’m better at estimating the actual wind speed when away from the instruments, and in anticipating how a predicted marine forecast will impact my chosen paddling destination.

Pleasure boating certainly isn’t for everyone, but if being on the water feeds your soul like it does mine, I think you’ll find there is a lot of overlap between kayaking and boating. I’m not sure which gives me the most smiles-per-hour, but I’m thankful for a life that lets me get as many as possible.



*Tom negotiating current, waves and rocks. Photo: Victor Leon*

## Shitstorm Redux!

*Sean Morley*

*Note: The May edition of Coastbusters featured an article (“Shitstorm”) that described a major surf zone incident at a symposium in the Pacific Northwest. That article was written by one of the two lead instructors for the class. This article, written by the other lead instructor, describes the same incident from a different perspective. The lessons are incredibly instructive and are worth reading again – ed.*

For this first day of the symposium, I had been designated as one of two ‘Lead’ instructors (the other being Mark Whittaker) for an Advanced Long Boat Surfing Class. My assistant was Jamie; Mark’s assist was Richard. I had not met Mark before but had paddled with both Jamie and Richard before. I knew them to be very strong and skilled paddlers.

### Deciding on Happy Camp at Netarts Bay

In making the suggestion to go to Happy Camp – at the entrance to Netarts Bay - I was mindful that the main beach at Pacific City would be crowded with other classes and board surfers. The surf at Pacific City also tends to be dumping, while the entrance to Netarts Bay at Happy Camp seemed to have the potential for longer surf rides. I was eager to have longer rides so that my students would have time on the wave to develop their surfing skills.

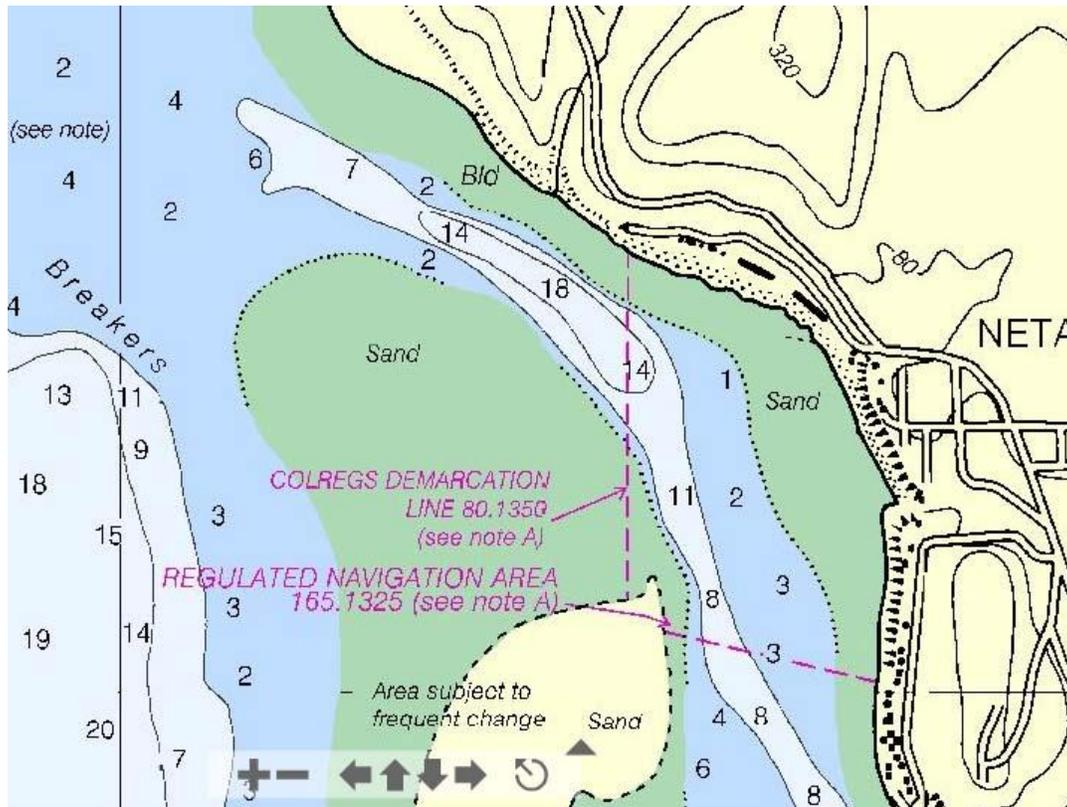
I had not been to the location before and I underestimated the obvious risks presented by what would become an ebbing tide. In my mind I was thinking that we could use the ebbing tide as a conveyor belt to assist students to get back out quickly. I knew that I would need to control the group carefully but since this was supposed to be an “advanced” class I felt that the students should have the required skills. Indeed, I had taught several of the student before and knew they were competent

paddlers. I knew my assistant Jamie to be effective in assisted rescues and I felt we could quickly rescue anyone who capsized and came out of their boat. I did not fully consider the potential for multiple capsizes at the same time. I prioritized the desire for long surf rides above safety and this was a fundamental and basic error that ultimately led to the incident that unfolded.

I spoke with Richard who I knew had the most local knowledge amongst the four instructors. He liked the idea of going to Happy Camp and so I made this suggestion to Mark. Mark seemed to be happy with the idea and did not express any concerns at that time. It was only once we had returned from the incident that I became aware that he had had concerns about the choice of location.

The one individual that did offer me advice was John Walpole. I had not met John before and did not appreciate that he had considerable sea kayaking experience. Whilst I did listen carefully to the information he gave me about the tidal currents and sandbanks at Happy Camp, had I known him better I might have read between the lines of what he was telling me and understood that he was really trying to tell me not to go there. Likewise, if John had known me better he might have felt more comfortable about telling me that Happy Camp was a bad idea on the ebb.

Once we met with the students we informed them that we were going to Happy Camp. One of the students knew of the location, although he had not paddled there. He was eager to get going so I allowed him to go ahead and to meet us there. This was a mistake.



The Netarts Bay Inlet. NOAA chart 18250

Once we had ensured everyone had a ride and had their boats loaded, we left the main venue and headed north. We drove past a beach (McPhillips) where the surf looked ideal for our class. Because I had let the student go ahead we were unable to change plans at that time.

