



By *Sandy Noyes*

## **Chincoteague, VA** as a Paddling Destination, March 29, 2008.

Chincoteague has been saved the awful fate of beach communities to the north like Rehoboth and Bethany Beach in DE [urbanized, skyscraper beach communities] by the simple fact that its outer beaches and inner marshes are within boundaries of either National Wildlife Refuge or National Seashore lands.



*Behind the dunes*

The refuge beach itself is ten miles long, most of it accessible only by hiking, and it connects to Assateague Island National Seashore which extends another 14 miles up into MD. That assures that there are large expanses of shoreline and marsh here kept in a wilderness state. The mission of the Chincoteague NWR is to provide a rest stop for migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. It's the right criteria for paddlers too, provided they aren't indifferent to wildlife and beautiful habitat and don't mind the tranquility... or ponies grazing here and there at water's edge.

While there is one ocean inlet at Toms Cove in the refuge for those who want to play in waves, the main appeal to paddlers would be the marsh system around the refuge and extending north of the causeway leading into the refuge [an area of about 2 x 10 miles], all of it readily accessible from four launch sites described below.

The most accurate map is the USGS "Chincoteague East Quadrangle" 7.5 minute series. There are no nautical aids in and around the marshes, so paddlers ought to have the local tide chart, the USGS map, a GPS to help get back out of the marsh, and the local fishermen's map with its compass rose. ["Chincoteague-Assateague Fishing and Recreation Map", 2007, GMCO Maps and Charts--"use it or get lost"--available at Captain Steve's Bait and Tackle on Maddox Blvd.] Those could perhaps be left in the car if you have hired one of the two local guides: Jay Cherrix [Wildlife Excursions, 757-336-6811] or Jeff Clark from Oyster Bay Outfitters, 757-336-0070. Both Jay and Jeff will guide for an hourly fee, Jay charging \$39/hr.

Note that currents are not an issue in the Assateague Channel, under the bridge into the refuge: 1 kt, and only a 2-foot differential between high and low tide. But I was warned about strong currents at the south end of Chincoteague Is. in the area called "The Canal."

For the adventurous, there's also the 70-mile Virginia Seaside Water Trail to the south, running inside VA's barrier islands, almost all of which are in conservation ownership. Go to: [www.deq.virginia.gov/coastal/seasidewatertrail/](http://www.deq.virginia.gov/coastal/seasidewatertrail/)

Even with a new bridge now under construction, it looks like Chincoteague will retain its rural character, for now. With the exception of three medium-size chain motels on the waterfront, the town core consists of 200 or so quite modest homes from the 1920-1940 period and several trailer parks. It has one main street, one small supermarket, one pharmacy, one bookstore and a small commercial fishing fleet... no boutiques, no organic food stores, no McMansions. Yes, there are surf shops, decoy carvers' stores, and a couple of firework shacks. There are numerous places to stay: small motels and cottages, and camping.

Its rural quality, the unusual concentration of wildlife during migrations, and the many, many miles of protected paddling, are what make Chincoteague unique, to my mind. Warm water [60.5F yesterday at Toms Cove; 64F today at Fir Landing] toward end of April is another attraction for New Englanders who have been dealing with frigid conditions at home for too long. And it's no harder to get here than it is to drive to Boston from NYC.



*Fir Landing*

### **Wildlife Sightings:**

Sightings 4/28: Little Blue Heron, Green Heron, 10 Whimbrel, 90 Dunlin, 20 Snowy Egret, 10 Great Egret, 5 American Oystercatchers, 70 Willett, 75 Glossy Ibis, 5 Semi-Palmated Plover, 200 peeps in a flock; a pair of Clapper Rails sighted and 20 overheard; one Black Bellied Plover; 6 ponies.

### **Photographs:**

Two views are attached:

- Behind the Dunes: this landscape is at the ocean beach, about 200' back from the surf.
- Fir Landing: this seascape is at the best of the put-ins, accessing Morris Island marshes.

### **Paddlers Safety Numbers:**

- Search and Rescue Emergency:  
757-336-2855
- Coast Guard, Chincoteague:  
757-336-5917  
[USCG Station is just off Main Street]

### **Put-ins:**

- Memorial Park Boat Ramp: take East Side Road South until you see park signs on left\*.

- Fir Landing: take Deep Hole Road north until you see sign for Fir Landing Road. Go to end\*.
- East Side Boat Ramp: take East Side Road south about a mile from where it meets the marsh, and look for ramp parking lot on your left\*.
- Toms Cove: take main National Wildlife Refuge road [Fee: \$5 day pass, \$15/week] to end at beach. Between #2 and #3 parking areas, find sign on right indicating no jeeps. Put-in is on bay beach 25 feet behind the sign.

\*NOTE: Get a ramp license. You can use all town launch sites for \$5 per week by going to the community center town offices at 6150 Community Drive and requesting the license. You will get a citation from police if you park at a ramp without it.

Sandy