

Winter & Horn Harbors Trail

15.5 to 22.1 miles

This trail has at least two stretches of open bay cruising, protected paddling in several estuaries, innumerable marshes to explore, and several side trips. It begins at the Mathews County Public Beach - Haven Beach, though as an alternative, you might want to launch in the more protected Whites Creek and follow Section 7 of the Gwynns Island/Milford Haven Trail to reach Haven Beach.

The trail heading south follows the eastern shore of Mathews County in the open Chesapeake Bay until it turns out of the Bay into a sheltered refuge, Winter Harbor. It then traverses the northern basin of Winter Harbor, winds through a series of passages through marshlands, and then opens into the southern basin of Winter Harbor. Upon exiting Winter Harbor to the south, it briefly reenters the open Bay, and then enters Horn Harbor at its northern tip. It proceeds inward along the northern shore of Horn Harbor, and then outward along the southern shore of Horn Harbor before exiting to the south at Doctors Creek. Of course, if you are heading north, the order is reversed. The detailed section guides provide guidance in both directions.

Besides the Bay beaches, Horn Harbor, and the two basins of Winter Harbor to explore, there is also interesting Garden Creek which can be reached via a canal just behind Bethel Beach. All in all, this is probably the most varied trail of the Blueways. Pleasure craft are few due to the shallow waters; only watermen use these channels. Wildlife,

especially marine bird life, is abundant in these natural areas.

Sections of this trail are in the open Chesapeake Bay. If wave and/or wind conditions are rough, you should choose an alternative, more sheltered trip and wait for another more favorable day to cruise the open water sections of this trail.

It is important that you read the Guide sections “Notes of Caution” and “Using the Guide” before using this trail guide.



PADDLING NORTH TO SOUTH

Section 1: Haven Beach (or Whites Creek) to Bethel Beach - 1.8 miles



You can launch directly off Haven Beach if conditions are not rough. Note that parking at Haven Beach is very limited.

You can alternately choose to launch at Whites Creek Landing and follow Section 7 of the Gwynns Island/Milford Haven Trail - *Whites Creek to Haven Beach via Rigby Island Channel.*

The beaches in this area are natural beaches with no facilities available. Some of this beach area is publicly owned.

About $\frac{3}{4}$ mile past Haven Beach, you will encounter a set of parallel sea walls jutting into the Bay. This channel was once the outlet of Garden Creek, but is no longer in

use. There are several beach homes with jetties one-half mile south of Garden Creek. Just south of these homes is the Bethel Beach Natural Area Preserve, a ninety-acre area owned by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. You may visit and read the interpretive signs, but please do not bother the wildlife or vegetation. No camping or fires are allowed on this beach.

Launching points:

- #7 - Whites Creek Landing.
- #8 - Haven Beach.
- #9 - Garden Creek Beach.
- #10 - Bethel Beach.

Section 2: Garden Creek - 2 miles



To make the side trip to Garden Creek, follow Bethel Beach southward in the Chesapeake Bay and turn west at the tip of Bethel Beach just past the osprey platform. Then make a turn to the north immediately, but be aware of the shoals. Continue northwards towards the underpass of the bridge over Route 609. Follow the canal under the bridge for another half-mile to Garden Creek. Take note - swift currents during tidal flows funnel through Garden Creek Canal. Garden Creek is fun to explore and is protected, with very shallow waters throughout.

Garden Creek Canal is ¾ of a mile long and the creek is nearly a mile in length, but you could spend a day exploring the entire creek.

Launching points:

- #10 - Bethel Beach

Section 3: Bethel Beach to Winter Harbor Haven (Bay route) - 4.5 miles



This area abounds in wildlife and many species of marine birds can be sighted throughout the year. The endangered Northeastern Beach Tiger Beetle and the threatened Least Tern make their homes along this beach during the summer months. Also, an osprey platform is located at the southern end of Bethel Beach. Be aware of submerged stumps just off Bethel Beach.

Continuing south along the beaches in the open Chesapeake Bay, you will encounter an expanse of white sand beaches known as Winter Harbor Island. A one-story block building is located at the southern end of this island. Just south of this building, bear to the right (west) into a narrow channel, which is the entrance to Winter Harbor. Very swift currents during tidal flows (the swiftest tidal flow occurs at a time approximately halfway between high tide time and low tide time) can make the entrance tricky - take care. Follow the channel markers along the main channel, staying to the left (southwest) shore to avoid the shoals and boat traffic. To the left (southwest) of channel marker #14, there will be a large, high dock for workboats with a small public launch site to the left of the dock. This is Winter Harbor Haven.

Launching points:

- #10 - Bethel Beach.
- #11 - Winter Harbor Haven.

