

# the third sea voyage of

# makenuk's fin



(or; Bored of the Water Wings)

with apologies to J.R.R. Tolkien

to the sea, to the sea, the white gulls are crying  
the wind is blowing, the white foam is flying  
southeast away, the gas gauge is falling  
I hear a strange hum...mosquitoes calling???  
the Assateague airforce, has come out to greet  
but I am prepared, with gallons of DEET!

## Prologue

*Concerning mosquito-  
infested salt marshes and  
other matters...*

This tale is largely concerned with a large blue plastic boat and a glorified sandbar with six kinds of mosquitoes, five kinds of blood-sucking flies and three kinds of ticks. From its pages one may learn that it might be a better idea to just book a flight to BonAire for your next vacation.

If, however, you equate

hotels with mints on the pillow and guided tours with a stint in a straitjacket, you may want to pack up your 'yak and drive down the Delmarva Peninsula, till you run out of land.

## The Fellowship of the 'Yak

### The Long Expected Vacation

It is early afternoon on

the Saturday before the Fourth of July, 2002. I am crawling through the hundred and eleventh bit of road constriction (no, that's not a typo) somewhere on the Delmarva Peninsula. A year-old blue-grey tabby cat (an SPCA refugee) named Sindarin is complaining loudly about the Ford of Bruinen's lack of air conditioning. Copying a Survival Skill from Heather Hanna (who would have been a Ranger if she'd been born in Middle Earth), I stuff a few frozen Gatorade bottles into the cat carrier...it worked for Heather's

Nightcrawler and Sindarin:  
 Nighty got to go to the beach the  
 next year.



Siberian's, it works for  
 Sindarin. He at least is not dy-  
 ing of heat stroke. He is, how-  
 ever convinced his new  
 human is hauling him off to  
 some strange new form of ani-  
 mal shelter.

I have a long-standing  
 tradition of getting up at wierd  
 hours (three AM) or hitting the  
 road right after work (midnight)  
 to make the five and a half  
 hour drive to Chincoteague  
 Virginia. I am sitting in the  
 midst of a mess concocted by  
 the Dark Lord himself, be-  
 cause Friday was spent in a  
 maelstrom of getpaycheck-  
 cashpaycheck-buystuff-buy-mo-  
 restuff-spendtoomuchatdrugst-

ore-spendtoomuchatgroceryst-  
 ore-gotowork-survive Friday  
 Night At Subway (see; Battle  
 of Helm's Deep, The Two  
 Towers, Lord of the Rings)  
 packstuffintotruck...it's three  
 AM, do I really want to start  
 driving now???

I decided sleep is a  
 good idea. How bad could it  
 be, driving Saturday?

Seven or eight (nine?)  
 hours later, in a complete  
 state of frazzzz, I cross the  
 causeway from the Mainland  
 to the hiccup of sand called  
 Chincoteague Island. It's  
 barely discernable as an is-  
 land; you drive across the  
 Maryland/Virginia state line,  
 take the first road seaward,

the road winds past the radar  
 dishes and science fiction  
 movie settings of Wallops and  
 the Nasa Visitor's Center, past  
 a classic rollerrink called The  
 Dream, past Ray's Shanty  
 (best seafood on the east  
 coast). Beyond the last bit of  
 loblolly pine woods, marsh  
 grass wanders in and out of  
 brackish water in a jigsaw puz-  
 zle of land and sea. One side  
 of the road is lined with bill-  
 boards for motels and seafood  
 restaraunts, the other side in-  
 vites you to pull over and en-  
 joy the Scenic View.  
 Something like open water oc-  
 curs briefly, then you climb up  
 over the drawbridge onto Main  
 Street. Leftish is the Island  
 Roxy theater, where the  
 hoofprints of Chincoteague's  
 most famous resident are still  
 visible. For those of you who  
 didn't read Misty of  
 Chincoteague (Marguerite  
 Henry), this kid's book put the  
 two glorified sandbars called  
 Chincoteague and  
 Assateague on the map.

### At the Sign of the Soggy Pony

Chincoteague is a  
 small island, originally inhab-  
 ited by oystermen and fisher-  
 men, now by art shops and  
 decoy carvers, kayak rentals







and bed and breakfast entrepreneurs, and a few zillion tourists. It still, mostly, manages to avoid the big city clutter of places like Ocean City.

A few of the residents still own fishing boats and oyster beds.

And Chincoteague ponies. These most famous landmarks were probably left there by early colonists, hoping to avoid taxes and fencing laws. (Although a more colorful local legend has them swimming ashore from a wrecked Spanish Galleon...and shipwrecks, including one with treasure, abound on these sandbar-laden shores). Enough horses escaped periodic roundup by their owners to establish a population on the

large outlying barrier island, Assateague. Conditions on the island; salt marsh cordgrass and panic grass low in nutrition, brackish water, hard bug-filled summers...contributed to the lessening of the horses' stature. The average landlubber equine is 15 or 16 hands (four inches to a hand, measured at the withers or for you equus-impaired types; the shoulder blades), the average Chinc pony is 12 or 13, maybe 14 hands. If taken home as weanlings or yearlings and fed a high-test diet, they often grow bigger.

Once a year in the last week of July, the Chincoteague Fire Dept (arguably the richest fire company in the world), holds Pony Penning, swimming the semi-

wild herds across the narrowest part of the channel from Assateague to Chincoteague, and selling weanling foals and yearlings at auction. Ponies of the sort of conformation and breeding seen in local ads for a few hundred bucks can go for thousands of dollars.

On the north/Maryland end, the ponies are part of the Park Service wildlife. They have the same bloodlines, the same origins as the Virginia ponies owned by the fire company, but long ago, a fence was installed across the state line, and now the two herds are separate. While the southern pony population is controlled by selling off many of the young every year, no such roundup exists on the north end. There, horses are







postcards from Chincoteague:  
night herons

shot with darts containing birth control drugs, to keep the population at a steady number.

Assateague rolls up out of the sea-sand, thirty miles long and wide as a gull-swoop. The casual beachgoer, armed with frisbee and beach umbrella and the latest in fashion swimsuits, finds low dunes and user-friendly waves, Brown Pelicans swooping over in terradactyl formation, black-headed Laughing Gulls and other shorebirds, and a bit of beach for surf fishermen to drive their trucks on, and park their beer coolers. Behind the dunes, on the northern (Maryland) end, you can set up a tent in the National Seashore. The interdune zone rolls into the shrub zone, marked by low candleberry bushes and others, then into outcroppings of loblolly pine woods, like little islands, then more shrubs, marsh grass (high marsh and low marsh) and a shallow bay that stretches to the mainland a couple miles away.

Developers once tried to put in roads and road-

signs...the Storm of '62 (see Marguerite Henry's "Stormy, Misty's Foal") erased them and convinced the Ocean City types to leave Assateague to the Park Service and the wildlife. Assateague is now a tapestry of State Park, National Seashores, and the Chincoteague Wildlife Refuge.

### The Shadow of the Past

I first came here about thirty years ago, the last year that Misty yet lived. I had

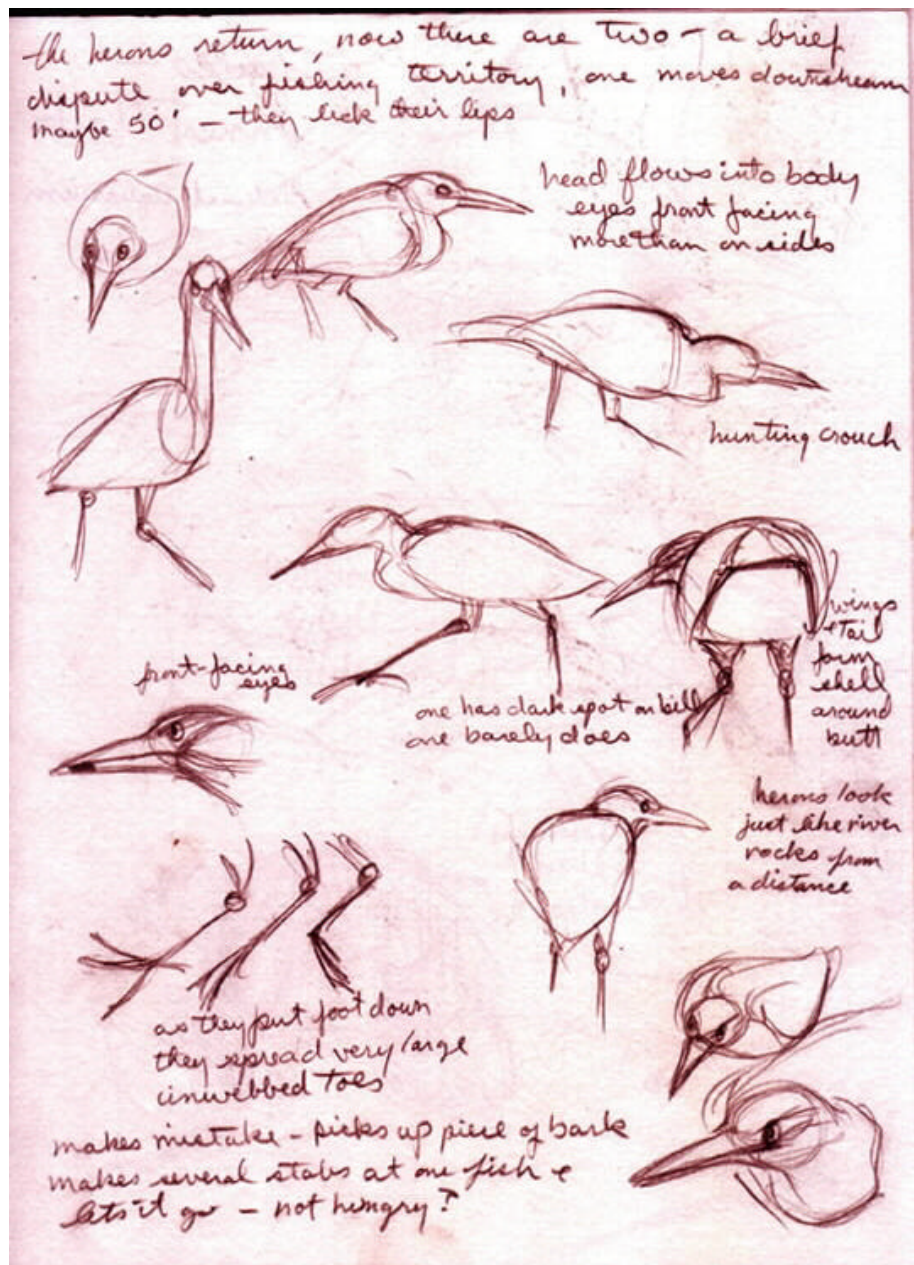
shown my Dad a book by Marguerite Henry called "Album of Horses", in it was a chapter on Chincoteague and Misty.

"We should go there."

Dad said.

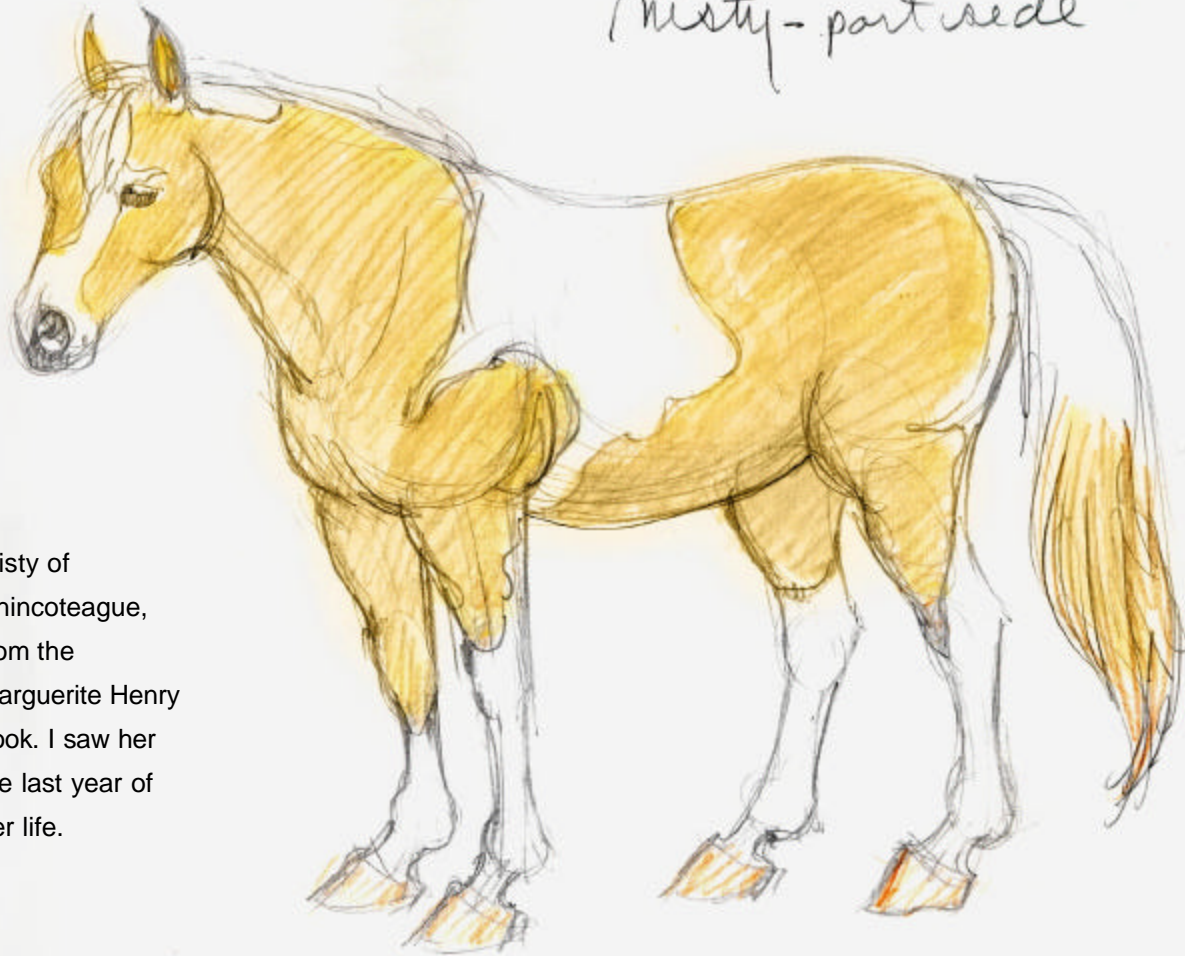
Go there? Like it was a real place, near enough to drive to?

