

TOP STORY

Kayaker paddles Wood-Pawcatuck river system from 'source to sea'

By Cynthia Drummond Sun staff writer

Aug 13, 2020 Updated 8 hrs ago



WESTERLY — Bill McCusker launched his kayak at the Taylor's Landing put-in on Route 138 in South Kingstown on Monday morning, and by midday Wednesday, he had made it to the ocean.

McCusker had paddled nearly 50 miles of the Pawcatuck River system to Little Narragansett Bay.

The goal of the three-day paddle, dubbed “source to sea,” was to draw attention to the rivers that comprise the Wood-Pawcatuck river system, which was designated in 2019 as “Wild and Scenic” by the National Park Service.

McCusker, 57, of South Kingstown, represents the town on the Wild and Scenic Stewardship Council.

“We’ve had the designation a year now, and I’m part of the education and informational committee. We’re getting ready to bring awareness to us and bring awareness to the river,” he said.

Supported by his wife, Elise Torello, who brought him home at the end of each day, McCusker, an experienced paddler, began his journey at 6:30 Monday morning.

“I pre-paddled a lot of this just to get an idea of how things work, so I had an idea of some of the conditions,” he said.

The dry summer has resulted in low water levels, which make navigating the river more challenging. McCusker began his trip in a smaller, lighter kayak and switched to a larger kayak for the second and final days.

“It’s a 14-foot Necky Vector Sit-On-Top,” he said, referring to the larger kayak. “The first part of the ride, I used an Old Town Camden 12-footer, because the river’s so low in the Lower Chipuxet and Upper Wood that I knew I had to carry it over logs and things and the other boat’s lighter. The one I used today is more seaworthy and can carry a little extra gear.”

Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association Wild and Scenic Rivers Coordinator Kassi Archambault said McCusker would have had to contend with very low water in some sections of the river.

“We haven’t had enough rain,” she said. “It’s about 4 inches less rain than typical, so there’s quite a lot of scraping bottom, and intense heat.”

The first day, McCusker logged 18 miles, and averaged 14 miles on Tuesday and Wednesday. The heat wasn’t a problem because he was usually able to paddle in the shade; however, in addition to the low water, he encountered several beaver dams.

“There were 11 beaver dams between the Chipuxet, where I started, until I got beyond where a beaver dam could exist on the Pawcatuck, which would be around the Shannock area,” he said. “So, you had to climb over those.”

On Wednesday, as McCusker approached Little Narragansett Bay, the wildlife was different.

“It’s funny,” he said. “The wildlife changed so much today. Today it was gulls, striped bass and egrets flying around where yesterday it was wood ducks and snapping turtles and things like that. It’s interesting how the river changes.”

Deborah Lamm, chairman and president of the Watch Hill Conservancy, greeted McCusker when he arrived at Napatree just after noon on Wednesday. The conservancy manages the Napatree Point Conservation Area.

“The National Park Service’s Wild and Scenic Rivers designation is so important to all of us,” she said. “It is the ultimate validation of how special this part of our state is. Bill’s landfall on Napatree reminds us that Napatree and Little Narragansett Bay are the end of the line for the rivers that comprise the Wood-Pawcatuck System.”

McCusker said he enjoyed his three days on the river because the scenery and conditions were always changing.

“The river kept changing so it made it interesting,” he said. “For me, there wasn’t time to just reflect and it wasn’t a race. It was just observing the whole time. ... This whole thing was to draw attention to 'Wild and Scenic.' If you can get one person to get out on the river because of all this, then it was well worth it.”

For more information on the Wood-Pawcatuck Wild and Scenic river system, visit <https://www.facebook.com/WPWildScenic>.

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Web Link

https://www.thewesterlysun.com/daily-news-alerts/kayaker-paddles-wood-pawcatuck-river-system-from-source-to-sea/article_e4f76b5e-dd94-11ea-8e25-7b2eafd934eb.html?utm_medium=social&utm_source=email&utm_campaign=user-share