

## Photo Destination: Captain John Smith's Chesapeake Bay

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*"Heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for man's habitation." – Captain John Smith, 1612*

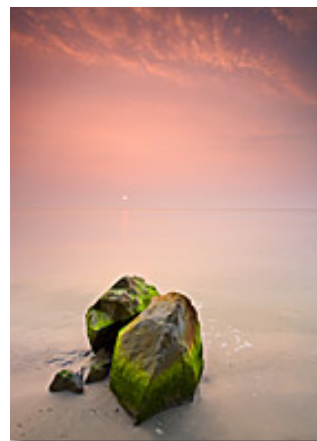
Any glance at a map will show that the most prominent geographic feature of the mid-Atlantic area is the Chesapeake Bay. With nearly 12,000 miles of varied coastline – more than the West Coast – and an abundance of wildlife, there are plenty of photo opportunities in the Chesapeake area. This holds especially true for those adventurous souls willing to get off the beaten path and follow in the wake of the famous Captain John Smith, who explored the Bay 400 years ago in a sailing barge with a small band of intrepid English colonists. The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail – one of the newest units of the National Park Service and America's first national water trail – commemorates this event, and today beckons photographers to explore the Chesapeake's remaining wild spaces.

Much of the Chesapeake can be explored by auto or on foot, but to truly experience the most remote parts of the Bay, boat travel is recommended. Kayaks are probably best suited for Chesapeake exploration, as they allow access to many hidden coves and marshes that have water too shallow for motor boats. If traveling on the water, make sure you have proper instruction and necessary safety equipment, and always wear a personal floatation device. Keep an eye out for inclement weather, particularly the many violent thunderstorms common in the summer months. The last place you want to be in a lightning storm is on open waters or within a salt marsh with little or no shelter.



Most of the Chesapeake is made up of extensive salt marshes, sandy beaches, and low dunes. The Chesapeake is fed by a number of major tidal rivers, including the Susquehanna, Potomac, James, York, and Rappahannock rivers. In some places, the Bay or its tidal rivers are characterized by rocky shores, including most notably, the Calvert Cliffs in Maryland.

Wildlife is abundant on the Bay and its tidal rivers, and in particular many species of birds are drawn to the Chesapeake's open waters and extensive wetland areas, including bald eagles, osprey, pelicans, herons, egrets, tundra swans, sanderlings and other shore birds, ducks, and double-crested cormorants. Mammalian species that can sometimes be seen include deer, dolphins, whales, fox, river otter, raccoons, muskrats, and beaver.



Unfortunately, one other form of wildlife is very abundant during the summer months – biting insects of all varieties. If shooting during bug season, bring plenty of insect repellent – or better yet, bug net clothing – otherwise, you may fall victim to hordes of ravenous mosquitoes, black flies, horse flies, deer flies, greenheads, no-see-ums, and many other unspeakable predators. The insects tend to be at their worst in marshy areas, whereas the Chesapeake's many windswept beaches are often bug-free.

I have spent three years exploring the Bay by car, foot, and kayak for my recent book *Chesapeake: Bay of Light*, and I've seen some pretty incredible places and wildlife events. There really is no end to the shooting possibilities in a place as large and diverse as the Chesapeake, and it is difficult to pick only a few areas to focus on, but here it goes. What follows are some of my favorite locations to shoot on the Chesapeake and its tidal rivers:



### Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge

Located in the vast tidal marshes of Dorchester County on Maryland's famous Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay, Blackwater is a beacon for wildlife and photographers alike. The refuge is a major stop on the Atlantic Flyway and a sanctuary for the threatened American bald eagle and the endangered Delmarva fox squirrel. The refuge's Wildlife Drive takes visitors past the scenic salt

marshes, forests, and fields of Blackwater Marsh, and gives the photographer easy access to many species. Year-round residents include bald eagles and great blue herons. Summer brings great egrets, whereas winter darkens the sky with huge flocks of snow and Canada geese, and even brings otherwise “exotic” species such as white pelicans, which in recent years have been seen at Blackwater. Bring as many long telephoto lenses as you can stuff in your camera bag – in a place like Blackwater, you are going to need all of them.