We went, me, Mom, Dad, and two friends from high school. We saw Pony Penning, stayed in a little rent-a-trailer on Chincoteague (Mom would not camp in a tent), and finally dragged my dad out onto the beach. He





Misty - part side



Misty of  
Chincoteague,  
from the  
Marguerite Henry  
book. I saw her  
the last year of  
her life.



Stormy

Stormy, Misty's foal, from the Marguerite  
Henry book. This sketch from a book. I  
sketched her from life in the mid-80's.

tromped down the beach in his work boots, jeans and chambray shirt (sleeves rolled up to the elbows) staying as far from the water as possible. He had seen more than enough water to suit him on the long haul across the Atlantic on a troop ship in WWII.

We saw Misty (snoozing in the back corner of her stall at the pony farm, so I did not take a picture), the Pony Penning Swim, and ran on the beach under a big orange moon.

We came back another year with the whole 4-H club, crammed into the back of a big blue pickup truck, with a white cap.

Eventually, I came on my own, first camping on the north end, yards from my car in a tent borrowed from a cousin, then driving on the beach in my four-wheel-drive Blazer, then backpacking into a remote site on the far north end. Once, I canoed with a then-boyfriend into the buggy backcountry south of the Maryland-end National Seashore, it was my only experience on the backcountry waters, and I was in no hurry to repeat it.



Aragorn (Strider) played by Viggo Mortenson in the films. Someone observed that if you attached "have a nice day" to any of his grim lines in the films, it was very funny.

### Strider

Somewhere along the line, I met Heather Hanna. I don't remember how; through one of those odd connections that started with borrowing that tent from my cousin and learning about a game called Dungeons and Dragons ("play an Elf"), reading Lord of the Rings ("whatthehell's an Elf???"), going to science fiction conventions (selling lots of pictures of Elves at the art shows), and meeting interesting people (most of whom looked more like Dwarves or Hobbits).

Heather's family owned several properties on Chincoteague. Heather owned a wolf-grey Siberian Husky called Strider (Aragorn the Ranger was his registered name). As the northern hike-in sites degenerated to the ones you could only reach by hiking past five miles of four-wheel drives with beer coolers and fishing lines (snagging unwary backpackers), and the Blazer was replaced with two-wheel

drive, I ended up at the Hanna Houses many a summer.

### The Council of Beachtrek

Some years ago, Heather's circle of role-playing-gaming science-fiction-loving anime-collecting computer-geek refugees from Middle Earth started a tradition known as Beachtrek. Basically it involved moving vast quantities of high-tech toys like computers and video games and an entire collection of Japanese animation (anime) to Chincoteague for a week. Unlike the teenagers I work with, going to the beach for a week, for Beachtrek folk, does not require a tanker load of beer. Enough Coke and Mountain Dew to fuel all-night Dungeons and Dragons games, and sufficient electricity to fuel a week-long marathon of the latest computer game will do. We slay orcs and dragons and evil beasties till three AM, then most of the Elves and Wizards and Dwarves and Drow of the



Beachtrek D&D Fellowship retire to their beds and sleep till two.

Two PM...

### The Great River

*"...they will not sink, lade them as you will, but they are crafty and wayward if mishandled..."*  
*Elf of Lorien to the Fellowship, on Elvish boats)*

I have hiked, backpacked, beachwalked, four-

wheeled and even ridden horses on Assateague's leagues of sand. I snorkeled Tom's Cove and dived for shells in the surf, but, being boat-impaired, I missed, for nearly thirty years, most of the island.

Because what makes it an island is water, lots of water. Shallow water; the channels and bays are on average, two or three feet deep, sometimes five, with the main boat channels around

Chincoteague weighing in at twenty feet deep or so. Even off shore, you travel out to sea for miles in ten and twenty feet of water.

I never had much use for floatin' boats...I would much rather be IN the water, not ON it. Floatin' boats were something you jumped off of to look at the sunken boat, on a dive trip.

Then Nancy Springer took me to her friend's cabin in the Adirondacks, where I fell in love with a big blue sea kayak that lived at the cabin. Less than a year later I had my own big blue 'yak; a Perception Sea Lion, 17 1/2 feet long, 22 1/2 inches wide, flat of bottom and raked of bow. It was dubbed Makenuk's Fin for the northwest coast legend in which the orca folk ("makenuk" is a terribly Anglicized version of the Kwakiutl word for orca) take off their fins to walk on land...the fin becomes the boat. And in a sea kayak, you feel like a sea creature, part of the water, not buzzing along at seventy over top of it. You can feel the water shift as the bottom comes up under you in the shallows, you can feel the thrum of boat engines or other water sounds, hear the scrape of seaweed on the hull or the sonar of dolphins. I learned to paddle it on the local lakes and the great river; the Susquehanna, as well as the north end of the Chesapeake Bay, where I had an introduction to long open water crossings and waves, and navigation.

I paddled it at Assateague for the first time in 2000, exploring the innaccessible marshes, playing in the huge swells offshore and chasing dolphins up the channel at twilight. I meant to do a longer paddle, a two-day trip from the north end to the south end of Assateague, but

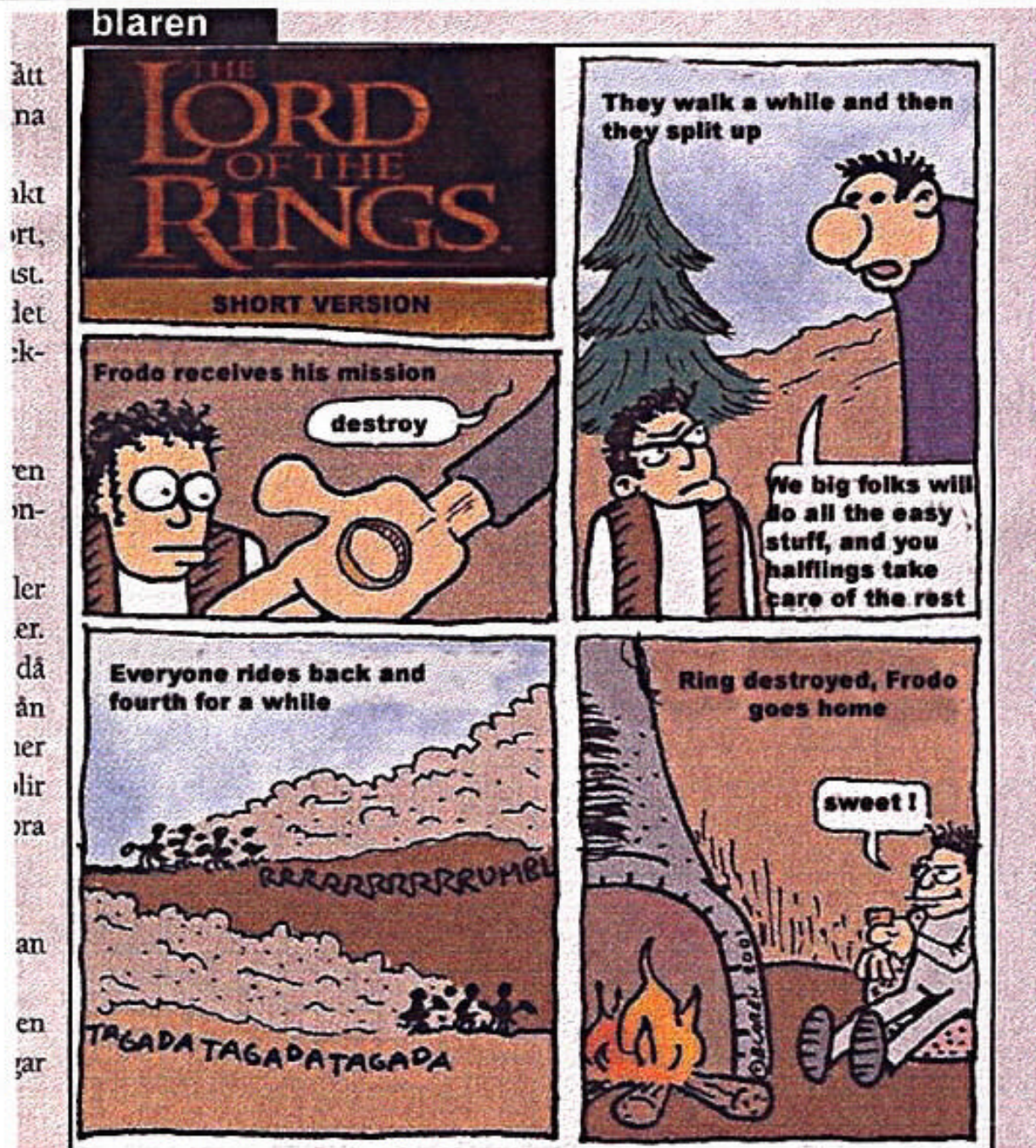
Legolas: the archetypal Elf of the Fellowship of the Ring





## LOTR: The Short Version

Source: Swedish magazine  
"Codex"



"short short" version of LOTR that appeared in the Swedish magazine "codex".



2001 proved to be the Year of the Beachtrek D&D Game of Doom, and I never got past a few day trips.

This year life changed in a major way; first another blue-grey cat died; Shadowfox who had shared my life for about 16 or 17 years near as I could figure. This in the midst of my 86 year old Dad's declining health. He made it to his birthday, before passing on to The Great Mystery.

This year, I was determined to do the long paddle.

### Many Meetings...Sort of

Completely frazzed from the ordeal of the Saturday Before Fourth of July Drive, I arrive at Heather's House to find no Heather. This is significant...

Heather has the keys.

I find a note in the mailbox from Janet Gordon and the rest of Beachtrek, who are in a beachhouse called the Green Heron at the other end of Chincoteague. I drive to other end of island. Find Green Heron. Linda is only person in evidence, I go "ACK, ARRRGHHHH!" and Linda goes there, there, and makes soothing motherly noises. Rest of crew arrives, phone calls are made.

Heather is sick and might get here tomorrow.

ACK! ARRRGHHHH!!

Sindarin is convinced I've abandoned him to some new wierd shelter. I return to Hanna house (the Wren's Nest) and set up camp on porch. I am Prepared; I have water, food, and a dog crate (complete with litterpan) for the cat. Feel guilty about leaving cat on strange porch, screened or not, and spend night on porch with cat.

Find porta-tree useful...

Something or other AM...Heather and Mindy arrive.

Pile stuff out of truck into house, set up Base Camp. Blow entire day doing this and other Dumb Stuff I Gotta Do, including re-arranging gear into big Rubbermaid boxes for two-day trip, getting parking permit to leave truck at Tom's Cove, and tracking down rest of info needed for backcountry paddle (like weather report, tide tables). Attempt to install cat in air-conditioned splendour upstairs, but find dog crate won't fit up narrow steps. Borrow collapsible crate from Heather, and unspillable water bucket, heave upstairs, and manage to figure out how to unfold it. Nearly as easy as re-folding a roadmap. Install cat. Cat still convinced he is being cleverly abandoned. Blow off D&D game so I can go to bed early.

Shanghai Heather and others to rise early to drive me and 'yak to north end of island.

I actually make it to the beach for a brief swim, and my yearly salute to the sea.

