

Beltway Chapter Report- Mallows Bay Exploration

For a place that could be accurately described as a dumping ground, Mallows Bay has too rich a history to be so simply labeled. The bay is located on the Maryland side of the Potomac River and is home to 230 sunken ships. It is considered the largest shipwreck fleet in the Western Hemisphere. The 100+ year saga of these boats culminated in the bay's designation as a National Marine Sanctuary in 2019.

It was a beautiful, clear day on October 11 as 11 members of the Chesapeake Region arrived to explore the Mallows Bay-Potomac River National Marine Sanctuary. We started with an on-land presentation outlining the history of the "Ghost Fleet", including where they were built, why they fell into disrepair and how they ended up where they now lie in Mallows Bay. Then we headed out in kayaks to explore the graveyard.

Mallows Bay is best viewed at low tide. Except for the largest ships, one could easily dismiss what can be seen above the water as old pilings, submerged trees or even vegetated shallow areas - especially if one were traveling on a fast boat in the main channel or viewing the bay at high tide. Up close, these shipwrecks can pose a risk to unwary paddlers in the shallow, murky waters that nearly conceal the entirety of these shipwrecks.

Our group was fortunate to have Joe and Shellie from Atlantic Kayak lead us through the graveyard, with assistance from Melissa Acuti Boyle of Maryland State Parks. They raised the ships from the depths through fantastic stories filled with world wars; congressional charges of ineptitude; community protests; boom and bust economics; year-round life on a shipwreck; and environmental reclamation, both passive and active.

Thank you to Sammy Zambon and VA State Parks for use of their kayaks and PFDs. Many thanks also to Melissa Acuti Boyle for connecting us with Atlantic Kayak and for the spiffy safety whistles!

Have a site you want to share with the region? Or a topic for a future Beltway Gang training? Please contact Alonso Abugattas (Aabugattas@arlingtonva.us) or Jennifer Simms (jennifer.simms@montgomeryparks.org) with your ideas.

Ken Rosenthal is the Manager at Walker Nature Center in Reston, VA. He loves the areas of interpretation where cultural and natural histories intertwine to produce incredible stories. He also will never shy away from the opportunity to write his own byline.