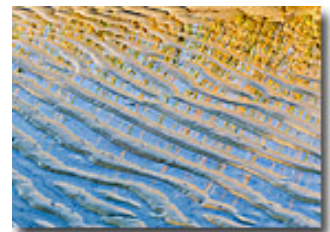
### Calvert Cliffs

Pastel blue and yellow cliffs rising as high as 200 feet from the water line Maryland’s Western Shore for forty miles. The Calvert Cliffs were formed over 15 million years ago when a warm, shallow sea covered southern Maryland. Over 600 species of fossils have been identified from these cliffs, with the teeth of various species of shark being the most abundant. A rare and exciting find is a huge tooth of ancient Megalodon – essentially a prehistoric giant great white shark. Megalodon teeth can measure up to seven inches in size, sometimes even larger. The easiest places to access the Cliffs are Calvert Cliffs State Park, Flag Ponds Nature Center, and Bayfront Park (located in the town of Chesapeake Beach). Bayfront Park in particular is a great place to get to the cliffs at sunrise, when the light is at its best. Be prepared to wade in the water at high tide; low tide reveals extensive tidal flats and mirror-like tide pools. Wide-angle lenses are very useful when photographing the cliffs, but one should also be on the lookout for close-up shots of the many intricate and colorful patterns that can often be found in the rocks.



### Smith and Tangier Island

Located in the middle of the Bay and reachable only by boat, Smith Island (in Maryland) and Tangier Island (right across the border in Virginia) are a window into the Chesapeake’s past. Small towns cling to existence on these isolated islands, where the Chesapeake’s famous watermen continue to ply their trades – fishing, crabbing, and oyster harvesting. Between the two islands exist an archipelago of smaller islands, some no more than mere sandbars barely above the high tide line. In the summer, thousands of terns, gulls, cormorants, and brown pelicans come to these islands to nest, making this one of the premier (although virtually unknown!) wildlife viewing destinations in the Eastern United States. Smith or Tangier Island both make excellent staging grounds for exploration of the archipelago, but a boat or kayak is needed to explore the region (rentals can be obtained on Smith or Tangier Island). Bring every lens in your kit for this shoot – you’ll easily find opportunities for wide-angle scenics, telephoto wildlife shots, and everything in between.



### Mathews County

Mathews County in Virginia is a sea kayaker’s paradise. Largely undeveloped with miles of pristine white sandy beaches and numerous small uninhabited islands, one can spend weeks here exploring and photographing. The highlight of the area is New Point Comfort Preserve, at the southern tip of the Mathews County peninsula. Here, one can photograph a gorgeous wild beach and numerous shorebirds, osprey, and eagles. To top it all off, just offshore is a beautiful historic white stone lighthouse. New Point Comfort Preserve, the lighthouse, and much of this area can only be reached by boat or kayak, although a lovely stretch of wild beach – Bethel Beach Natural Area Preserve – can be reached by car.

### Virginia Beach

Although not wild by any stretch of the imagination, the hyper-developed area around Virginia Beach, Virginia nonetheless has many great photo opportunities. First Landing State Park – right in the middle of Virginia Beach – is a location steeped in history and natural beauty. Here the English colonists first landed in the New World, before proceeding farther up the Bay to the tidal James River where they established Jamestown, the first successful English colony in America. Photographic opportunities here abound. One can find acres of beautiful bald cypress swamp with trees draped in Spanish moss. During the summer, pods of bottlenose dolphins can be seen frolicking in the waters offshore. During the winter, humpback whales come to feed in the nutrient rich waters where the Bay meets the Atlantic Ocean. The whales are best observed from one of several whale-watching tours that depart from Virginia Beach on a daily basis.

## Janes Island

Janes Island State Park, located on Maryland's Eastern Shore, is a truly unique experience. Located in the mostly undeveloped Tangier Sound area of the Chesapeake, there are places on Janes Island where one can see only wilderness in all directions. You can reach the mainland part of the park by car, but to reach Janes Island itself, you need a boat, canoe, or kayak (the park offers canoe and kayak rentals). Janes Island is completely undeveloped and isolated from the mainland. With more than 30 miles of water trails winding through classic Chesapeake salt marsh, and more than 5 miles of unspoiled sandy beach, Janes Island offers wild adventure. Opportunities for wildlife and scenic photography abound.

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**Ian Plant** lives in the Washington, D.C. area and has been photographing the natural world for fifteen years. His work has appeared in a number of books and calendars, as well as national and regional magazines, including *Outdoor Photographer*, *National Parks*, *Blue Ridge Country*, *Adirondack Life*, *Wonderful West Virginia*, and *Chesapeake Life*, among others. His sixth and most recent book is the critically acclaimed *Chesapeake: Bay of Light. An Exploration of the Chesapeake Bay's Wild and Forgotten Places*. Ian's work has also appeared in five other books of the Wonder and Light series.

Ian is co-owner of [Mountain Trail Press](#) and leads workshops through [Mountain Trail Photography Workshops](#). To see more of Ian's work, visit him online at [www.ipphotography.com](http://www.ipphotography.com).



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