### The 'Yak Goes South

Get up at butt-crack of dawn, roust Heather and Mindy, and three screaming Siberians. Cat complains loudly that he will never see me again. Get assurances from buddies they will check on cat.

*(this cartoon appeared in the Swedish magazine Codex and on theonering.net ):*

*The Lord of the Rings; Short Version:*

*Frodo recieves his mission: destroy it...*

*The party walks for awhile and then they split up...(we big folks will do all the easy stuff and you Hobbits can do all the rest)...*

*Everybody rides back*

*and forth for awhile...*

*(tadatadatadata-*

*datada,*

*rrrrrruuuummmmmbbblllle)...*

*Mission accomplished, Frodo goes home (Frodo in lounge chair by fire; "Sweet.")*

*Bored of the Water*

*Wings: the short version:*

*I recieve my mission: paddle it...*

*Everybody drives back and forth for awhile (to the Green Heron, to Hanna house, to the Beach to drop truck, to the Green Heron, to....)*

*The party drives for awhile (to the north end) and then they split up ("We sensible folks will go lounge in the air conditioning and play D&D and you can paddle 25 miles in 15mph headwinds in blazing sun and camp in the Mosquito-Infested Marsh of Doom....")*

*Mission accomplished, I collapse on the beach unable to move for four days...*

Everybody drives back and forth for awhile: to Hanna house, to the Green Heron, to the beach in a corner of Tom's Cove to drop truck, to the visitor's center, to the Green Heron, to Hanna House...coordinating just three of the Beachtrek crew into a coherent Fellowship of the 'Yak proves an adventure that would have even doughty and grim Ranger Aragorn Son of Arathorn bopping his head on the hilt of his trusty blade, Anduril.

Remarkably, the Fellowship of the 'Yak is willing to say things like: "you have my van"...and "You have my sunscreen." and "If this is what the Council wants, Gordon will see it done." (\*1)

We park my truck at the beach on Tom's Cove, a place I've paddled in and out of before, and should have no trouble finding.



#### Famous Last Words...

The big pink parking permit resides on the dash, telling the Park Service why the truck is there overnight on a beach that closes at ten.

Ten...that is significant.

Weather reports look good; sunny, no storms, winds of 10-15 mph from the S/SW. I have paddled last year, into 20-25 mph winds; I was running a race with several crabpots, and they seemed to be



winning. (\*2)

10-15 mph winds should be doable.

We wrestle 'yak onto the roof of Heather's big white Ford van. The roof is higher than my truck's cap, and rounded, the 'yak starts to slip, we wrangle-wrestle-lasso and subdue it. Then wrestle the foam kayak blocks under it (Hanna House is devoid of anything resembling a stepladder, a kitchen chair is pressed into service.)

Two kayak blocks, size small. This is important.

We throw tie-down straps over, find places on van to hook them and tie it down.

As I am tying down the last lines from stern of boat to stern of van, Linda utters the immortal wisdom; "Wouldn't it work better if you closed the doors first?"

Duh.

Close van doors, retie stern lines. Leslie piles into front seat, ladeling on sun-screen. Linda and I pile into back between dog crates (with three exuberant Siberians waiting for their chance to run

on the beach) and boxes of gear.

We reach Old Ferry Landing on the Maryland end of Assateague, slightly more than twenty miles north of Chincoteague. I get backcountry permit (a mere \$5).

"So, when are you planning to be back?" Heather asks.

I will pull out at my truck, parked now in a familiar corner of Tom's Cove. Heather







and crew will drop off the kayak blocks and tie-down straps, (the ones we

used to put the 'yak on her level van roof) leaving them in the back of the truck (which has a cab which is about a foot shorter than the cap roof).

I'll just land, pile gear into truck and drive home.

Heather wants to know when she should call out the Coast Guard to come and find me.

I've paddled across the north end of the Chesapeake Bay, with Wave Wolf and Red Tide, 5 hours/16 miles. Even with this light headwind I should be back no later than Tuesday evening.

"Yeah, I'll be back Tuesday afternoon. If I'm not there Wednesday morning, you can call the Coast Guard."

Heather, Leslie and Linda help unload Makenuk's Fin and two large Rubbermaid bins and some other stuff;

two days of food; pop-top cans of Campbells Selects soups (good cold), and spoon gorp made of Kashi (7 grains, all natural) "GoLean Crunch" cereal, sunflower seeds, soynuts and peanuts, dried fruit mix of apricots, papaya, pineapple, banana chips

four days of water (at a gallon per day, in screw-top bottles, refillable), and some Gatorade(as well as some water in Gatorade bottles which fit nicely in cockpit or under deck bungees) there is NO water available in the back-country, unless you are lucky enough to find one of the rare brackish ponds, so a water purification unit or tablets are useless, unless you've got a portable desalinization unit

tent, poles (I spent one rainy weekend on Assateague in a pole-less tent propped up by air mattresses and ropes to picnic tables) stakes (mostly

useless: sand-filled plastic bags tied to your tent ropes, and buried, are better) string, closed cell foam sleeping mat (and auxiliary flotation device)

drybag 1: sleeping bag, dry clothes(mostly for sleeping), fire kit, sage, sweetgrass (Native American herbs burned like incense), logbook, pens, a bit of Listerine and floss(I've had a tooth break on a day paddle, Listerine will pretty much prevent tooth-

aches from setting in)

drybag 2 (in cockpit) with windbreaker, first aid kit, maps (in individual ziplock bags), good binoculars, Peterson's Field Guide to the Eastern Birds, cell phone:non-existent because I have discovered upon arrival at Assateague, we are outside its functional calling area, big purple wool cloak (sans pointy cloak pin which would punch hole in drybag turning it into





Minya; "first" in Quenya Elvish,  
(Minui in Sindarin)

wetbag), extra batteries, wet-wipes and hand sanitizer, a few extra garbage bags (pack it in, pack it out), ziplocks for smelly garbage

and a small roll of The Force That Holds The Universe Together (it has a dark side and a light side...): duct tape: you can fix a blown sandal, repair your boat (long enough to get home), make a waterproof bandaid, mosquito-proof that hole in your tent, fix your wetsuit, the rudder cables on your boat, or use it to make a splint when you fall and break something (not likely on Assateague which is totally flat)

small drybag (in cockpit) for much-used stuff: maps in use, bags of gorp and dried fruit for the day, cheezy throw-away camera (not waterproof but containing flash, and cheaper than waterproof cameras strapped to deck), tide tables, lipscreen

in mesh bags behind seat: spray skirt (useful in waves), dive mask, wetsuit hood, extra water bottles, bugstuff (nuclear level), sun-screen (near-nuclear level, but mostly for face as diveskin is about 100 proof sunscreen),

in cockpit: couple bottles of water, quickie bird ID chart (waterproof), two pound



dive weight with snap(for anchor), bigass sponge(cellulose, more absorbant)for returning water to *outside* of boat,

on deck bungees: bilge pump, rope-in-a-bag (for towing, for tying up, for anchoring), MightyFine Dive Hat (like baseball hat only cooler), sunglasses (scuffed and not used), cheezy waterproof binoculars from Walmart (only the right eyepice focuses), dive compass in old dive-gauge boot, MightyFine Ikelite MiniC Delight (with whopping halogen beam, sees forever, waterproof, sinks like rock), small



dive light with cone (like a mini-lightsaber), headlamp, snorkel, couple of cotton handkerchiefs: all-purpose squares of Useful Cloth, on rear deck under tie-down straps: Minya(spare paddle) and bright green dive fins which have swum the Caribbean, the Red Sea and the Great Barrier Reef, but not with me in them.

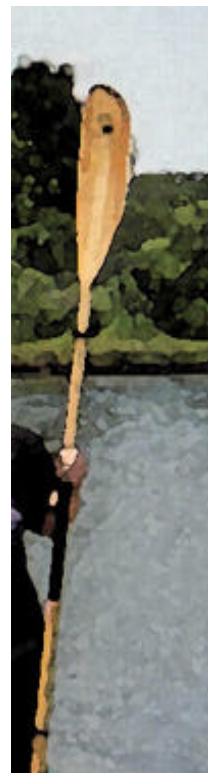
I also rigged a grab line around the entire perimeter of the boat: I had only to unhook one end at the bow carry handle and it could double as a tie-up line or anchor line, or tow-me-home line...

I wore my diveskin, sandals (till they disintegrated, then I put on the light dive

boots)dive hat and PFD(much of the time, anyway)

Final touches: Lashed under the deck bungees: the WalMart puppy: a black Lab, lifesized that I bought for my Dad when he was in hospital and nursing home: it resembles his dog, Sage

Some people have carved mermaids on their bows: I have an Elf, The Elf: a really cool spare 7" Legolas action figure from the Lord of the Rings movie collection (ToyBiz). I lash him to the bow carry handle, where his odd articulation (designed to be shooting a longbow) makes him look like he's navigating me in the wrong direction. ("*But Eressea is to the west!*")



"Is all that stuff going to fit in the boat?"  
"Oh yeah, sure."

I pack and juggle and repack and finally end with an entire Rubbermaid box full of stuff that doesn't need to go. The wool sweater and rain



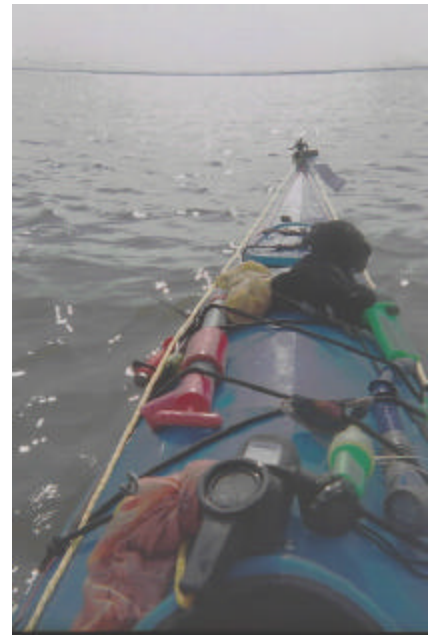


Galadriel knew what she was doing when she gifted the Fellowship of the Ring with those Elven Cloaks of Lothlorien.

Shorts, useless in mosquito country, are ditched, so is the t-shirt. I will paddle in my diveskin, a "superhero suit" of heavy spandex, proof against sunburn and jellyfish, cool when wet, and an extra warm layer when dry, close-fitting and stretchy, not nearly as annoying in the water as baggy shirts or shorts.

My main paddle, Ramalinte, is a light wooden Bending Branches paddle with a broad, spoon/whale-fluke blade. Minya, the first paddle I ever owned, is a Mighty Fine Camp-Mor \$30 plastic basic paddle, I strap that one to the rear deck in case Ramalinte is lost or broken. Cliches take on new and serious meaning: the backcountry of Assateague would be a very bad place to be up the creek without a paddle. (\*2.5)

Heather, Leslie and Linda bake in the sun while I juggle gear into the boat. The dogs pant in the shade of the airy van. I cram, I stuff, I contemplate the need for smaller drybags. The only way to get the large drybag, filled with

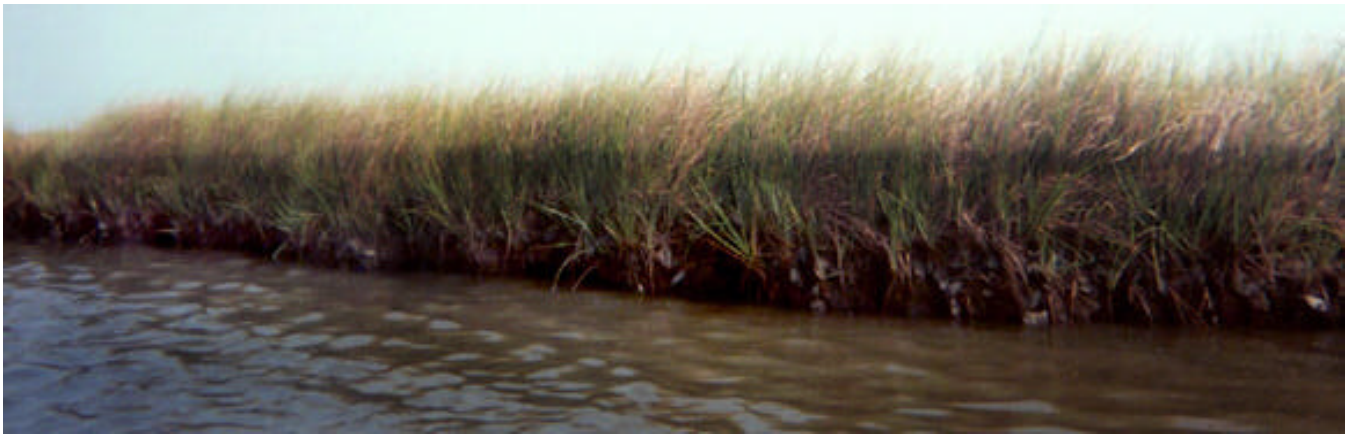


poncho are ditched, swapped for a waterproof windbreaker and wool cloak.