Section 4: Winter Harbor -

2.6 to 7.7 miles



The northern basin of Winter Harbor can be entered by paddling south past the tip of Bethel Beach and turning right (westward) into the harbor. Once inside, explore the harbor if you like. The trail travels in a southwesterly direction through the harbor until you sight an opening in the marsh grass flanked by two duck blinds. This channel will take you to the southern basin of Winter Harbor. There is no way to accurately describe the route through this area. It is somewhat of a maze of channels. There are many trails through Winter Harbor that meander about and sometimes dead-end, but it's a lot of fun to explore this area. Try to continue heading in a mostly southerly direction. Large expanses of *Spartina* grasses abound. You will sight Winter Harbor Haven dock when you emerge from the channel. Traveling westward from Winter Harbor Haven, the southern portion of Winter Harbor is great to explore with three fingers leading off of the main channel. You could spend several days and many miles exploring its marshes and creeks.

Launching points:

#10 - Bethel Beach.

#11 - Winter Harbor Haven.

Section 5: Horn Harbor - 7.8 to 9.4 miles

This section begins at Winter Harbor Haven just south of Channel Marker #14. Turn east and follow the main channel $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile to the Chesapeake Bay. The outlet to the Bay is narrow and can be very challenging in windy conditions and during strong tidal flows. Turn south along the coastline; you will

encounter marshes and small beaches.

Submerged aquatic grass in the water is abundant. Following the coast $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile, you will come upon several small islands to the east. To the west, just past these islands, is the mouth of Horn Harbor. Looking in a southwesterly direction across the harbor, you will see Mill Point jutting out.

Horn Harbor is a bay with a wide mouth open to the southeast. It is an approximately 2.7 mile long waterway with many little side creeks and coves to explore.

There may be workboats and pleasure boats in the deep channel, but there is good paddling along the shoreline. It is open to the southeast and waves from that direction rolling in from the Chesapeake Bay are likely to be troublesome when there are strong southeast winds.

The land adjoining the harbor is low, and there are marshy areas near its mouth. The land rises a bit as one cruises up the harbor, but it is never very high. There are numerous small side creeks and coves that are very inviting for exploration. Quiet homes are sprinkled along the banks. In the area of channel marker 19, you will see a marina on the north bank.

After you reach the head of the Harbor, you can reverse course and paddle outward toward the Bay staying off the south bank. There are some creeks and coves to explore, but fewer than on the north bank. At the mouth of the Harbor as you turn toward the south, you will find Mill Point on your right (west). It has a lovely little beach set amongst trees facing east. There are other small beaches on its south side.

Observe caution when rounding Mill Point because you will be back in the open Bay. You should stay inside the more sheltered Horn Harbor if conditions are rough on the Bay.

The entrance to Doctors Creek is to the south of Mill Point. You will find a small sandy launch area on the shore of Doctors Creek.

Launching points:

- #11 - Winter Harbor Haven
- #11A – Peary Landing
- #12 - Doctors Creek Landing



PADDLING SOUTH TO NORTH

Section 5: Horn Harbor - 7.8 to 9.4 miles



Doctors Creek is to the south of Mill Point. You will find a small sandy launch area on the shore of Doctors Creek.

Paddling north, you must round Mill Point in order to enter Horn Harbor. Observe caution when leaving Doctors Creek and rounding Mill Point because you will be back in the open Bay.

Near the mouth of the Harbor as you paddle north, you find Mill Point on your left (west). It has a lovely little beach set amongst trees facing east. There are other small beaches on its south side. Rounding Mill Point and turning west puts you in Horn Harbor.

Horn Harbor is a bay with a wide mouth open to the southeast. It is an approximately 2.7 mile long waterway with many little side

creeks and coves to explore. There may be workboats and pleasure boats in the deep channel, but there is good paddling along the shoreline. It is open to the southeast and waves from that direction rolling in from the Chesapeake Bay are likely to be troublesome when there are strong southeast winds.

The land adjoining the harbor is low, and there are marshy areas near its mouth. The land rises a bit as one cruises up the harbor, but it is never very high. There are numerous small side creeks and coves that are very inviting for exploration. Quiet homes are sprinkled along the banks. In the area of channel marker 19, you will see a marina on the north bank.

After you reach the head of the Harbor, you can reverse course and paddle outward toward the Bay staying off the north bank. There are more creeks and coves to explore than on the south bank.

On exiting the Harbor and turning north, you will see several small islands to the east. Again, use caution, as you will be back in the open bay. Along the coastline; you will encounter marshes and small beaches. Submerged aquatic grass in the water is abundant.

Following the coast $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile, you come to the inlet to Winter Harbor. The inlet is narrow and can be very challenging in windy conditions and during strong tidal flows. Follow the main channel $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile into Winter Harbor. Winter Harbor Haven is just south of Channel Marker #14.

Launching points:

- #11 - Winter Harbor Haven
- #11A – Peary Landing
- #12 - Doctors Creek Landing

Section 4: Winter Harbor -

2.6 to 7.7 miles



Traveling westward from Winter Harbor Haven, the southern portion of Winter

Harbor is great to explore with three fingers leading off of the main channel. You could spend several days and many miles exploring its marshes and creeks.

