

Dataw Island: A Beautiful Place to Kayak



by Nancy and Greg Schulte

The waters around Dataw Island are a kayak paddler's paradise, changing daily with the tide and the season. As the tide rises, periwinkle snails inch up spartina grass to escape predators washing into the marsh. As the tide drops, dolphins team up to trap fish washing out. At low tide, oysters pop shut and snowy egrets stalk the mud flats for worms and crabs. As the seasons change, the spartina grass celebrates each with beautiful displays of color. And every paddle promises a surprise: a mink swimming across your bow, an eagle soaring overhead, a new view of our beautiful island.

Before moving to Dataw Island, we kayaked on rivers and lakes, waters that flowed one direction or not at all. We were initially intimidated at the prospect of paddling through a tidal marsh. Nobody wants to make the front page of the Beaufort Gazette stuck in pluff mud or swept out to the Atlantic! But we quickly learned that, with preparation, paddling our waters can be just as safe and relaxing as paddling a river or lake -- or just as safe and invigorating if you want exercise. Plus, there are unexpected delights: watching a dolphin mother and baby playing together; sighting osprey or pelicans diving for fish; being scolded by clapper rails hiding in the marsh.

Key to preparation is checking tides. Jenkins Creek and Morgan River are extensions of Saint Helena Sound, flowing in and out twice daily with the tides. A smartphone tide app like "Tides Near Me" can help you plan a safe and easy trip. Tides differ along our sinuous shoreline: Check for the tide at "Jenkins Creek – Polawana Island" for the Jenkins Creek launch and at "Morgan River – Lucy Point



Creek Entrance" for launching from Sparrow Nest. Generally, it is best to kayak during "slack water" (the hour before and after high tide) when there is less current and a reduced risk of stranding. If possible, plan your trip to ride a rising tide to your destination then return on the falling tide. If exploring a new part of the marsh, go on a rising tide; it will lift your kayak out of pluff mud rather than leaving you stranded until the next high tide. Tide height is also important: It affects

whether you can paddle under the causeway, how far you can venture up a small creek, and what you can see beyond the spartina grass.

Safety is another key to preparation. The Coast Guard requires kayakers to wear a personal floatation device and a whistle. Inflatable life jackets that automatically inflate in the water are less constricting and cooler in our hot summers. Paddle with a buddy or group and ensure that one of you has a coil of tow line and a mobile phone in a waterproof pouch. Phoning 911 is the best way to get help in an emergency; the 911 dispatcher can even determine your location. If you paddle on your own, make sure someone knows your itinerary. Don't paddle in high wind – we draw the line at 15 mph -- or if there is any risk of lightning. Bring water and sunscreen.

There are currently two good launch points on community property: the Jenkins Creek launch on Dataw Drive near Oak Island Road and the "wrack" (dead spartina grass) to the right of the crab pots near the Sparrow Nest gazebo. The EZ Launch on Jenkins Creek is easy to use; you won't even get your feet wet. From there, a popular paddle is to take the rising tide "up" to the causeway then ride the falling tide back (route A on the map). For variety, you can cross Jenkins Creek and turn