Yep, wool cloak. Never know when you might need a good wool cloak. Wool blankets have long been a staple of any backcountry expedition; they're warm and useful even when damp or soggy, and they dry fast. They are excellent bug armour, and can be used as an impromptu portapotti if you are stranded in the open. This dark purple wool cloak was the only piece of wool I had handy.

sleeping bag and clothes, and other objects, into the hold, is to open the bag, stuff it in bit by bit, and close it after it's crammed in there. Closing involves squooshing the air out and rolling the top to make it watertight, not easy in the tight hold of a low-profile kayak. I contemplate what gear goes where: stuff only needed for camp can be stowed in the watertight holds: you can't open the hatches in open water (more than a foot or two deep), if you flooded your hatch, at least in deep water, you'd get an interesting





effect called Cleopatra's Needle. Half the boat would flood, leaving it vertical in the water rather than horizontal. Hard to fix if you are by yourself.

Emergency stuff needs to be close to hand; either on deck or in the cockpit in drybags or in wetbags behind the seat. Water, food, lights, compass, bilge pump, maps, tide charts (useless in the north end: the tides are several hours off from Tom's Cove, and barely noticeable), rope, a two-pound dive weight rigged up as an anchor, spray skirt. One large drybag gets crammed into cockpit, serving

as additional flotation, and access to things like first aid and a windbreaker.

Stuffing and cramming I twist my wrist and sproink something. I've done it before, some mutant arthritic carpal tunnel thingie, maybe. Massive doses of ibuprofen and a few days and it works itself out. I shake it and contemplate scragging the whole mission.

The hand still seems to be capable of a paddling stroke, just not anything else.

Finally loaded, I shove the Fin out into the shallow water. She's floating even, not

heavier on one end or the other. I take pictures, hug everybody goodbye and launch to great cheers and jubilation.

I paddle picturesquely out of Ferry Landing, Heather, Leslie and Linda climb back in the van and vanish southward to air conditioning and quiche.

I am in the middle of a maze of marsh grass, clamm-ing tourists, wading kids, birdwatchers, and puzzle pieces of water. No distant shore is visible, only the maze of the salt marsh.

Uh...which way out of here?

I wander up one little puzzle-piece of water, turn



**My route** from Old Ferry Landing on the Maryland end of Assateague to Tom's Cove in Virginia.

Map available from National Seashore.



and go back out towards a lady clamming. I wander up another little puzzle-piece or two...

The horizon opens, and I see a distant shoreline; the mainland.

Feeling slightly stupid, I paddle out towards it.

Well, here I am on my way, I settle into a nice rhythmic long-distance stroke.

Something doesn't seem quite right, maybe it's the sun direction. I stop for a compass check...

Oh yeah...I turn and go SOUTH.

### Jettisoned Flotsam

After about 50 yards I realize the cockpit situation is not working. I feel like the last kid crammed onto the school-bus, the one with his butt hanging half off the seat. I backwater and pry myself out of the cockpit, standing in a foot and a half of swamp water. Juggle gear from cockpit to forward hatch, from forward hatch to stern hatch.

I am left with a foot-square Tupperware box that recently contained a first aid kit (now stuffed into a drybag). It doesn't fit anywhere. I contemplate setting it adrift like Moses, or returning it to the beach to be found by the next crabber. I frown and set it on my lap and paddle on.

A hundred feet away, two women are clamming in chest deep water, using a sit-on kayak as a platform to work from. I paddle up, ask



how the clamming is going, and we fall into a discussion of the merits of sit-ons versus Real Kayaks.

I ask if they want a nice Tupperware box.

They do.



### Helm's Not-So-Deep

Lord of the Rings does not leap from cliffhanger to cliffhanger, from battle to battle like a Star Wars movie. The Hobbits, then the Fellowship, then small groups of the broken Fellowship, spend long days walking, trekking, trudging across vast and everchanging landscapes. Great attention is paid to meals. Pages are spent describing a wood, or a river, or a tree.

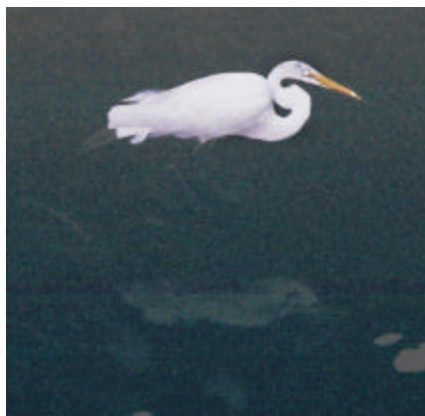
Not exactly the stuff of

an episode of Crocodile Hunter.

I find myself in the middle of such a passage. I paddle and paddle and paddle. I don't pay much attention to meals, other than to take brief breaks and down some gorp or dried fruit or Gatorade or water. The landscape rolls by to my left, unchanging. The water ripples on, sometimes slightly deeper, sometimes slightly shallower. Seagulls wail overhead, a terradactyl line of pelicans strolls by on the wind, a stick sinks with a sudden blorp (a swimming turtle, spyhopping). The wind blows unceasingly, the sun walks across the sky from left to right, the color of the sky shifts with it.

I don't really have time to stop and explore. I have to be at a certain camp by nightfall, and at Tom's Cove by next nightfall. And it's hard to tell what kind of progress I am actually making. I can see that I am moving forward: foam on the water slides by, distant land features slide by nearer ones at a reassuring rate. The wind blows on, but the crab-pots are not winning this race.

The landscape is like one of those massive thousand piece puzzles made out of a picture of M&Ms, every piece looks like every other piece. I eye the maps (from visitor's center and internet): map says "blahblah island" the actual island I'm drifting past could be blahblah island or yatayata island or any of a





thousand other bumps of sand and marsh grass in the next twenty-five miles. The outside of Assateague (the oceanside) is a smooth beach, from the air it looks like it was drawn by a draftsman.

The inside of Assateague is something else: a woogity-woogity snake-wiggle of shoreline, water and land weaving in and out of each other till you can't tell where one begins and the other ends. To find the Park Service signs (for the campsites) you need to be close to shore (or constantly pulling out the binoculars, hard to use in a rocking boat).

To get to the south end in less than a week, you paddle from headland to headland, across open reaches of shallow water, far from shore.

Thus missing most of the Park Service signs.

Most of the water is

typical green murk, like the waters around Chincoteague. In one area though, I find a slight clearing of the murk, about two feet of vis, and drop over the side for a brief snorkel. Lying face down in the water I totally relax, the ultimate waterbed. I half doze, drifting near the anchored boat in gently rocking waves in two to three feet of water.

A school of Atlantic Silversides circles me, bright silver minnows, three or four inches long, they swarm in schools. I've noticed them revolving around me, moons around a planet, before on other snorkels. Whether I have become a sort of artificial reef for them (a place to hide) or whether this is a sequel to Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds", I don't know. They flash by over and over, and then vanish.

Floating on the bottom,

stranded beyond the tide line, I have, over and over again, seen these long (several feet) narrow (couple of inches) blobby things that look precisely like sea-going intestines. Closer inspection reveals a pattern of teeny tiny brownish specks (the size of a pin-prick) throughout, as if it were some kind of odd egg mass.

The Park Rangers had no idea what it was, I couldn't find it in Peterson's Field Guide to Wierd Things on the Atlantic Coast.

Maybe it's worth one last X-Files episode.

### Lothlorien

"What beauties did you see?" Heather asked later.

At the time, I was paddling, shaking out the recurring numbness in one arm







(pinched nerve, old problem), careful not to do anything with my left wrist but paddle, wondering if I'd wake up tomorrow too stiff to go on. Wondering if I was getting too old and civilized to go into the wild like I did when I was twenty. Contemplating my kung-fu instructor's mantra of Not Going Anywhere Alone.

Running the Iditarod. Alone.

It's the Journey, not the Destination. Gary Paulsen's



"Winterdance", about his Iditarod Journey, is one of the funniest books containing huskies ever written. He didn't win the race, he didn't even come in in the top ten. But it was a great book.

You don't just read the last chapter of Lord of the Rings. You ride with the Rohirrim, climb Caradhras, shiver in the dark depths of Moria, stare in wonder at the eyes in the trees of the huorn wood, turn with Legolas to listen to the sound of distant gulls in the dark.

Egrets and cormorants

and diving pelicans. Brown pelicans, once an endangered species, now almost common here. And somewhere out there, on the empty part of the beach I can no longer backpack to (closed to hikers) the nests of another endangered species: piping plovers.

Mystery greeblies in



the remotest parts of back-country: pilings and fences of stakes and abandoned shacks and docks and crabpots. Remnants of a power line to nowhere.

A stick in the water that suddenly down-periscopes; a swimming turtle. Not a great sea-turtle, but one of the little webby-footed pond types seen on the local lakes. Or maybe a diamond-backed terrapin.

A herd of ponies hanging out in the marsh grass; typical dusty bays and chestnuts, some with pinto splashes of white, the odd dun, palomino. And, oddly, one sun-burned black!

Several places I land have pony sign: tracks, stallion piles.

Eelgrass beds with hid-



den treasures: seahorses (endangered in many parts of the world), sea pork that looks like bright orange brains, little branchy sponges in a crayola



box of colors, green water,  
flash of silversides, "poof!" of  
a vanishing pufferfish, a stick  
that turns out to be the tail of  
a ray, ethereal jellies, comb  
jellies flashing neon lights

(lines of cilia) as they drift like  
a lost alien from "The Abyss".

Sun sinks over the  
mainland, turning the vast  
stretch of shallow bay on my  
right to diamond-studded sil-

ver, then the colors of Martha  
Stewart's living room, then it  
flames out in fourth of July  
glory.

### **The Passage of the Not- Nearly-Dead-Enough Marshes**

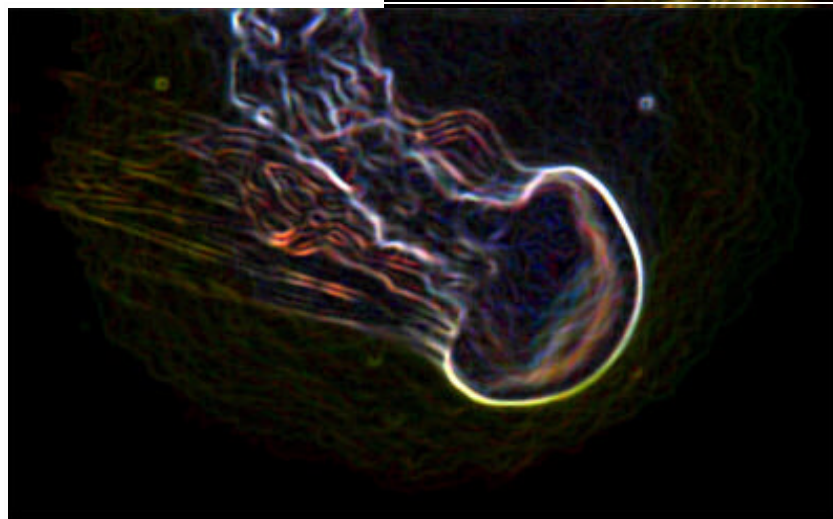
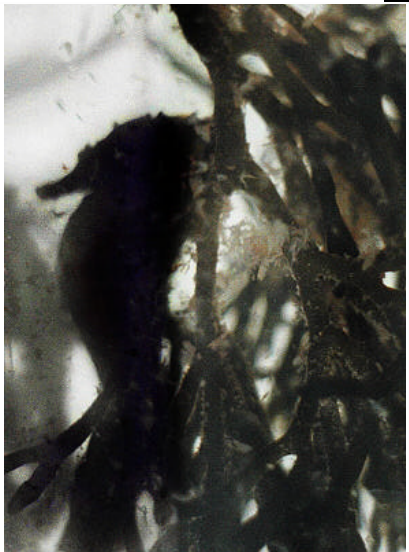
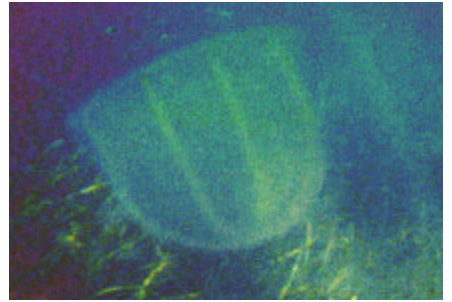
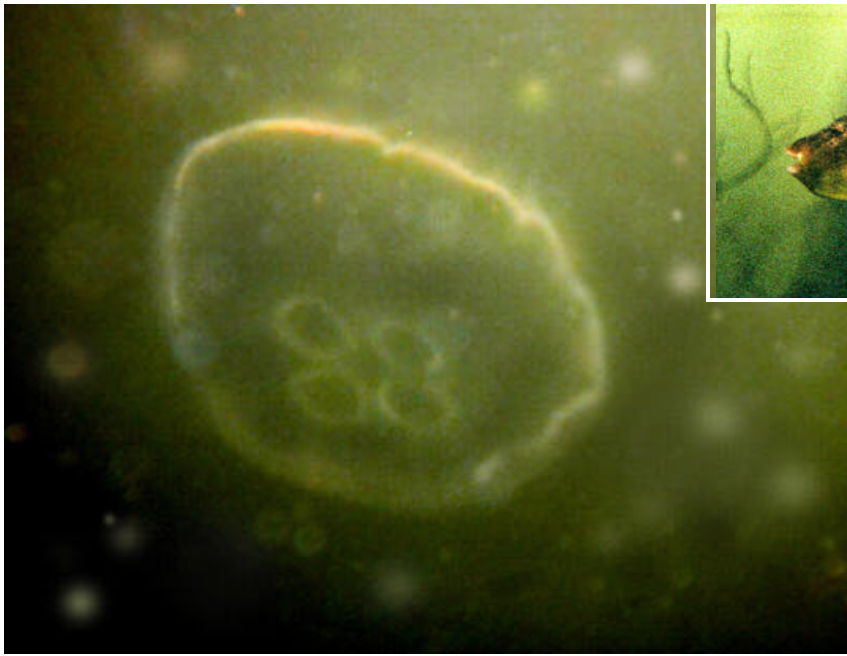
I've passed at least  
one discernable campsite  
sign; awhile back, I saw the  
one for Pine Tree. Checking it  
against the map, it seemed  
like I was on schedule, al-  
though, if necessary, I would  
just pitch the darn tent wher-  
ever. (\*2.6)

I pass mystery mark-  
ers, see no more camp signs.