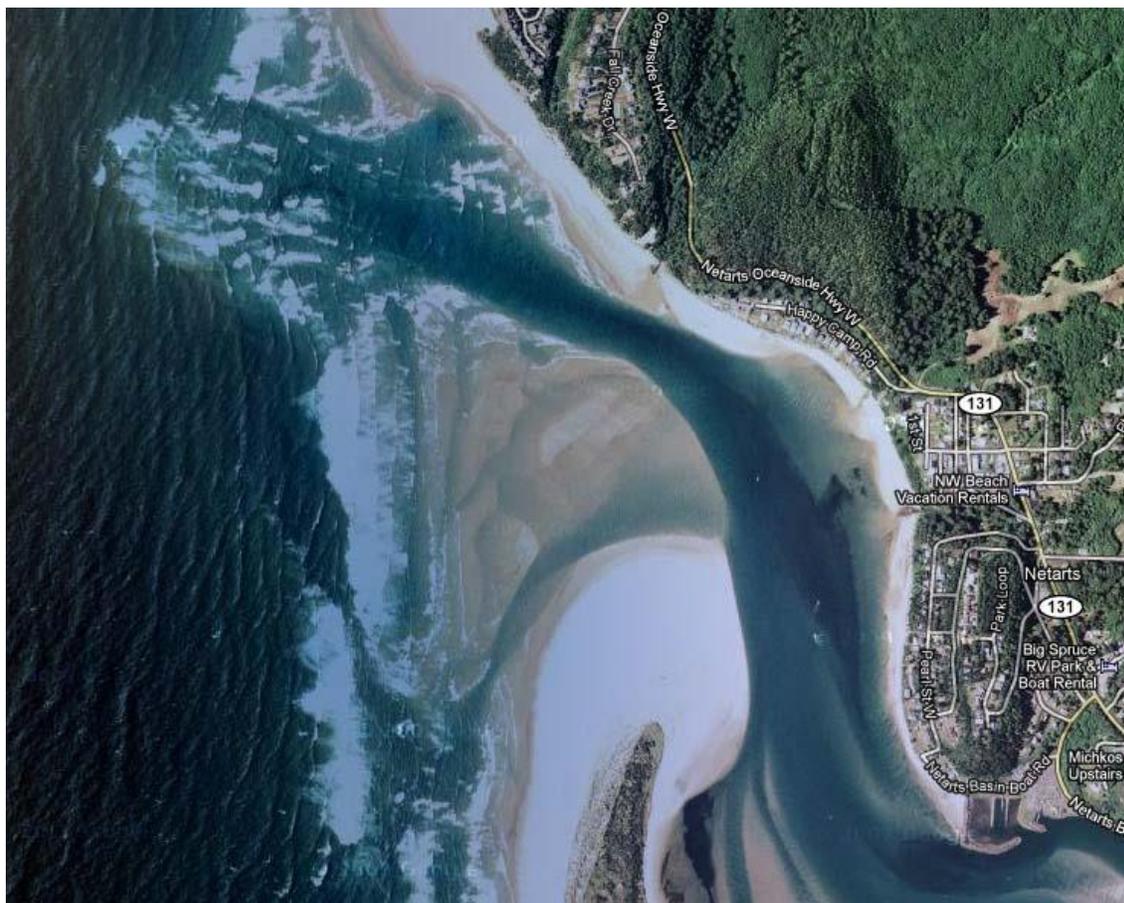
### A Late Start

By the time we got to Happy Camp, got unloaded and changed, it was 2 PM and the tide was already starting to ebb. The surf looked very manageable from the car park. However, it was impossible to accurately assess the size of the surf outside the entrance to Netarts Bay. I had a brief discussion with Mark and we agreed that the conditions from the car park looked reasonable. I suggested that Mark's group work on the inside and I offered to take my group outside. We designated a point to act as a boundary between the two groups. I foolishly left my VHF radio in my truck. I would not normally carry a VHF radio during a surf class but

this was not a usual location for a surf class and I should have been wearing it and arranged to communicate with Jamie, Mark and Richard on Channel 69 if it became necessary. One of my students asked if he should bring his radio. I suggested he keep his decks as clean as possible. This was bad advice.

### Pre-launch beach talk

I spent approximately 20 to 30 minutes on the beach with my group discussing our experience, objectives for the class and safety issues, including the risks associated with surfing during an ebb tide. We discussed the strategy for managing the group. I asked Jamie to be the outside marker and told the group to utilize the ebb current in the channel to paddle out and turn around once they got to Jamie. I warned them about straying too far from the deep water channel into the break zone and encouraged them to surf left into deep water where the waves



*Netarts Bay Inlet on Google Earth*

would be spilling rather than right to where the waves would be more dumping. Of course this all relied on them having the skills to be able to control their kayaks and we spent some time discussing stern rudders as a means to keeping the kayak straight and strategies for turning when surfing on a wave.

### The launch

Before launching I asked everyone in the group if they felt comfortable paddling out to the entrance. (I did NOT ask if anyone was “too scared” as has been alleged). I stated it was possible for anyone who did not want to go outside to join the group on the inside. Everyone appeared eager to go outside but in retrospect I could have asked this sooner or in such a way that it would have been easier for a student to opt to stay inside.

I assisted everyone in launching. I like to do this so

that I can ensure no one is over anxious and I can check things like hatch covers. The downside to this strategy was that I was the last to launch and the group was already starting to paddle out towards the mouth. At that point I felt able to catch up with everyone before they reached the surf break but then one of my students stated he had an issue with a foot peg. Once I had assisted him with this I looked up and saw that my group had not waited for me but had paddled straight out and into the break zone.

I was annoyed with myself because I knew I should have specifically told Jamie to keep the group together and wait for me before entering the break zone. I knew that we needed to assess the conditions at the mouth of the bay before getting involved in the surf break but I had not explained this to Jamie and given him this specific instruction.