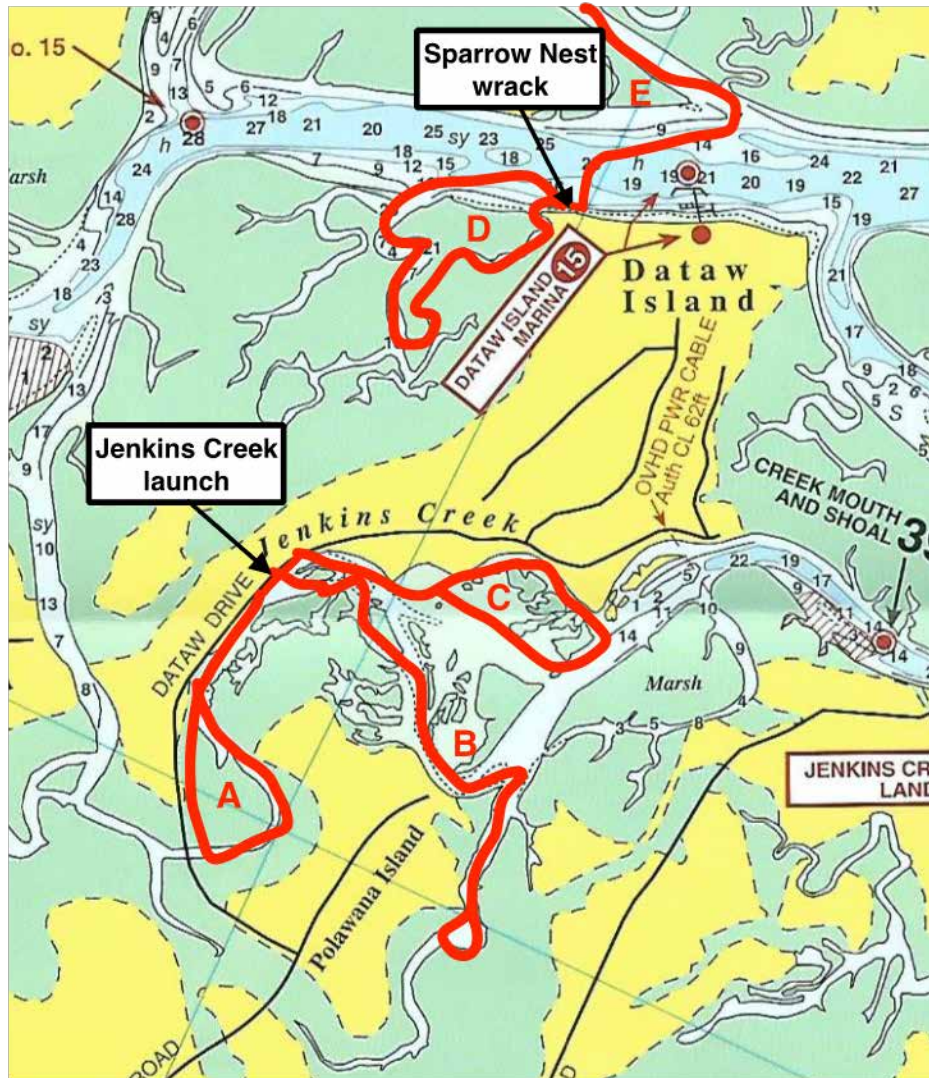
Dataw Living

behind Polawana Island (route B), or head "down" by the Clubhouse to Pee Dee Point (route C). Be sure to wave at the golfers on Cotton Dike holes #8, 9, 10, and 11!

Launching from and returning to the wrack at Sparrow Nest is only possible during the hour before and after high tide; even then, you will get your feet wet. From there you can wind through the marsh off Sparrow Nest Point (route D) or, if calm, cross the Morgan River into the Coosaw marsh (route E). There, if you know the route and use your smartphone's GPS map, you can explore the prehistoric Indian shell rings on the far shore.

Morgan River can be more challenging than Jenkins Creek, so checking the tide and wind is doubly important. Wind and tide in opposite directions can create swells or even whitecaps that all but the most experienced kayakers will want to avoid. Yet on a calm day, Morgan River can be as smooth as a lake. Launching into the Morgan River would become easier and safer if we were to add a kayak launch at our Marina, like the one on Jenkins Creek. That would open new kayaking opportunities, to include outings at low tide to the sandbar off Morgan Island.

Circling Dataw by kayak gives new appreciation for the size of the salt marshes to our east and west. One of us has circumnavigated the island four times, taking 3 to 3 1/2 hours depending on tide and wind. Circling the island in two days, leaving from the Jenkins Creek launch and "overnighting" your kayak at the Marina (see map), is less exhausting



Kayaking Routes Off Dataw



and can take better advantage of the tides. The trip is best undertaken by experienced kayakers in a group, particularly since there are few places to take out.

Kayaking around Dataw Island is guaranteed to make you smile. We'll never forget when a dolphin suddenly surfaced a paddles-length away, eliciting a squeal of surprise from Nancy. The dolphin, perhaps equally startled, circled back to give her a questioning "eye ball." Our curious companion was clearly saying "Sorry!" or perhaps asking "Are you okay?"



For more information, please feel free to contact the authors, Nancy at nschulte10@gmail.com or Greg at gschulte10@gmail.com. And join us for a future "kayaking meetup" on the welcoming waters around our Island.

Nancy and Greg Schulte moved to Dataw in 2015. Nancy is Kayaking Captain of the Dataw Island Yacht Club.

4 Quick Tips for your Kayaking Trips:

1. STORAGE

You can rent kayak storage at the Jenkins Creek launch by contacting Jackie Karasch in our Accounting department by phone at 838-8435 or by email at jkarasch@islc.net.

2. GUIDED TRIPS

The Dataw Island Yacht Club regularly organizes guided kayak trips off Island, a good way to learn about paddling in our tidal salt marshes. The dates of these trips are listed on the club website at <https://datawyachtclub.com>, and more details and sign-up information is sent via the DatawNet a month in advance of each trip. The club also has a kayak loaner program for members, accessible on the Yacht Club's website by signing in as a member with the password on your membership card.