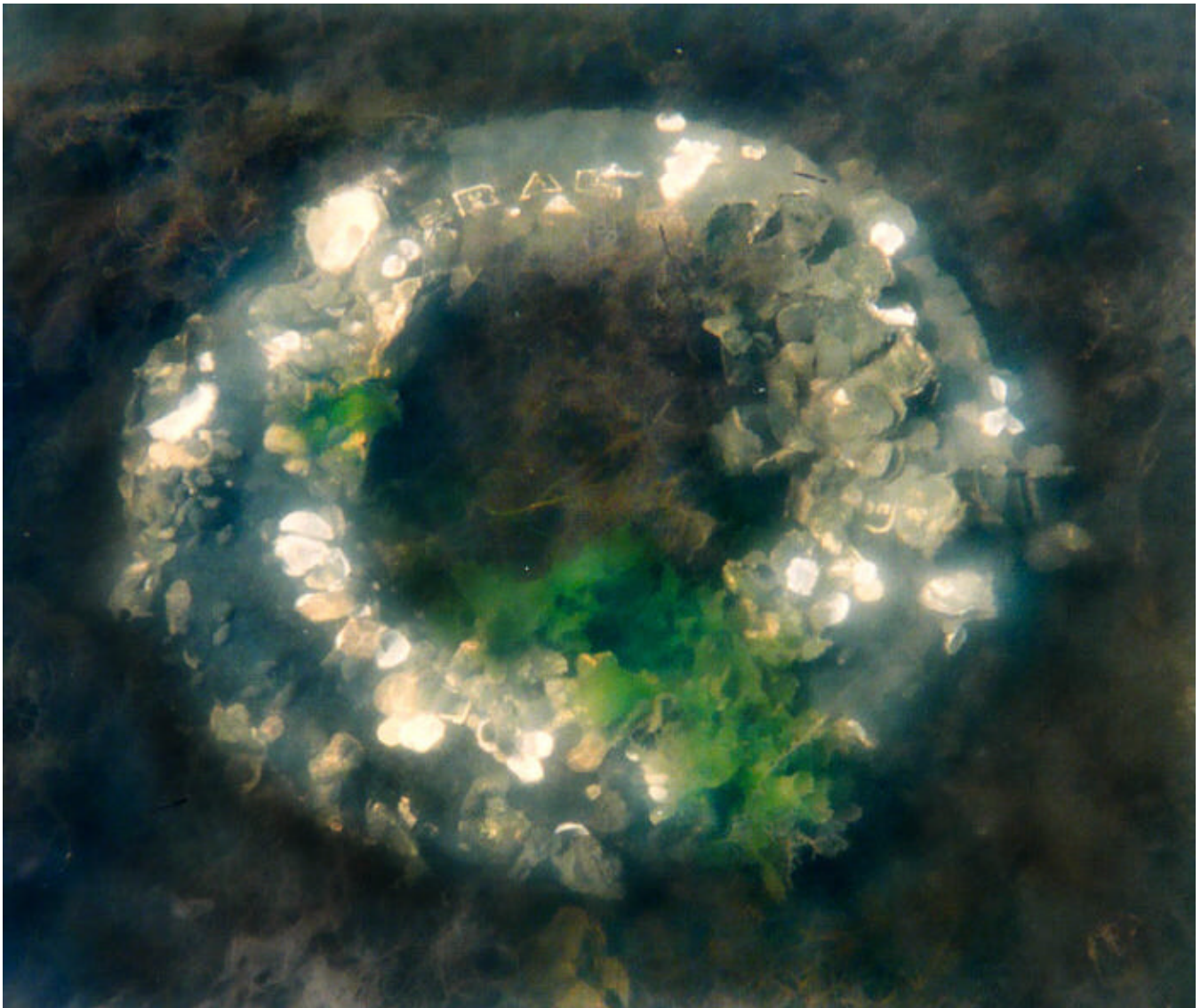
Finally see a vague  
sign in the middle of nowhere,  
no obvious site, follow shoe-  
line. See no more markers.  
Ready to give up when I spot  
tumble-down house and col-









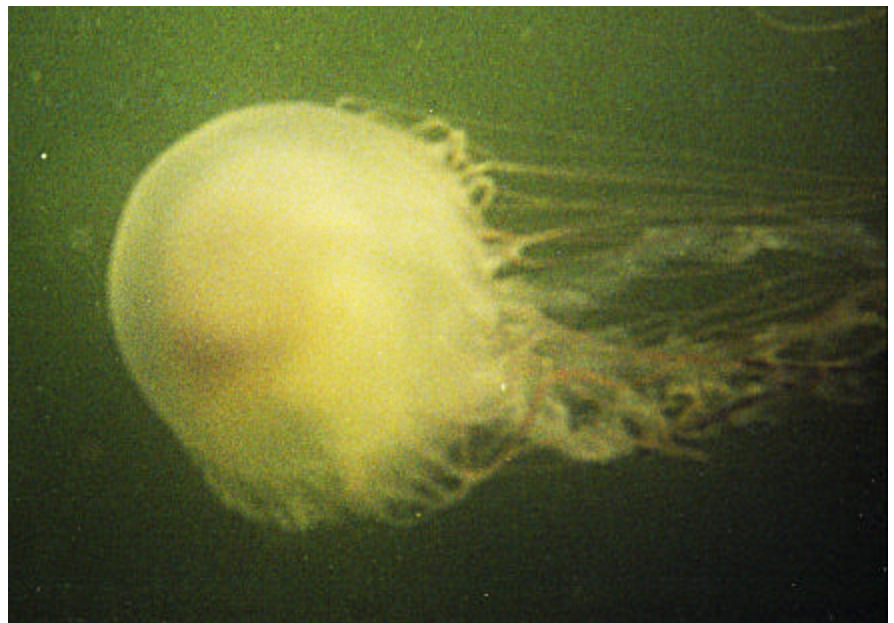


lapsing dock which mark  
Green Run. Sign on building  
apologizes for the state of the  
campsite (picnic table yes,  
porta-potti no). I paddle into  
small cove, and up pictur-  
esque creek, lined with grey  
weathered driftwood and living  
loblollies.

A faint hum assails me.

The Assateague Air  
Force comes out to greet me  
in all its glory. (\*3)

I beat a hasty retreat  
back to the cove. Apply bug  
repellant. Restage assault on  
beachhead. Find one foot of  
water and three feet of muck  
at takeout. Crawl over bow of  
boat and reach shore. Haul  
boat up out of water. Eye po-  
tential movement of water







(high tide line???) and tie boat to telephone pole with big whopping rope.

Yeah, telephone pole. I have paddled seven hours through mosquito-infested backcountry to tie my boat to a telephone pole.

Hastily set up tent, do

not use stakes. Note that tent is set up on what seems to be a pony trail with a (not entirely fresh) stallion pile nearby. (\*3.5) Have visions of ponies coming through in middle of night and sacking tent for gorp and soup.

Retreat into tent.

Darkness falls. Have laid out wet gear on picnic table (alternate possibility in absence of picnic table being that Mighty Fine extra rope). Change clothes into something dry. Various loud crunchings and rustlings are heard outside. Feel like Tom Hanks in





"CastAway" when he hears wierd noises in middle of night (falling coconuts). No danger of coconuts, no poisonous snakes, no large predators, probably not even any human ones (like anyone would come out here to harass another hu-

man). I am in the lee of the abandoned house, a big brick thing with boarded up windows and Park Service signs warning all to stay out.

Alone in the wilderness is ok, alone under trees or sky is fine.

Crammed up against a ruined building makes me feel like an extra in the Blair Witch Project.

I eat cold soup, scribble in the log, burn some sage and sweetgrass and manage to sleep.







In the morning, I change into my diveskin, wrap the wool cloak around me, and tear down camp with enough mosquitoes to get me airborne.

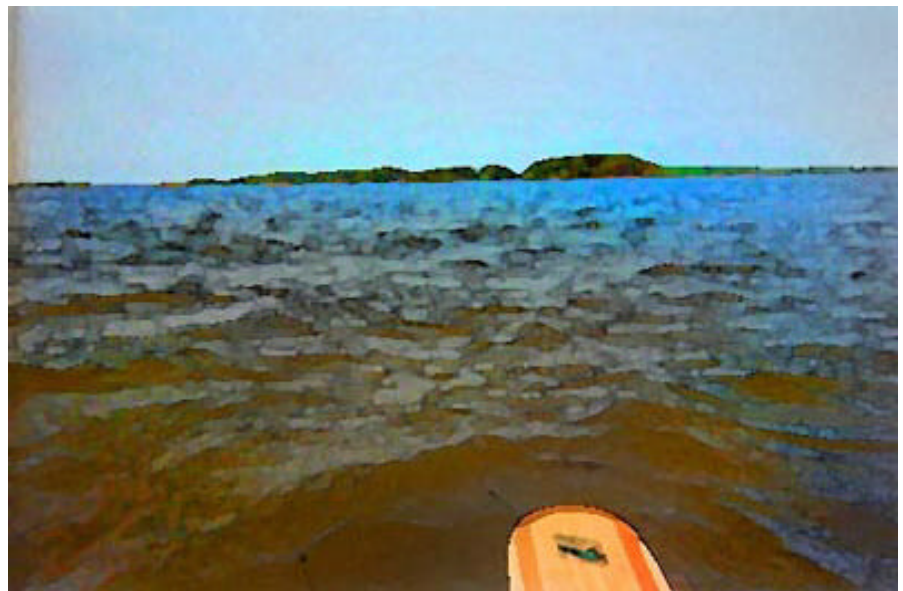
I flee into the middle of the shallow cove, where I eat soup, do Tai Chi in a foot of water (interesting...), and watch the sun come over the treeline.

It's about 7:30. I start paddling.

### Homeward Bound

I've paddled about seven hours Monday (with a put-in time around noon). And only made it to a camp less than halfway to my destination in Tom's Cove. The 10-15 mph headwind is giving me more trouble than I thought. Still, I figure I should make it before nightfall without any trouble.

By midday I haven't seen any change in the landscape: I don't expect to see a sign that says "scenic Virginia welcomes you", but I should by now have seen some kind of blit on the horizon that is the north end of Chincoteague. So far, all the blits have turned out to be bumps of marsh grass and sand, indistinguishable from all the other "islands" on the



map.

I am, by mid-day, fairly exhausted. Not stiff, not sore, just gawdawfully tired. The gorp helps, and breaks, short ones, then one longish one curled up in a bit of sand at the edge of a marsh. I make use of the cloak as bug repellent. It's hot, but no more hot than baking on a beachtowel. I nap a half hour or so and continue.

It's hard to find decent landings here: much of the marsh marches straight into the water: mud walls of several feet drop from the low-marsh cordgrass into a few feet of water, often mucky with silt. Even sandy coves spotted from a distance prove to be orcish tricks: choked with up-rooted eelgrass and too mucky to step out into. (\*4)

Sleeping in the boat is difficult: it's too tight to scrunch down into, and one can't lean back over the rear deck at all. The best compromise turns out to be curling forward over some large pilowy object (like your PFD, best attempted in shallow water.)