*Illustrative photo (not from this incident): Kierran Tistagh*

### Things start to go pear-shaped quickly

As I finally caught up with the majority of the group, I was alarmed to see Jamie surfing a large wave which did not comply with my instruction to him to act as the outside marker. Instead of the group keeping close to the deepwater channel several had gone deep into the break zone and in a very short period of time a large set came through which caused multiple capsizes. Several students rolled successfully but one student, Shay, came out of her boat. I performed an assisted rescue on her and successfully put her back in her boat, but during this time it was apparent that others had capsized and were also swimming.

It was clear that conditions were too big for the ability of the group. At this point I should have used my whistle to attract everyone's attention and direct them back to the beach. Unfortunately, the group was already too split up to make this possible. I told each student I encountered to head into the beach. I was aware that some were finding it extremely difficult to control their kayaks and stay upright. I

was also aware that some of Mark's group had strayed out into the zone where we should have been working and they were also struggling to stay upright in the surf.

### And then got worse

I then spent the next two hours performing rescue after rescue of boats and people, desperately trying to keep track of the group. The details of these two hours are somewhat vague. Whilst reuniting one of Mark's students -Steve - with his kayak I was aware of another one of Mark's students David, who had capsized, was out of his boat, and had drifted well outside the mouth of the bay. Thankfully he was holding his paddle vertically so I was able to keep track of his whereabouts. Once I had put Steve back in his kayak I paddled out to Dave, put him back in his boat and coached him back in through the surf. As I brought him in I was aware that two of my students, Shay (whom I had rescued earlier) and Donna, were both in the water without their kayaks. Jamie was working with Shay and had managed to put her on his back deck. He seemed to be making very little progress toward shore. Shay was quite

distressed and complained of being cold. The dry suit she had borrowed was leaking.

Fred, a professional photographer, was in my group. He was proving to be a very competent rough water paddler and was a huge help performing several rescues and tows. I was concerned that Shay was in the early stages of hypothermia and might not be able to hang on to Jamie's kayak for much longer. I am unclear exactly when I did this but at some point in time I asked Fred to paddle in to the beach and call the Coastguard. I asked him to make a specific request for a jet-ski as I felt this was likely to be the quickest and most effective way to get Shay ashore and out of the water.

I went to the aid of Donna who was swimming with her paddle. She did not appear to be at all distressed but there was no sign of her boat. I saw Shay's boat and towed it towards Donna in the hope that she would be able to paddle it into the beach. But Shay's kayak was low volume and Donna was unable to fit inside it.

#### Now I'm in trouble!

As I was attempting to put Donna into Shay's kayak, a large wave swept over our heads 'log rolling' us several times. In the process I lost my paddle, which had been tucked under the front of my lifejacket. I was unable to reach my spare located on my front deck and I had run out of air after the long tumble ride. I was unable to hand roll on my first attempt so I did a wet exit. When I surfaced another large set wave took my boat away from me. I saw my and Donna's paddles nearby and used my short tow to secure them and then started swimming after Shay's kayak which was swamped but floating about 100 yards away. Donna was also nearby and I told her to try to stay with me.

After a long swim I caught up with Shay's kayak and did a cowboy scramble into it. The boat was holed through the hull near the day hatch, the cover of which was missing. The other hatches were secure so the kayak remained floating. I paddled over to Donna and provided her with support until we were joined by Richard, who gave her a back-deck carry to the south side of the bay entrance and

a large sand spit that had become exposed as the tide had dropped.

#### Help arrives

I then paddled Shay's flooded kayak across to the north side of the estuary where I found Mark towing my kayak and Jamie still carrying Shay on his back deck. I asked Mark to go into the beach and start rounding up everyone. I transferred from Shay's boat to mine and then hooked up to Jamie's kayak and attempted to tow him and Shay towards the north side of the estuary. By this time, I was aware of emergency vehicles on the beach. I had no idea if we had accounted for all of our students and was very anxious that we could have missed a capsized student who could have been swept out to sea.

We were still a fair distance offshore and outside of all but the largest breaking waves. So I was extremely relieved when I saw two rescue jet skis approaching from the direction of Netart's Bay. Whilst I was now confident that we could make it to shore, I was not at all confident that Shay would be able to hang on through the surf zone. We transferred Shay to the jet-ski which was a very quick and easy process. Then, while Jamie went to rejoin the group, I paddled over to the south side and the sand spit where Richard was waiting with Donna. I waved down the other jet-ski which carried Donna across the estuary and back to the group. As Richard and I paddled back across the estuary, I observed a Coastguard helicopter circling and was concerned that they had located another member of our group. I could also see two Coastguard vessels offshore.

I landed, got hold of the roster sheet, and checked off everyone's names. It was only at that time that I knew that everyone was accounted for. I liaised with the Sheriff and Coastguard and confirmed that we were all ashore. I gave them details of Shay's kayak that was still missing. Donna's had been recovered. Once the authorities had all the information they needed we worked as a team to get all the kayaks carried back to the Happy Camp car park. I checked on Shay and Donna who were being treated for hypothermia in ambulances and then conducted a class debrief.

## Reflections

In summary I wish to make the following observations and recommendations:

1. More specific advice/recommendations on suitable locations should be given by the symposium organizers to each class's Lead and Assistant instructor(s), particularly if these instructors are not from the local area. Having an earlier meeting than noon on the first day would help with this by giving more time for decision making and possible reconnoiter by those unfamiliar with the area.
2. Lead instructors MUST inform the Safety Officer of the launch and final destination of their class.
3. When it is necessary to drive to a location, the Lead instructor(s) should lead the convoy and no student should be allowed to go ahead on their own.
4. Tidal CURRENT information should be provided for each location where appropriate and available.
5. No class should be conducted in a bay entrance or mouth of a river estuary during the ebb.
6. VHF radios should be compulsory on-water equipment for ALL instructors.
7. Short tows of less than ten feet are dangerous and ineffective in surf conditions. Long tow lines are also difficult to control and a tow line of around 15 to 20 feet would appear to be most useful, although towing in surf is not desirable. It can be very challenging and potentially dangerous.
8. When conducting an Assisted Rescue in surf, if keep your paddle tucked under your lifejacket you are likely to lose it during a capsized. It may be preferable to stow your paddle under bungee lines. Had mine been secured under the bungee I would likely have been able to roll even if it had become twisted. I shall also be experimenting with a paddle karabiner attached to a quick release loop on my lifejacket.
9. An 'Advanced Class' should not be scheduled on the first day of a kayak symposium.
10. An instructor's reputation should never be used by the symposium organizers or other instructors to judge his or her ability to make good decisions.
11. All Lead and Assistant Instructors need to be actively involved in decision making with regard to location and given the 'power of veto'.
12. Both Lead and Assistant Instructors should be qualified, experienced and competent to lead in the environment they are teaching in.
13. All symposium attendees should be encouraged to feel empowered to express concerns about any aspects of safety.
14. Final head counts should be conducted out loud so that everyone in the group is aware of the size of the group.
15. When asking students if they feel able to deal with the prevailing conditions it should be done in such a way as to make it easy for them to opt out and there should be an alternative activity available.