The channel to the northern basin of Winter Harbor is a bit tricky to find. If you look straight ahead from the launch site, marker #14 will be slightly to the left and a small island will be slightly to the right. Pass to the left of the island and head into the main channel behind the island. Once into this channel, bear to the right as you thread your way through the channels. Try to continue heading in a mostly northerly direction. Near the end of the channels, bear left and you should emerge into the northern basin through an opening in the marsh grass flanked by two duck blinds.

There is no way to accurately describe the route through this area. It is somewhat of a maze of channels. Large expanses of *Spartina* grasses abound. There are many trails through Winter Harbor that meander about and sometimes dead-end, but it's a lot of fun to explore this area.

Once inside, explore the harbor if you like. The trail travels in a northeasterly direction through the harbor until you sight the tip of Bethel Beach. Beware of the shoals to the south of the tip. Turn right and paddle in a northeasterly direction past the tip (it will be on your left) until you reach the Bay. Then turn left (north) and you will be headed up the Bay in open water. Again, exercise

caution in rough conditions. Bethel Beach Landing will be on your left (west).

Launching points:

#10 - Bethel Beach.

#11 - Winter Harbor Haven.

Section 3: Winter Harbor Haven to Bethel Beach (Bay route) - 4.5 miles

This area abounds in wildlife and many species of marine birds can be sighted throughout the year. The endangered Northeastern Beach Tiger Beetle and the threatened Least Tern make their homes along this beach during the summer months. Also, an osprey platform is located at the southern end of Bethel Beach. Be aware of submerged stumps just off Bethel Beach.

Winter Harbor Haven is to the west of channel marker #14. There is a large, high dock for workboats with a small public launch site to the east of the dock. As you leave the dock area, paddle east and exit Winter Harbor by following the channel markers along the main channel leading out to the Bay. Stay to the right (west) shore to avoid the shoals and boat traffic. Very swift currents during tidal flows can make the exit tricky - take care. After exiting, you will be in the open Bay.

The narrow channel exits Winter Harbor just south of a one-story block building located at the southern end of an island. It has an expanse of white sand beaches and is known as Winter Harbor Island. Continue north along the beaches in the open Chesapeake Bay taking care to observe caution if the wind or waves are high in the Bay.

Launching points:

#10 - Bethel Beach.

#11 - Winter Harbor Haven.

Section 2: Garden Creek - 2 miles



To make the side trip to Garden Creek, turn north just before the tip of Bethel instead of entering the Bay. Be aware of the shoals. Continue northwards towards the underpass of the bridge over Route 609. Follow the canal under the bridge for another half-mile to Garden Creek. Take note - swift currents during tidal flows funnel through Garden Creek Canal. Garden Creek is fun to explore and is protected, with very shallow waters throughout.

Garden Creek Canal is ¾ of a mile long and the creek is nearly a mile in length, but you could spend a day exploring the entire creek.

Launching points:

#10 - Bethel Beach

Section 1: Bethel Beach to Haven Beach (or Whites Creek) - 1.8 miles



Bethel Beach Landing is in Bethel Beach Natural Area Preserve, a ninety-acre area owned by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. You may visit and read the interpretive signs, but please do not bother the wildlife or vegetation. No camping or fires are allowed on this beach. After you leave Bethel Beach paddling north, you will see several beach homes with jetties that are one-half mile south of Garden Creek. As you continue, you will encounter a set of parallel sea walls jutting into the Bay. This channel was once the outlet of Garden Creek, but is no longer in use. The beaches in this area are natural beaches with

no facilities available. Some of this beach area is publicly owned.

About ¾ miles after the old Garden Creek channel, you will reach Haven Beach, the Mathews County public beach. You can take out there if conditions are favorable, or you can continue another ¾ mile and pass into the southern part of Milford Haven (Whites Creek) by passing through the channel at the south tip of Rigby Island. A complete description of the channel is given in Section 7 of the Gwynns Island/Milford Haven Trail - *Haven Beach to Whites Creek via Rigby Island Channel*. There you can take out at Whites Creek Landing.

Launching points:

#7 - Whites Creek Landing.

#8 - Haven Beach.

#9 - Garden Creek Beach.

#10 - Bethel Beach.

Mathews Tidbits

- Mathews was one of the major shipbuilding centers of the Colonies, and later of the U.S. Shipbuilding activity declined after the War of 1812.
- Mathews-built ships participated in many armed clashes with the British, some in distant waters, some right on the Blueways Trails.
- There were armed clashes in the County with the British during the Revolution. Gwynns Island, which the British were occupying in the summer of 1776, was the site of a spirited engagement.
- During the Civil War, Federal gunboats sometimes cruised the shores and fired shells into homes. What prompted them to do so is unclear. Were they firing back or just firing?