Somewhere early afternoon, I park in shallow water and fish for the Real Binoculars. The ones that survived Makenuk's first trip, the one on the Great River, where



I got dumped three times, and the boat went downstream without me, upside down, with the binoculars ziplocked and stashed behind the seat.

I see a vague blur, bluey-grey, that might be yet another mystery blot on the map, or...

I paddle and paddle and paddle...

The blot grows large, and solider, and becomes the north end of Chincoteague: Wildcat Marsh.

### Window on the Wet

Here, last year, I measured twenty feet of visibility: I could see, horizontally, from one end of my boat to the other and then some. Now I paddle past clumps of eel-grass hiding treasures, orange blobs of sea-pork, pale patches of sand where rays and skates lie, hidden turtles, silversides and kilifish, puffers and boxburrfish and the odd tropical traveller lost when storms shift the ocean currents. I want to get out and

snorkel, but the sun is beginning its walk down the west side of the sky, and Chincoteague is several miles long, and the wind, if anything, is harder.

I start down the inside of Chincoteague, the shallow channels between it and Assateague. I have paddled that several times, including in the dark. I've paddled from there into Tom's Cove before too. Except for a small bit of channel at the southern end, inhabited by speedboats and town life, it's quiet. The big-







gest danger is running aground at low tide.

I paddle a few minutes down the east side into a hefty wind. I'm tired, very tired. And the west side of the island may be in the wind-shadow. I turn and go back up around Wilcat Marsh, and down the far side of Chincoteague.

This will put me in the channel most of the way down.

I pass a house, then another, somewhere behind those houses is the Green Heron, across a fenced in backyard or two, some marsh, a gut. I momentarily think of parking the boat and walking to the Green Heron, "Hey, just

take me out to my truck so I can go pick up my 'yak."

Nah. Gotta keep going.

I pass the Chincoteague high School, an excellent put-in for short trips to clear water snorkeling in Wildcat Marsh. I could pull out there, walk back to the Green Heron, farther up main Street.

Nah.

I paddle past more houses, thicker and thicker civilization. The arch of the drawbridge looms greyly in the distance. Joy! I'm almost there!

And Chincoteague is what? only a few miles long?

### **The Bridge of Jet-ski-Doom**

I paddle the channel that winds its way through the center of Chincoteague town. It's wierd, after a small eternity of isolation in the backcountry, it passes by like some strange picture postcard dream. I stop and check maps, gorp, water.

Paddle under the bridge on a gorp-fueled second wind.

A power boat vrooms by, not as fast as they usually do, but fast enough to kick up a couple of small tsunamis. Normally a boat wake would be "yee-hah! let's play!". I'm tired and just holding my rythm is hard enough, the wake wops me broadside, four feet from the bridge pilings.







This would be a really stupid place to dump the boat...

The steady Sea Lion rolls neatly with the incoming waves and stays upright. Even loaded down as she is, she handles neatly, not wallowing.

Chincoteague stretches on into the evening, growing to the size of north America. I could swear it was supposed to be a couple of miles long, but no more. I paddle, one eye on the sinking sun, and one on the never-ending line of docks and buildings. I have to paddle around the end of the island to get into Tom's

Cove.

Large hotels and old fishing establishments segue to empty docks and trailers. The size of the buildings and docks shrinks with the size of the island's remaining land. Chop increases, the channel here can be fast, and wave-tossed: although the wind is coming from the other side of the island, it has a lot of fetch either way. This water can be a little rough. I keep an eye on the shore, like a pilot with a failing engine. If I have to bail out, I can land there....there....there...

The sun is orange, ma-

genta, fuschia. The channel bends left into Tom's Cove, and right...out to sea. I checked tide tables earlier (not much use farther north, as the tides can be hours later in the bays and channels), and thought this would be slack tide.

The end of the island is in sight, I'm tired beyond belief, but with enough second wind and determination to just keep going, it's not all that much farther.

I yell over to a guy on the dock, "Which way into Tom's Cove?" double-checking my directions.







He yells back, "That way, just hug the island. Tide's going out....you might make it..."

Oh...cool. I hadn't planned on this.

I eye the sun, out of sight now. Plenty of light for now, and the end of the island is brief and narrow, I breathe and plunge in. There's nowhere else to go.

### **A Journey in the Dark**

I round the island into a maelstrom. Tide ripping out,

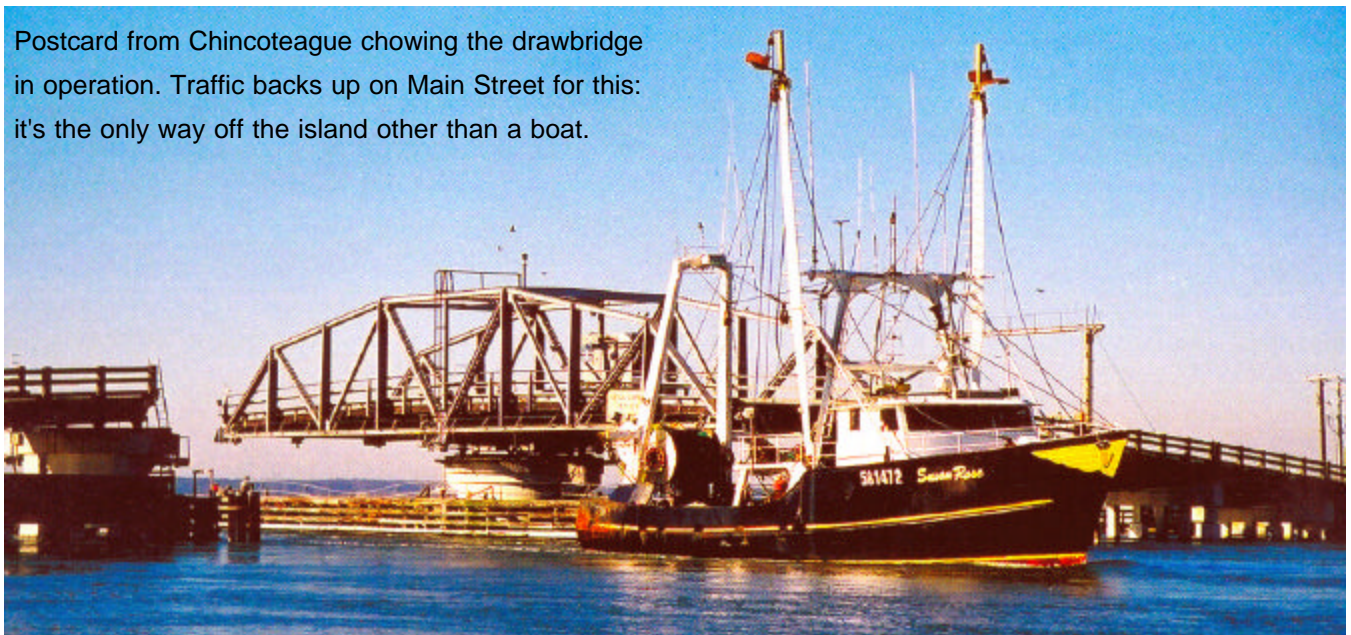


wind waves coming from left-ish, reflecting waves off the mudwall thirty feet away ricocheting into the rest of the mess.

I think this is what my Expedition Kayaking book called clapotis. It's a descriptive term, a chaotic word for a maniacal mess of water. I feel like a goldfish in a blender.

The waves are probably only two feet high, maybe three, but I have been paddling about fifteen hours by

Postcard from Chincoteague showing the drawbridge in operation. Traffic backs up on Main Street for this: it's the only way off the island other than a boat.





now.

I have a few moments of stark raving terror, then the adrenaline kicks in and I paddle like hell. I am making forward progress, so the currents are not taking me out to sea. I am twenty or thirty feet from shore, so if I dump, I could

reach land.

You bet I'm using the PFD and spray skirt.

I rip through the maelstrom, and come to something slightly less chaotic. Exhausted I pull over on a piece of sloping beach. I consider the vast expanse of

Tom's Cove ahead, and contemplate dropping anchor here until morning.

I anchor the boat, find the binoculars and in fading light walk up a slight rise to scan Tom's Cove.

Straight ahead, there's where I want to go, right?

I spot a building, familiar, the old Coast Guard life-saving station...at the end of the Hook. No, no, I want to aim for the OTHER end of Tom's Cove. There's a familiar treeline (containing the lighthouse, farther up), and in the far distance, faint headlights in the parking lot, where I've left my truck.

I look at the darkening water: I've paddled Tom's Cove before, in the dark. I set a compass course, and fix on the lights on the beach. It's still a couple of miles, and in some conditions, you can get three foot waves. The wind has a lot of fetch here. And there's been a lot of wind.





I consider once more staying where I am. Solid land.

I note the presence of mussels underfoot. Mussels grow underwater.

This safe cove will be underwater in a few hours.

I up anchor and shove Makenuk's Fin back out into the chop. I check a compass course, note where the lighthouse is, and the treeline (even in the dark, the treeline, as well as the line of marsh grass/land will be visible). I note a group of people clamming a few hundred feet away. Comforting somehow. But I don't need rescue, I just need to cross Tom's Cove...almost there.

I paddle.

And immediately run aground.

The seagulls standing in the water should have been a clue.

I get out, glare at the three inches of water under



my boat, eye the clammdiggers. Pull it slightly to starboard.

More shallows.

Hmmmm.

I remember the map. Bigass tidal flat at the mouth of Tom's Cove. That would be where I am. I eye the clamdig-

gers to port, a channel marker well to starboard. I grab hold of the grabline and heave the boat to starboard.

I walk for awhile, occasionally falling into foot-deep, foot-diameter mystery holes made by some sea creature at high tide. I pull out the

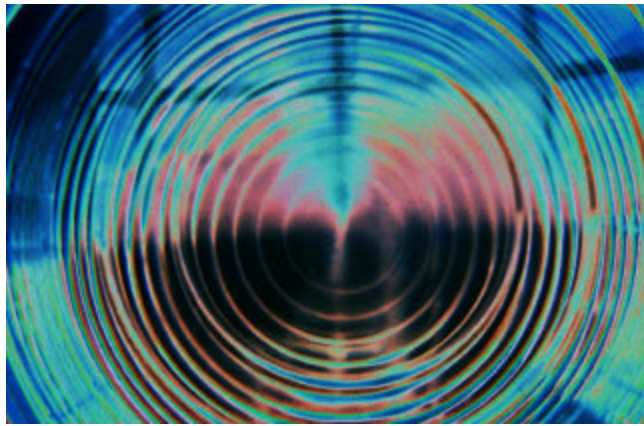


MightyFine headlamp,  
and the windbreaker.  
It's still warm, a muggy,  
windy July evening.  
But this is Tom's Cove,  
and the wind will get  
colder and more insis-  
tant till I am across it. I  
do not want to wrestle  
my way into a wind-  
breaker in the middle  
of the Cove.

Walk walk walk  
walk walk walk.

Tow tow tow  
tow tow. I edge toward  
the channel marker (deeper  
water) but the water stays  
frustratingly shallow. I get in  
and out of the boat several  
times when I think I may have  
found deep enough water. I  
can float the Fin in four inches  
of water, unladen, with just me  
and some basic gear in it.  
With this much gear it may  
need as much as six or seven  
inches. The tide flat goes on  
forever at a maddening three  
inches.

Finally I find enough



water to float in. I get in, tuck  
in the spray skirt and start  
paddling.

I have a compass  
course, I have lights on the  
shore, I have the lighthouse in  
the treeline to my port stern.

I have three-foot waves  
wopping me broadside.

Ok, maybe they're only  
two feet. But they are dead-on  
broadside. I could turn and  
tack back and forth, hitting  
them at an angle, but that  
would lengthen the trip and I

want to get there yester-  
day. Also, the Fin being  
flat and straight of bot-  
tom does not turn easily.  
I would waste more en-  
ergy turning and tacking  
than just plowing on  
through.

Makenuk's Fin rolls  
gently with the incoming  
waves and shakes them  
off.

About every minute or  
so, a series of two or  
three whopping big ones  
rolls in, whumpwhump-  
whump.