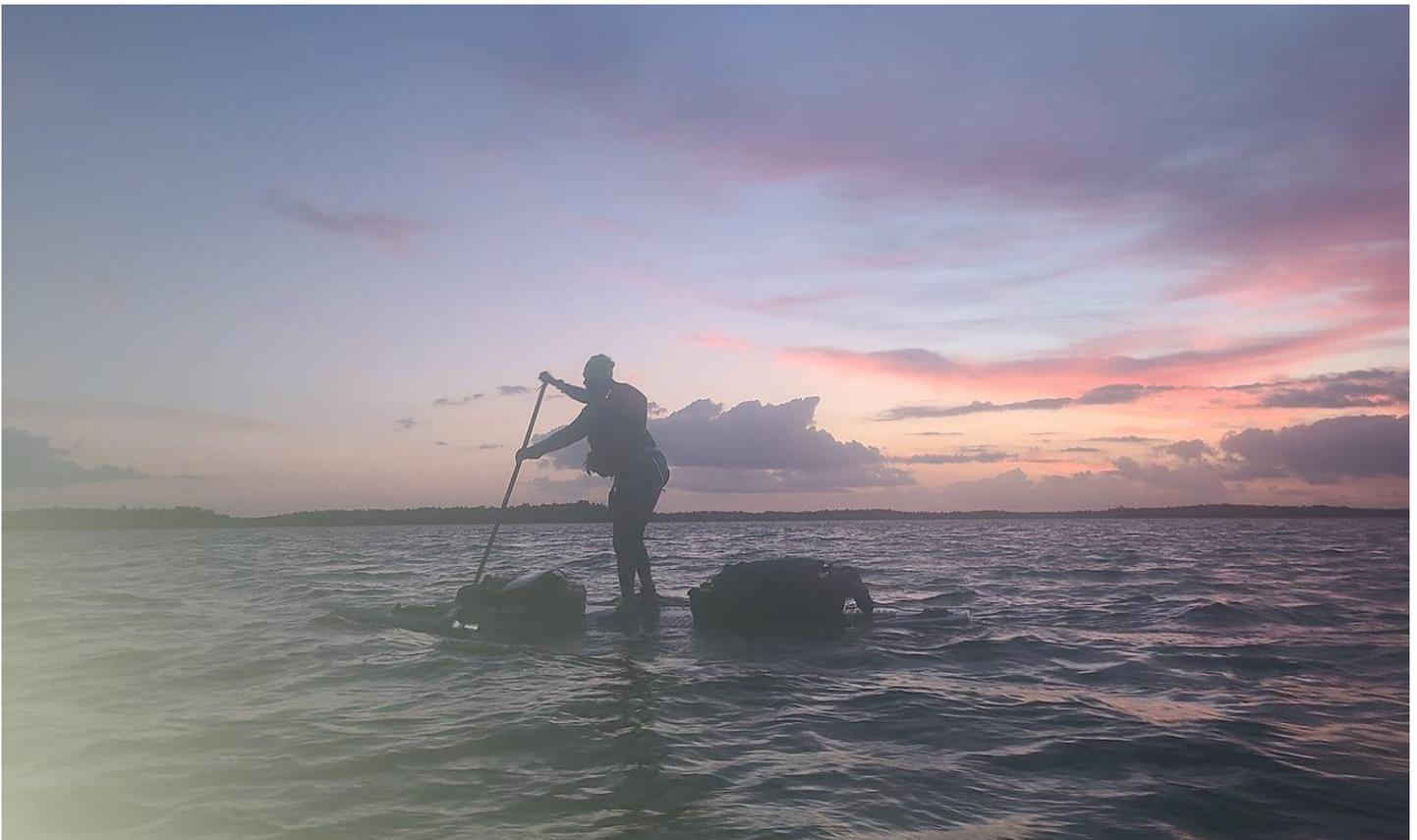
**Photos of the Month**



**Osprey!**

*Photo: Curtis Warrenfeltz*

**Photos of the Month**



**Rabbit Key Dawn**

*Photo: Janice Hindson*

**Photos of the Month**



**West Texas Storm**

*Photo: Laura Rowe*

## Paddling and Place: What's The Nature of Our Connection?

*Rick Wiebush*



*Kent Narrows MD. Stock Phot*

Sea kayakers in the Baltimore/DC area have relationships with two basic kinds of places. Those that involve calmer water (typically the Chesapeake Bay) and those that involve dynamic and often rough water (typically ocean inlets and surf zones). In this article I use two specific places to discuss our relationship with the environment in the two “types”.

### Kent Island

We often use Kent Island Narrows, Maryland (in the northern part of the Bay, near Annapolis and Baltimore) for day touring, and for calm water introductory and intermediate skills classes. Kent Island is heavily populated. There is a major highway bridge that crosses the narrows above the put-in ramp that we use. There is a constant flow of power boaters who use the same ramp. The banks

are crammed on both sides with bars, marinas and shoulder-to-shoulder fisherman whose lines create a gauntlet for paddlers. The island itself is very marshy and it is ringed by reeds. So the environment is primarily man-made and hectic, with nature relegated to (barely) background.



*Cigarette boats bar hopping in the Narrows*

These characteristics lead to a very anthropocentric view of nature i.e. the Kent Island area is there, we tend to think, for us to *use* for our purposes. It also reinforces the dualism with which the Western world views the relationship of man and nature. It is a setting that is *separate* from us. It doesn't elicit a sense of respect, and certainly not awe. There is nothing very special about it, beyond being convenient. We are bigger than this place. We have an instrumentalist view of nature here.