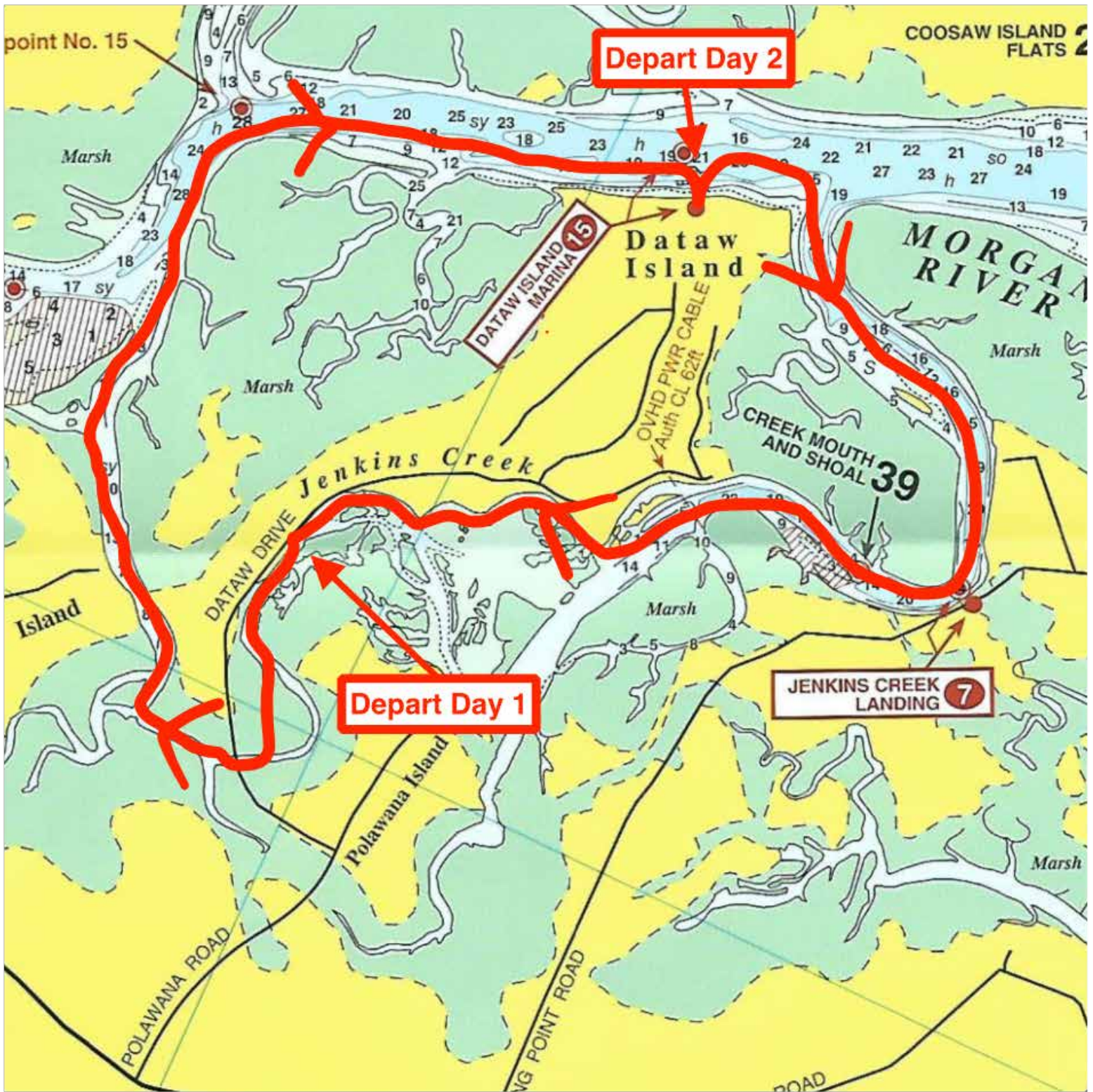
3. OH, CRUD! (PLUFF MUD)

Stuck on pluff mud? Don't get out of the kayak because the pluff mud will suck you down. Paddle backwards to the deeper water from which you came or wait for a rising tide to lift you up. If the tide is falling, the 911 dispatcher can send an airboat from the Beaufort Water Search and Rescue. Expect to make the front page of the Beaufort Gazette!

4. WHICH BOAT IS BEST?

A 12- to 14-foot sit-in kayak offers good maneuverability and decent tracking for our salt marshes. Lighter is better for carrying on land, though ultralight composites are easily scratched by oyster shells and boat ramps. If you fish or have restricted mobility, a sit-on-top kayak may be preferable, though they are usually heavier and more easily blown off course by the wind. Invest in a lightweight carbon-fiber paddle so your arms won't be as tired after a long paddle. An outfitter can provide further advice.





Circling Dataw in Two Days