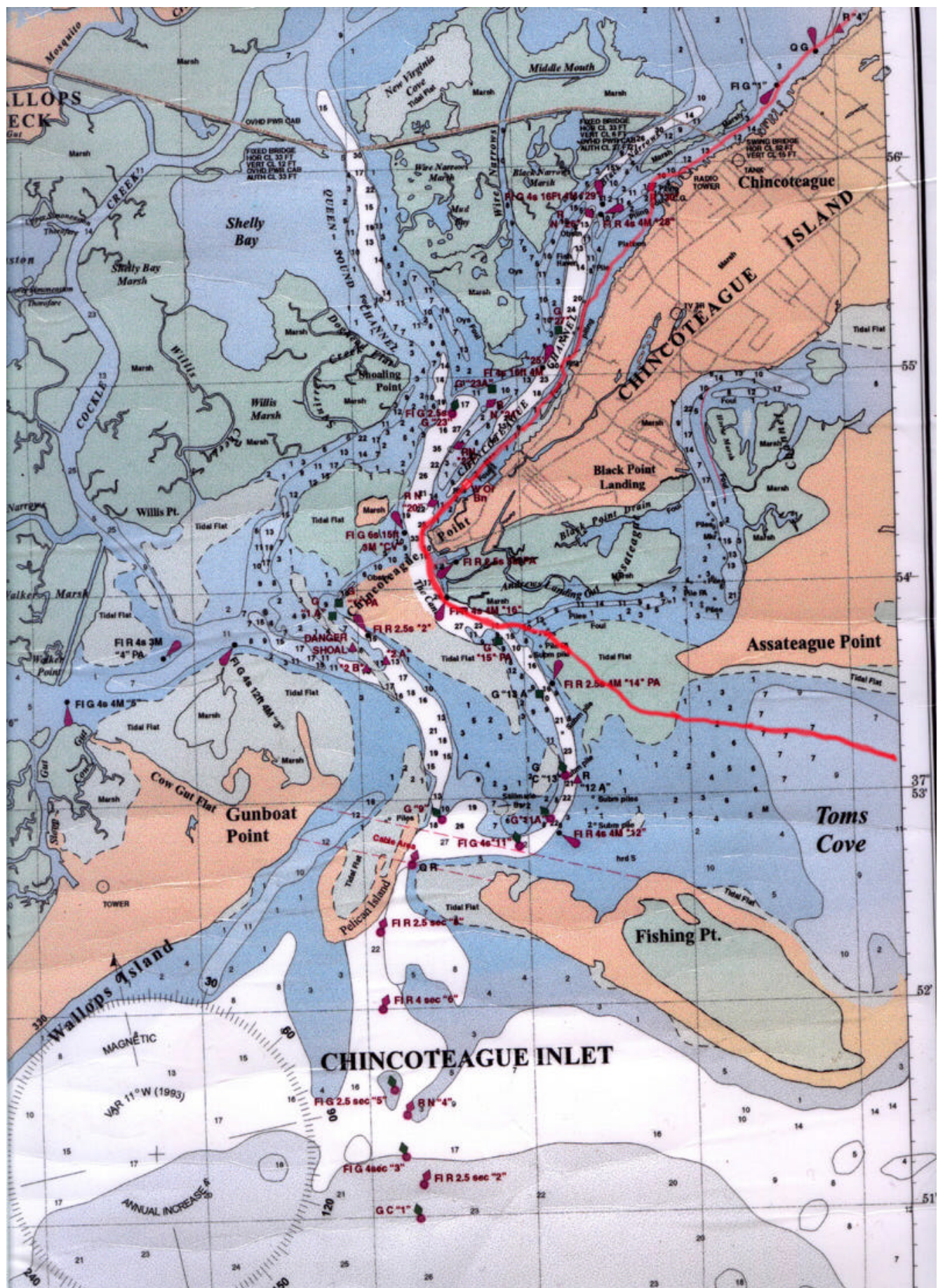
The sturdy SeaLion  
takes it in stride, even if I  
don't.

### **The (Parking Lot 4) Havens**

I know now why people  
collect lighthouses, why they  
build those kitschy sculptures  
of wood and concrete in their  
front yards, why religious  
groups feature lighthouses on  
Inspirational Posters.









I've been paddling for over fifteen hours, I'm exhausted. I just want to get in my truck, go home and crash for days. The Cove is vast and dark and windy. The water seems bottomless and cold (it's probably in the high seventies or low eighties, shallow and sun-warmed). I see light on the beach, headlights of

It's after ten, the beach is closed, everyone has gone home.

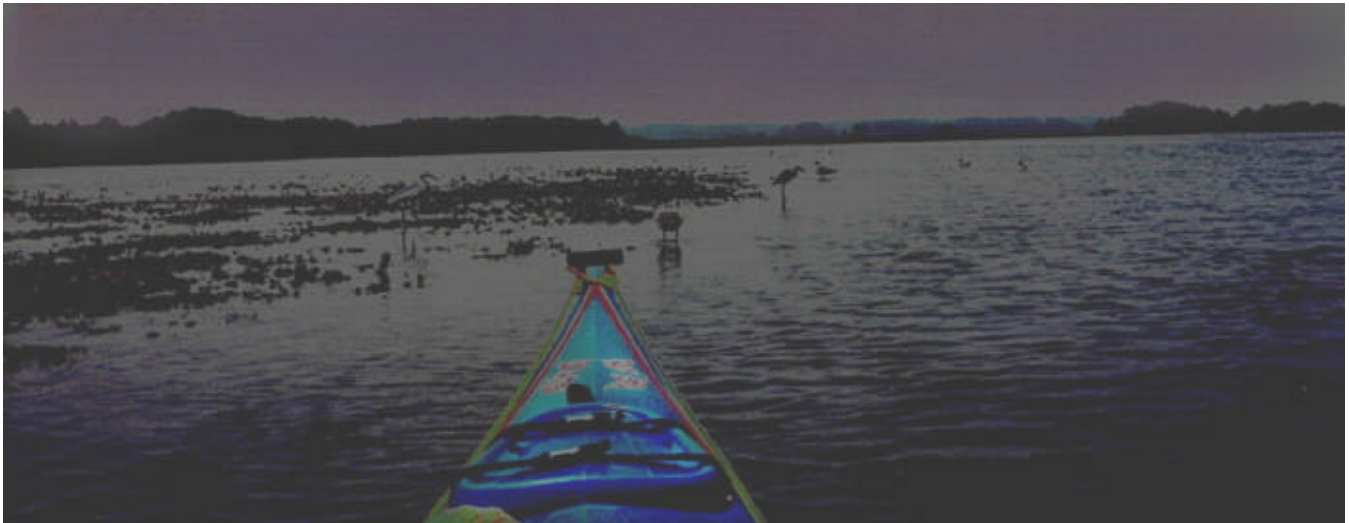
I still have a compass, I still can see land, and the lighthouse is still behind me to the left.

Still, it's lonely and cold without those lights on the beach.

Paddle paddle paddle.

near the Hook...where I could be swept out to sea.

I have navigated to the end of the Hook before, landed there in the dark. There is no marsh grass there, only a gently sloping beach with wave-ripple. I know where I am, I just don't quite believe it. I leave a light glowing on the boat and crunch



cars driving in and out of the parking lot. It's Home.

I paddle forever across the dark waters of the Cove, the lights staying maddeningly small and distant. Waves whopping me in their series of three, every minute or so, wind whipping from somewhere off the starboard bow. I think for a moment, that I may have got turned around somehow, and am actually paralleling the shore, rather than moving toward it. I check my heading: compass, position of lighthouse. Nope, ok, I'm going the right direction. Tom's Cove has just expanded to the size of the South Pacific, that's all.

Paddlepaddlepaddle.

Finally the lights begin to be visible as separate headlights or taillights. Warm fuzzy almost there feelings.

Then all the lights go out. I am staring at a stretch of starry sky, marked by the sweep of the milky way, and a dark line of land.

The land line looms.

Then, I run aground. Not on the beach, not in the little swoop of sand in the marsh grass where I have launched from and parked the truck. In some alien landscape with a fence of short sticks and no sense of where I am.

I get out, drop anchor, and crunch ineffectively through marsh grass.

I can't find the beach. I should be able to get out of the marsh and to sand fairly quickly. I can see the distant glare of a reflective sign, and I remember lights on the road to my left (cars leaving the beach), moments ago, I saw a lighted building, right *there*! I can hear surf directly ahead of me (the island is only a hundred feet wide or so here, the surf is just over a hump of sand and a bit of marsh grass). In exhaustion and frustration, I have the momentary, disoriented fear that I have got far off course and landed near the other end of Tom's Cove.

around in the marsh grass finding nothing. Finally, afraid I will lose sight of the boat, and that it will drift, anchor or no, I head back to it.

I blow my whistle a few times, just in case there is someone still on the beach.

The beach is empty.

I have no idea where I am in relation to the truck. It's cold and I am damp and utterly frustrated and exhausted. Smacking the water I see a flash of green light: biofreak-ingluminescence! Comb jellies in the water, flashing with green magic.

This is where a newbie paddler could get into Big Trouble. Even in July, the nightwind and damp clothes are enough to give you a big chill, if not actual hypothermia. I make sure the boat is anchored, pull out my wool cloak, tuck it around me, and curl up in the cockpit, huddled over my PFD, as a pillow. I'm still wearing a windbreaker on top of the (nearly dry) diveskin





as well. The wind cuts through it somewhat, but I am mostly warm.

I do the only thing I can do, I sleep.

I doze the way dolphins do, with half their minds awake (they would drown otherwise). After awhile the boat begins to rock as the tide comes up under it. I get out and pull it up a little farther on the sandbar. Go back to sleep.

Wake up, pull up boat. Go back to sleep.

Wake up, pull up boat, realize there is nowhere else to pull boat up to because there is water coming in from the other side. I have the disconcerting realization that I am not on a tideflat beach, but on a sandbar that will soon be totally underwater.

And I am cold.

I peel open the hatch and find my wetsuit. Even in July, the three-mil is useful. I perch on the boat and wrestle



my way into it, standing on a small island of tide flat sand in a pool of light from my flashlight. With the bright halogen beam of the Ikelite MiniC, I eye the line of visible marsh grass: if I follow it long enough I should come to one of those little beach areas.

2:30 AM, I begin to paddle again. First to the right, then that odd, nightmarish wee hours AM paranoia sets in, that way lies the channel, and the open sea (a long paddle away). I turn and go the other way. Within moments, I see the marsh grass give way, into a small cove, I follow it up an increasingly shallow, sand-bottomed beach. Like the one I have paddled out of many times.

I run aground, stand up, waving flashlight about. Catch sight of reflectors on beach: a vehicle. Good, someone else is here, they can maybe tell me where I am.

Walk closer; truck re-

flectors, white cap, white lines  
down sides:  
Hey! That's my truck!

### Flight of the Ford

I trudge to truck, trudge  
gear up out of boat. Unlock  
truck with great sense of re-  
lief.

Find big whopping  
parking violation pasted to  
window of truck.

Load gear in truck.

Decide to move truck  
closer to 'yak..

Trucks goes;  
"whreeeeewhreeeee-  
whreeeeeee" and refuses to  
start.

Ok, we do this every  
time it gets damp, it's been  
parked on the beach for two  
days, give it a few more tries.

Twenty minutes later  
the battery is dead and the  
truck is apparently a perma-  
nent part of the scenery.

I roll out my sleeping  
bag in the back, change into  
dry clothes, and fall asleep.

It only occurs to me  
next morning that we trans-  
ported the 'yak to the north on  
Heather's flat-roofed van.

Using two small kayak  
blocks.

The big one that fits on  
top of the truck's much lower  
cab roof is under the chaise  
lounge on Heather's screened  
in porch.

Sunup: I hear early  
beach traffic rumble past. I  
pop up blearily, expecting  
some sort of ...what? rescue?

Trucks with fishermen  
go by, early beachgoers. One  
Park Service maintenance  
truck. I wave and flash lights  
(do they work now???) and try  
to get their attention to no  
avail.

I go back to sleep.

A half hour later or so I  
flag down a Wildlife Refuge  
truck and tell my Tale of Woe.

"There's a payphone at  
the Visitor's Center..."

Dude, I just paddled 25  
miles, will the payphone ac-

cept GORP?.

I walk to Visitor's  
Center. It's eight AM, the cen-  
ter opens at nine. Several nice  
middle aged ladies in summer  
straw hats and white shorts,  
looking like watercolor painters  
from Martha Stewart's Better  
Ways to Waste Your Time  
are wandering about un-  
der the shady porch. They are  
in fact, setting up a watercolor  
class. They eye the Creature  
From the Mosquito Lagoon  
uncertainly.

I get to talking to them,  
and one Watercolor Lady lets  
me use her car phone. I sit in  
her nice silver sedan, two  
days worth of swamp grunge,  
and rouse Mike, Linda's  
Dearly Beloved. Mike is actu-  
ally awake, that is the miracle.

He doesn't quite sound  
awake. I have visions of him  
going back to bed and some-  
where about 5pm everyone  
wondering where I am.

The bike that usually  
lives in the back of the truck is  
gone, (\*5) I cleaned every-







thing stealable out before leaving it on the beach. Not that anyone would actually steal a slightly rusty ten-year old \$125 Sears special that's been used as a dog-rig.

I wander about vaguely on the porch, then return to the truck.

Mike and a few other Beachtrekkers arrive soon after, jump-starting is attempted.

Truck goes "wheeee-wheeeewheeee" and refuses to start.

A raised vehicle hood is a signal that few males within seven hundred yards can resist. A number of them come over and offer advice. One wiggles the battery terminal clip/cable thingie and says, "Hey, this is loose." It's not why the truck isn't starting, but it's significant...