#### Metompkin Inlet.

The other place is Metompkin Inlet on the Virginia Eastern Shore. We use this for serious paddling and for rougher water and surf training. The inlet sits between two barrier islands - Metompkin and Cedar - that are protected by the Nature Conservancy. The Atlantic Ocean rushes in and out of the inlet, alternately filling and emptying the vast bays between the islands and the mainland. There are no buildings and no people living on these islands. Hundreds of nesting birds are protected here. Millions of whole and crushed shells populate the beaches. There are few people who visit the islands. We see maybe five power boats each day (vs. hundreds at Kent Island) and these are mostly just local fishermen (vs. city yahoos in cigarette boats).

The name- Metompkin - is an Indigenous one, and the inlet area is as close to wilderness as one can get on the east coast of the U.S. It is a dynamic place, changing from day-to-day and week-to-week due to the winds, the currents, and storms. The surf is never the same; sand bars are constantly shifting and the breaking waves associated with them move from place to place. Variations in ocean swell produce gentle, spilling, friendly waves one day and confused, threatening, four- and five-foot dumping waves the next. Thunderstorms are frequent on summer days. It is dynamic and has agency - you never know what you're going to get.

Our attitudes toward and relationship with Metompkin is very different from our view of Kent Island. This place - Metompkin - is bigger than us. It is both starkly beautiful and dangerous. It elicits awe and commands respect. Since it is isolated, we feel more in touch with, and a part of, nature here. The ocean invites us (or not) to play in it. There are no illusions of us "conquering" nature and no sense of hegemony. While it is difficult to overcome ingrained notions of duality, it is in this place - for us - that the human and more-than-human worlds seem more integrated.



*Cedar Island at Metompkin Inlet. Photo: Rick Wiebush*

## Pushed to the Limits: BCU 5\* Training

*Jed Luby*

*Note: this article describes a BCU 5\* training that took place about two decades ago, but which continues to be illustrative of the very demanding high-level training (now called “Advanced Sea Leader”) run by British Canoeing. The training took place at Maine Island Kayak Company (MIKco). This article was written by one of the participants. It originally appeared in the MIKco blog and has been edited slightly for length. Ed.*

I had wondered about BCU 5 Star training since the days of my first sea kayak lessons. You know, we’ve all heard stories about people who have actually passed the 5 Star test and lived to talk about it: mythical paddlers who don’t need food, water or sleep and can live for days in their boats with hardly a concern for the weather. You hear how they do battle with huge surf and high winds, sea monsters and horrifying races that mere mortals couldn’t possibly handle... you know the stories can’t be true, but somehow...the image stays with you.

So it was in this context that I had come to Maine Island Kayak Co’s 5 Star Training with visions of 18-hour days and super-human feats performed while dancing in “entertaining” conditions with fully loaded boats. I never envisioned myself taking part in this advanced training, but after my 4 Star assessment I was left with no valid excuse not to try it. It was time to face the challenges and grow as a paddler – or accept my limits.

### Starting Off

The weekend started normally enough. We were seven nervous Gore-Tex clad New Englanders with sea experience ranging from relative newcomer to 20 years, and ages ranging from 30 to 65. I was happy to recognize faces from previous trainings

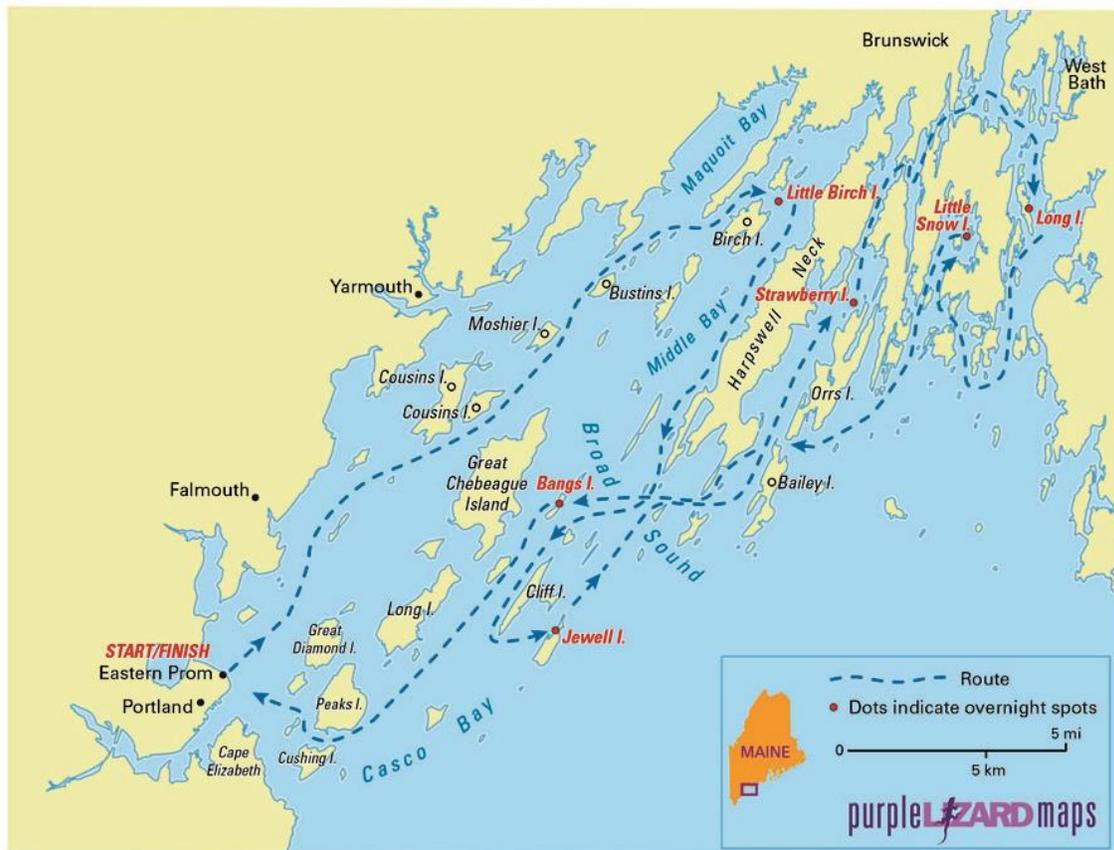
and pleased to be in such good company for what, I suspected, would be a challenging 3 days.

The BCU 5 Star is a leadership award involving open sea kayaking in tidal streams and challenging conditions along exposed shores. So, not surprisingly, the first discussions focused on a range of navigation techniques and strategies, and then turned to the causes and effects of weather systems on wind and waves and their interaction with landforms. Our instructors were able to cut through the complexity and deliver the material in such a manner that it seemed a natural extension of our previous experiences. The whole discussion felt more like a casual conversation with friends than the much-feared training that I had held in such honored status since I started my BCU training.

### Initial Assessment: Rolling and Rescues

The coast of Maine is a beautiful and varied place to paddle, and Casco Bay is no exception. This day’s warm October sun was like a gift that you know you don’t deserve but graciously accept anyway. We headed out towards Cushing Island for some self-rescue practice, rolling and re-entering in the chop, a game of tag between the rocks and hard ledges, and intricate rescue scenarios. I suspect the afternoon was designed to let us relax and play in our heavily laden boats while the instructors assessed the depth of our judgment and rough water rescue skills. Most of the group faired pretty well.

Complicated rescue scenarios developed out of the interaction of the sea state, group dynamics, and the dance of personalities, highlighting the need for “big picture” thinking. As 5 Star paddlers, it’s as important to know when to follow as well as how to lead.



Overview of Casco Bay. Jewell Island at lower center. Courtesy Purple Lizards Maps

Apparently satisfied that some of the basics were in place, Steve (Maynard) and Tom (Bergh) led us back to the MIKCo boathouse. *For the record, I would like to state that I was tricked into letting go of my boat and further that that is something I have never, ever done before or since.*

### Trip Planning Exercise: Oooops!

That evening, we were tasked with planning out a challenging but safe multi-day trip in the Cobscook Bay area from Deer Island past Eastport to Grand Manan Island – waters that none of us had previously paddled. Interestingly, we came up with conflicting analyses on what the tides would do to the currents and the severity and timing of the hazards. To our credit, we did come to a consensus on acceptable paddling conditions and daily mileage goals. Unfortunately, the evening came to a conclusion with our instructors identifying a major hazard, which we had missed, affectionately named The Old Sow. The Sow is a famous and dangerous whirlpool off Eastport and is generally considered

the second largest in the Western Hemisphere. Despite our collective experience and a full library of resource materials, we failed to anticipate and plan around a whirlpool that can take large powerboats to the bottom. How were we to know? And so this is how the humbling began.

### New Destinations

After breakfast on the second day, we were asked to plan out three 50-120 mile expeditions: one in Scotland with only general information; another past Martha's Vineyard with its complicated tides and strong currents; and the last in Cobscook Bay, very close to the Old Sow. We would not be caught making the same mistakes twice, so we poured over the available charts, reference materials and weather reports – twice! What were we missing? Where are the surprises hiding? As a leadership award the BCU 5 Star pushes us to think beyond our own wants and needs to plan a fun and safe trip in real world conditions and seas suitable for experienced (4 Star) paddlers. The effects of winds on tides and

and overall conditions determined when and where we could paddle. Intense consideration had to be given to the effects of tidal drift, races, overfalls and other hazards that could change the severity of the paddling within an hour's time.

Ned and I paired up to plan a trip in the Hebrides in Western Scotland with only basic information. Pouring over the available reference materials, we found significant hazards amidst varied coastlines. *Now, even as I write this I can't stop thinking of paddling that trip in real life. Anyone want to go? Know any Scots with boats?*

### The Two-Day Journey Begins

After lunch the journeying portion began, and we launched our expedition-loaded kayaks into relatively thick Casco Bay fog. The plan was to paddle late into the night, bivy on an island and pilot through the surf zones and spring tides of outer Casco Bay. We had no idea of the intermediate destinations – we only knew we'd be in our boats for the next 30 hours. I could not help thinking that I would finally get to witness 5 Star mythology first hand! Visibility was less than one mile, not bad except our first target was a very small island three miles off called Outer Green. We decided to check the accuracy of our heading and aimed for a buoy 1.5 miles out. After about 30 minutes, the buoy appeared dead ahead, reinforcing our confidence to continue on to Outer Green with its' rocky outcroppings on the very edge of Casco Bay. This was not a spot anyone would want to land or camp on (in fact it's off limits most of the year as a bird refuge). We were pleased to have found it, just the same.

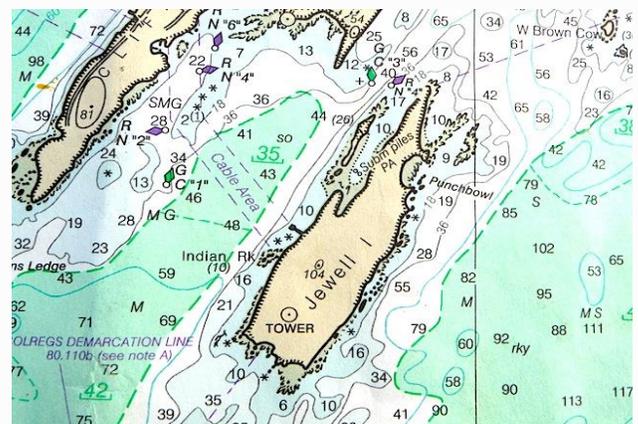
Our instructors asked the "leaders of the moment" to take us between Outer Green and Junk of Pork. Our inexperience led us to lengthy risk analysis, starts and stops, attempts at shouting over the noisy surf and constant attention to avoid drifting into danger zones. Finally, the leaders made the call. The surf was too extreme to go through, so we were led out and around in the safety of the deeper water. The leaders would have preferred to go through the slot, but to do so would have meant taking

unnecessary chances. They made the wise choice, a choice worthy of a 5 Star leader.