Finally we give up and

roust Janet, who has the Power Of AAA. We pretend the truck is hers and they tow it away, on the back of a roll-back truck, to some greasepit in southern VA.

We load the 'yak and gear into Janet's hatchback and trundle it home.

So Wednesday is blown off. I have no way to get the boat to water, although I do have the bike, if I wish to explore land trails on the refuge. I go crash and get up later for quiche and D&D.

Late that night, paddling buddy Jim arrives, and for two days we paddle out of his SUV, finding birds in the marshes off Memorial Park, and clear water, rays, turtles and sea pork in Wildcat Marsh.. We go to the

Firemen's Carnival for the Fourth of July, eat oyster sandwiches and watch small town fireworks. Go back to Green Heron where Chris takes advantage of Virginia's lax fireworks laws and shoots off fountains of flame on Main Street North.

We play D&D, and Elven fighter/magic user Celduin Ranaion uses fireballs without blowing up half the party.

Friday, we call the garage. I cringe, hoping I can use someone's plastic and pay them back. If it's even done. This is, after all, Fourth of July week, and I have TOURIST engraved on my forehead. I contemplate being stuck on Chincoteague for another week.





Hmmmmmm.

It's done.

It's \$20.

"Twenty bucks? And what service charges, labor charges etc, etc, etc???"

"Twenty bucks. Period.

We collect truck, thank excellent garage profusely, go paddle Wildcat Marsh, snorkel, come back. Truck won't start. This time there's not even so much as a whine.

AAAAARRRGGGHHHHHHH!

Paddling Buddy Jim, like any good Dwarf, has Knowledge of Technology. He peers under the hood,

hooms and homms a bit, produces some tools and notes the looseness of the battery terminal cable/clip thingie. A few minutes later (without even duct tape and No. 2 fence wire) the truck starts.

### **To the Sea, To the Sea...**

Sunday Paddling  
Buddy Red Tide shows up. It's my last day of Vacation From Hell. Two years ago Red Tide and I paddled out the channel and offshore and played in the big swells, with the Hook end

of Tom's Cove a comfortable couple of hundred yards away.

Today we paddle out the channel on the outgoing tide, the one I tried so hard to avoid just a few days ago. Pelicans swoop and hit the water, laughing gulls dance overhead. In the mouth of Tom's Cove a fin surfaces and vanishes, an arc of grey sliding across the surface.

Two years ago, in the channel at twilight, Red Tide heard me yell, "A fin! I saw a fin!" He remembers fishing in the channel and looking down and seeing a shark the size of his "power canoe". The next





thing he saw was me kicking butt up the channel into the dark.

What he didn't know till later, was I was chasing dolphins. I had no camera then, to capture the dolphin that surfaced ten feet from my boat.

This time I have one shot left.

We paddle hard across the end of the Cove, catching sight of fins and smooth grey backs arcing across the surface. Just ahead, then they dive and turn and surface somewhere totally unexpected. They don't seem in a hurry, just strolling along, turning, lolling, maybe chasing a fish.

Yet we get no closer. Certainly not close enough to get a picture with the wide angle lens in my throwaway camera.

I hear a yell, one has surfaced and snorted right beside Larry's kayak.

We follow them across the Cove, then they vanish, on their own business.

I blow the last picture on something small...

We continue out into the sea, through chaotic chop.

Red Tide comments, as he rolls, snake-hipped, with the clapotis, "You got to be a little hippy out here..." he readily admits to being an old hippie.

A few years ago, this would have been difficult, almost impossible for me. Now it's fun, plowing through choppy seas till The Hook is a vague line on the horizon (I have a compass, if Larry doesn't, and the beach and towers at Wallops are quite visible). We turn and surf back, then glide up a gut looking for clams.

We find no clams, but do find a horde of laughing gulls screaming at us...because they are sitting on their nests. I balance, precariously, one foot in the boat,

one on slippery marsh mud, peering into a nest; a khaki egg, with chocolate splotches in a marsh-grass nest the size

of a hat. A desert camouflage egg. We turn and leave the laughing gulls in peace.



Early Monday morning, three am. I have packed and slept for a few hours. Loaded the cat in his carrier, strapped the 'yak down for the journey home. I drive out of quiet Chincoteague streets into the dark, across the drawbridge, onto the causeway. Away from the Sea.

I stop for a moment along the road, look back in the dark. I hear a distant concert in the marsh guts we paddled only yesterday. Laughing gulls in the dark.

"Then I thought in my heart that we drew near to the Sea; for wide was the water in the darkness, and seabirds innumerable cried on its shores. Alas for the wailing of the gulls! ...

...deep in the hearts of all my kindred lies the sea-longing, which it is perilous to stir...No peace shall I have again under beech or under elm."

(Legolas, the Last Debate, Return of the King, LOTR)



## APPENDIX, liver, spleen, whatever...

### Paddling 101:

In addition to the gear I carried on this trip, I should have had:

a cellphone, or a marine radio or both

#### also useful in emergencies:

a signalling mirror, a flare gun, or flares(hand launched)

#### Should have:

paid more attention to tide tables. In future will face wind of doom rather than risk paddling channel ( or other potentially rough waters) in dark better to have parked truck farther north, like at high school or Town Dock and of course, a paddling buddy is always useful

**Life 101:** AAA and a credit card and a cell phone: don't leave home without it...thanks Janet

"Gordon will see it done..." did anyone notice that Janet's last name is "Gondor" spelled sideways???

(\*1)(Sorry, couldn't resist a few references to movie lines.)

(\*2)(For the Seacoast Culture Impaired: **Crabpots** are anchored to the bottom, with only their marker floats visible on the surface...)

(\*2.5) ("**Ramalinte**" is "wing-swift", "**Minya**" is "first", both in JRR Tolkien's Elvish languages).

(\*2.6) For walking as lightly on the land (or sea) as my favorite Elf, check out:

**"Leave No Trace Outdoor Ethics at:[www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org)/1-800-332-4100.**

The Park Service handed out a plastic (indestructable on backpack or kayak) list of things to do to minimize impact in backcountry (also on the Assateague Island website). Some of it is as simple as not picking the flowers, and not feeding the wildlife, some requires more thought: how to dig a cathole when there's no portapotti, which side of the trail to step to when encountering horses, pack mules or llamas (or pack Siberians), whether to walk *on* the trail and use the popular campsite (in well-traveled areas), or disperse to prevent creation of campsites and trails (pristine areas).

(\*3) Whoever wrote that mosquito scene in Disney's "Lilo and Stitch" has been to Assateague...

(\*3.5) **Stallions** mark their territory by leaving huge piles of poop, added to on a regular basis. On trails used by several bands, the pile becomes a sort of bulletin board: Trigger was here, Champion was here the day before yesterday, George is here right now and this salt marsh ain't big enough for the both of us...

Horse poop, while green, gooey and stinky when fresh, rapidly dries out, leaving

its main constituent: the indigestible parts of grass. You can burn it like buffalo pies...a clever outdoorsman (or someone who's shoveled a lot of poop) can tell how old the pile is. The pony piles at the camp hadn't been added to in days.







(\*4) **Eelgrass** is the lifeblood of the marsh, the grass beds support a wide variety of young marine life, including seahorses, endangered in many parts of the world. Even the uprooted rotting stuff in the ends of guts or washed up on beaches fertilizes and enriches the marsh ecosystem.

**Orcs** are Tolkien's goblins, evil dudes with a propensity for trampling living things that aren't even in their way. The

other day a guy came into Subway with a t-shirt that said "ORCS" across the front. "What's that?" I asked. "Off Road Cycles." he replied. Yep....orcs.

(\*5) **Murphy's Law of Bicycles:** as in "Mushunka" the tale of mishaps in the Carlisle Parade involving sled dogs and borrowed bikes, *if needed the bike which always lives in the back of the truck*

*shall be at least ten miles away...*

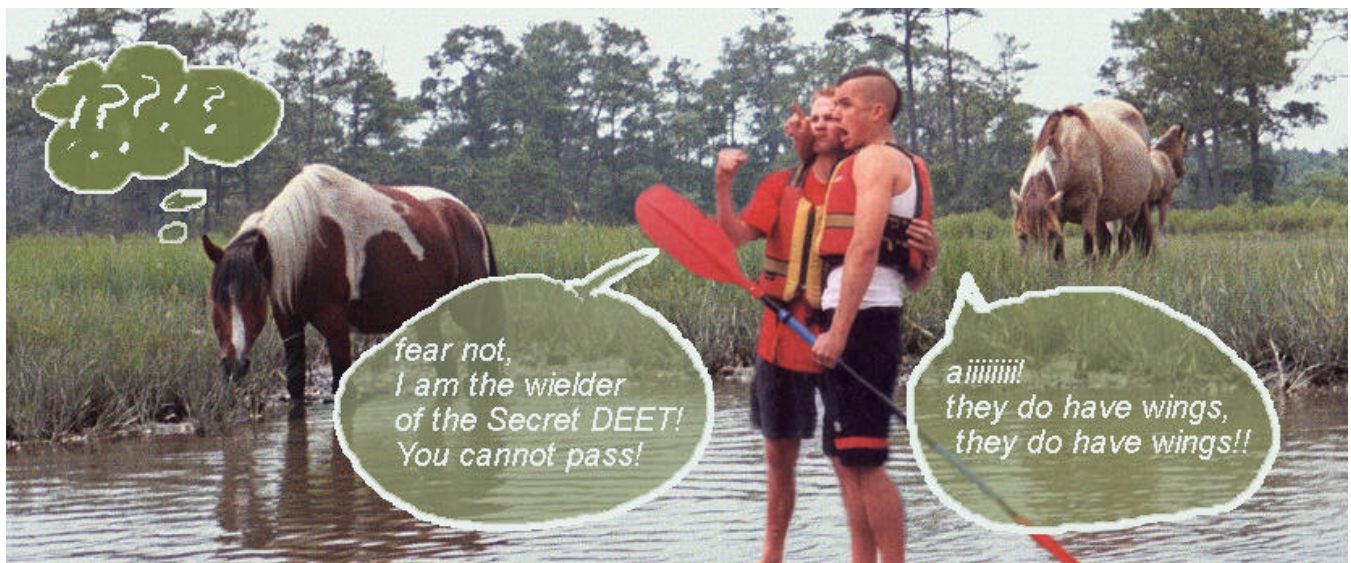
**The chapter titles** here-in are an ode to various chapters in that classic fantasy, uh, you know, the one with the hobbits and elves and all...no copy-right infringement intended...direct quotes from the book are credited.

**The Ford of Bruinen** was the ford crossed by Frodo on Glorfindel's horse Asfaloth (with Arwen and Asfaloth in the film) to safety in Rivendell. My Ford of Bruinen is a blue white- capped F-150 Ford pickup...alternately called "Padiwan"; PADI being the dive agency I certified under, a padawan being a Jedi apprentice...

**The Sindar** are the grey elves, (of Tolkien's world) Legolas of the Fellowship was **Sindarin**, which also refers to the beautiful language invented by Professor Tolkien.

The cat in question is grey and light and lithe and fast, and in full his name (formerly Murphy) reads: KoryOrliSindarinAlv, Knight of Elfame Sun-Descending, Magus Minor and Child of Arda. Kory, Elfame etc. are a reference to an excellent Mercedes Lackey/Ellen Guon book called Bedlam's Bard, Korendil/Kory was a cat-eyed Elf who at least once shape-shifted into a small silver cat. Orli is Orlando Bloom who played Legolas in the film, Lord of the Rings. Alv is apparently swedish for elf..."SindarinAlv" on a Swedish website was the only thing I could translate. ("alfar" in Norse myth are the Light Elves) Arda is Middle-earth, in Tolkien's works.





Here follows the original version of Legolas' "to the sea, to the sea" song, from Return of the King, (3rd book of Lord of the Rings)



to the sea, to the sea the  
 white gulls are crying  
 the wind is blowing,  
 the white foam is fly-  
 ing  
 west, west away, the  
 round sun is falling  
 grey ship, grey ship, do  
 you hear them calling?  
 the voices of my people  
 who have gone on be-  
 fore me  
 I will leave, I will leave,  
 the woods that bore me  
 for our days are end-  
 ing, our years failing  
 I will pass the wide  
 waters' lonely sailing  
 long are the waves on  
 the last shore falling  
 sweet are the voices in  
 the lost isle calling  
 in Eressea, in  
 Elvenhome, which no  
 Man can discover  
 where the leaves fall  
 not, land of my people  
 forever



"There are some among you who can handle boats: Legolas, whose folk know the swift forest river..."  
"And one Hobbit! cried Merry. "Not all of us look on boats as wild horses..."







Pirate Jenny, Agent of  
SHIELD  
Grandmother in Charge of  
the Chincoteague houses





The LOTR poster with the Argonath (the two whopping big statues above) was one of my favorites; showing the Fellowship in the Elven boats paddling the upper reaches of the Anduin river.

Of course, I had to join them, if only in spirit.