### Ooops Again

As evening approached the fog blended the sea and sky together. I was asked to lead our group to land on the southern end of Jewell Island while keeping everyone safe. There was intense surf on Green Island Ledges, a nasty underwater reef highlighted by the standing seas and crushing surf which almost exploded on the sharp folded rocks. By dead reckoning, I carefully tracked our progress along a safe outside course with only the boomers as a reference point. An hour later, my careful calculations fixed our position at a point nearly a mile from our actual location. I was considering turning in toward the wrong island. *Guess I'll re-read Burch's chapter on dead reckoning another time or two. The humbling continued....*

A quick snack stop on the real Jewell Island confirmed my error and gave my friends a chance to develop their jokes about how I had discovered a new island, "Little Jewell". We made our way behind "Big Jewell" in the calmer, protected waters. At this point we discovered that one of our teammates was suffering from nausea brought on by a touch of the flu. We approached this as any other challenge: we set basic rules, safety and communication plans. After ensuring that our teammate was safely put ashore on "Big Jewell", we paddled northeast into the darkening bay, threading our way through the shoals toward Broken Cove. We approached the cove as night descended.





Jewell Island. Photo courtesy Maine Trail Finder

### Negotiating Rocks, Ledges and Breakers: In the Dark!

*Wasn't this just great... Solid mature 4'-6' swells, 15 knot winds, spring tides, thick fog, and now a moonless, starless night! I mean NO visibility.* We were instructed to quickly gear up for night paddling. No rafting up was allowed for 5 Star trainees; each of us was required to sort our night gear within the swells while being careful not to capsize or flood our day hatches. We donned green glow sticks slung over our backs to identify ourselves, and various versions of headlamps and flashlights to experiment with when we needed light.

Our next destination, Eagle Island, is the former home of Admiral Peary of North Pole fame. But first we needed to avoid the obstacles through Broken Cove while correcting for tidal drift and approach Eagle from a very specific direction – right between the rocks on either side of a small beach. We could hear the breakers ahead and

around us and gratefully found the channel markers confirming our location. If we turned in too early along the wide shoal west of Eagle Island the wrong turn could find a paddler side surfing into the rocks on this pitch-black night. We all listened carefully, working to see the shapes with our ears. No one wanted to test their night surf skills quite yet. Eager to get some blood moving in my legs and incorrectly thinking I knew this beach, I offered to go in first. I made it to the steeply sloped cobble in small but dumping surf with a beautiful example of how not to land. I nearly made it ashore as the surf spun my boat... my instinctive high brace only reminding me that I wasn't actually in the boat. *Oh well, I needed to cool off anyway.*

Damp, dark, and cool, we were asked to cook a hot meal for ourselves, eat and stow our gear, and launch in about half an hour. We joked that the hopping sand fleas were an excellent source of protein and tasted like chicken. Truth be told, that meal did taste better than normal.

### Now the Real Fun Starts

After dinner the real fun started. The task was to navigate between Bates Island, 1 nautical mile due west, shrouded with shoals, and Ministerial Island 1/6th of a mile further north and also surrounded by shoals. This allowed for a pretty small margin of error given the conditions. A few degrees too far north or south and we'd be left wondering where we were in pitch blackness with no navigational aids and no visual clues. *So how cool was that?!*

We all knew 5 Star Training involved night navigation exercises...but I did not expect this. It was literally pitch black with no usable light. Even my headlamp proved less than useful since the light reflecting off my all-white boat and the moist fog robbed me of my night vision. The compass was too far away to read and the spring tides were drifting us to sea. Fortunately, one of us had a functional set up, an additional strap-on compass mounted close enough to see and illuminated with a glow stick. *I'm still convinced that you can either read a compass or try to keep your night vision but not both from the cockpit of a kayak in conditions such as these.*

With one of our group now able to maintain our heading, the rest of us concentrated on listening to the ocean: to the surf and shoal shapes, anything that might help fix our position. We frequently counted off, confirming that no one had gone missing. Suddenly out of the darkness a team member starts to holler. He's been picked up by an unseen breaking wave and is headed for me, in the dark, unable to stop. A quick back stroke kept me from being swept up as well. Just as suddenly the wave disappeared. No harm, no foul.

The wave that grabbed my mate was from the shoal at the north end of Bates Island. We had hit our destination dead on and the quieter water beyond gave us a chance to relax. As our night gear began to work for us, we plotted a now simple buoy to buoy course back to our team member on Jewell. At this point we were feeling our oats. As a group we'd survived a significant test of our skills, and more importantly had learned to trust our basic nav skills.

It was late but we were a rowdy bunch that night, full of the kind of spirit that only facing one's fears can instill. Another day was done. Maybe 5 Star survival was possible. We slept well that night.

### An Awesome Landing

We awoke early on Sunday, prepared warm breakfasts, and paddled out around Jewell's north end to play in the swells. Conditions had matured overnight with bigger walls of water coming in further apart and with greater speed. Now it was time to paddle back and forth through the surf line, hook up quickly and tow a "victim" safely out through surf and swells, and generally "read" the sea. We landed on a small steeply shelved beach for a quick morning stretch.

***5\* includes emergency landings in no landing zones. This certainly qualified as a no-landing zone!***

Paddling past Inner Green, we took a moment to practice surf rescues. It was a hoot doing a re-enter and roll miles from shore, with waves breaking over my half submerged boat. The waves were much better at filling my boat than my pump was at emptying the boat, but I soon found a way rig the skirt so I could alternate pumping and bracing.

Out on the ledges, the swells were huge but friendly. Spirits were high as we were asked to look for a landing zone on Outer Green. We knew the seas at the buoy were 8' every 14 seconds. Here the swells were refracting all the way around the island, sometimes exploding in the lee. It was a magnificent sight yet clearly no place to land, but we kept looking. 5 Star includes emergency



Outer Green Island – Courtesy Audubon Society

landings in no-landing zones. Well, this certainly qualified as a no-landing zone.

We held our position, studying the way the waves broke and surged over the rocks, looking for the pattern, the set signature that would tell us when the surges would come and when the lulls would occur and a safe landing might be made. Tom started paddling in and broke into a sprint just as a wave surged. It lifted him up five or six feet, gently placing boat and paddler onto a ledge, high on the rocks. I was in awe. This is the kind of super-human stuff I was envisioning.

Now it's my turn. I headed for the less glamorous and seemingly safer lower ledges for my landing, as did most of my teammates. We looked around and laughed nervously about our unlikely landing, but we all landed safely with only one swimmer. Spirits were high. We were on the final leg of our training. The fog was thick with drizzle as the seas were building with the falling tide. We huddled up against a black rock wall in these British-like conditions, discussing big wave tactics. Before us the sea was transforming our launch site into a major concern. We loaded quickly and worked out our launch plan.

#### A Dangerous Launch and A Broken Boat

The waves were surging impressively now right in front of our launch. We had to carefully time each launch in the lull between the bending surf. I pushed off the rocks, a blast of adrenaline, looking around

to see where everyone was I counted five paddlers on the water, four still to launch.

As Ned launched his boat a very large surge built, grabbed his boat, spun it sideways and then threw paddler and kayak hard against the island. Ned tried to roll in the deep, raging soup, rocks all around him, as the second half of the wave surged strongly over the scene – but the bow is pinned between the rocks and the Explorer folded just fore of the hatch. The seas had torn Ned's boat apart. Unable to control his boat, Ned bailed and swam to safety as the land hands reached to haul him out of the surge. The sea kept throwing his heavily laden boat further onto the rocks with each wave.

***The seas had torn Ned's boat apart.***

With Ned safe, the land-side crew moved to rescue the boat. As they hauled the wreckage from the sea, the bow dangled off at 45 degrees, the day hatch had a fist-sized hole, and the rear deck was about as rigid as wet newspaper. The sight of the damaged boat sickened us. What would we do now? Was this going to require an evacuation? Certainly that boat can't be paddled home!?! But since this was 5 Star training, an evacuation would be far too vulgar. We would need to search for a more elegant solution and return under our own power.

Clearly it was too dangerous for the on-water members to attempt to land. We needed to sit tight, stay warm and out of trouble, while the guys ashore attempt to salvage Ned's boat. If they couldn't fix the boat, then perhaps we could transport Ned and his boat on a towed raft.

After about twenty minutes, the boat was repaired. Well, maybe repaired is too strong of a word. No one would confuse this with a proper repair job. his was a true field repair designed to do little more

than keep Ned afloat on the 5-mile leg back to Peaks Island. Two spare paddles served as splints for the bow while copious amounts of tape and straps held everything together. Patches were applied to the 2 rear holes. Ned's gear was stowed in other boats and the once watertight compartments were filled to capacity with floatation bags. It wasn't pretty, but it would float.

The plan was set. The four on shore would throw the boat off the cliff as a surge rose. I would hook on and tow the boat out of the surge zone. Ned would then jump off the rocks and swim to Steve who would tow him through the surf to his kayak. Ned would re-enter his boat and we would head home. Simple enough, should work.

As I waited for the boat to be thrown off the cliff, I couldn't help thinking that I was awfully close to the same position Ned was in before that wave destroyed his boat. Before I could consider the danger I saw Ned's kayak in the air...I started paddling like crazy to catch it. If the waves got hold of it again there would be nothing left to fix. A quick hook up, sprint tow and the swamped boat was safe beyond the surge. Steve arrived moments later with Ned on his rear deck. Ned quickly climbed back in his boat, and started to pump out his cockpit with hopes that it would still float.

The paddle back to Peaks was truly surreal. Ned was quiet, stoic and solid: his Explorer broken almost beyond repair – but somehow it still floated, and he paddled the 5 miles back unassisted. I felt sorry for Ned over the destruction of his boat, and yet I was amazed that the Explorer was so tough that it could suffer that kind of punishment and still be paddled home. Peaks Island slowly appeared out of the low clouds. After one last surf line, we quietly left the sea behind and re-entered the harbor – tired, spent, and emotionally drained from our short expedition.

### Reflecting

Back on land at Peaks Island, everyone was gathered around the picnic table chatting up the weekend and the lessons learned. I sensed the kind of esprit du corps that only comes from truly unique and intense experiences. I had once again been humbled by the sea.

I am not a 5 Star paddler, I suspect that I will work for some time and take the training again before I dare assess for the 5 Star award. At any rate, the award itself is no longer the goal. Steve Maynard said, "It is a milestone, but the award is just a piece of paper. The skill set is what matters." Agreed, but the 5 Star Award does have meaning to me: not as a badge to be displayed, but as a goal to be realized. The whole BCU Star system is not there to differentiate paddlers, but to encourage people to gain more experience while improving their paddling skills and safety level.

***For me, paddling would  
never be the same.***

Gone are my misconceptions of British Gods walking on water during raging storms as their mates brewed tea promptly at 4:00. The weekend started innocently enough, but for me, paddling would never be the same. I had been introduced to so many new dimensions that I can't even recall how I had looked at sea kayaking a short three days before. And yet I know someday, after more time at sea, that the prior simplicity will return. On that day I will have reached my goal.

## Contributors

*Chris Hipgrave* – is a guide for Aurora Expeditions. He is a whitewater and surfski race competitor who routinely finishes first or second in just about every race he enters. He has competed throughout the world in a variety of disciplines and explored from the snow-capped Himalayas to South America, Europe, Asia, Australasia and the Antarctic peninsula.

*Jed Luby* – in addition to being one of the smartest and funniest people I've ever met, Jed was passionate about paddling and teaching. He passed away in 2017 at the age of 62. The tributes were a powerful testimony to the impact he had on other people generally and paddlers specifically.

*Sean Morley* – originally from the UK, Sean has owned and operated River and Ocean Kayaking in the San Francisco Bay area since 2006. Until his recent (2020) retirement, Sean routinely was a guest instructor at symposia all across the country. In 2004, he was the first person to solo circumnavigate the UK and Ireland.

*Tom Noffsinger* - is an ACA L5 instructor, a sea kayak surfing aficionado, experimented with living on a boat moored in Portsmouth, VA and is now the proud owner of an American tug boat.

*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. He has paddled in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Greenland, the Amazon, Nova Scotia, and his favorite place, Baja.

*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 – 2,000 words and submitted in Word. Photos should be submitted in .jpg format. Please send your submissions to Rick Wiebush at [rwiebush@gmail.com](mailto:rwiebush@gmail.com).

