

## **Fishing in the Wake of Captain John Smith**

Everybody has heard the story about how Captain John Smith and his crew tried to catch fish with a frying pan during their 2,000-mile exploration of the Chesapeake four hundred years ago, in the summer of 1608. Truth is that the fish were probably menhaden (aka alewives, bunkers, pogies). If you've ever tried to get close enough to them to throw a cast net, you know what a poor rig a frying pan would be. Smith did catch some fish (possibly croakers, sheepshead, and flounder) at the mouth of the Rappahannock by stabbing them with his sword, but you probably also know that he made the mistake of spearing a stingray, which promptly speared him. In great pain, he directed his men to dig his grave, but when the pain subsided several hours later, he ate a roasted ray wing for supper.

No, Capt. Smith wasn't much of an angler, and his gear was primitive, but he records a rich, healthy Bay that gives us a great standard for today's restoration programs. Even though the Chesapeake is hurting today from an excess of human pressures, following the new Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail around it will give you hope that we can succeed in those restoration efforts. Here's a selection of spots on the Trail that will make any angler smile. The lat/lon numbers are approximate, since these are large areas. Do a little scouting, though, and you'll find their sweet spots.

### **Garrett Island, Susquehanna River—39 degrees 33.4'N/76 degrees 05.3'W**

Several respected scholars believe that Capt. Smith and his crew met the “giant-like” Susquehannock chiefs from up the river on Garrett Island during their exploration of the head of the Bay in the summer of 1608. For the local Indian tribes, it was a neutral territory where canoes could find a safe landing place in any weather, with a 100-foot-high peak for a lookout in all directions.

Today, the island is part of the Chesapeake Islands National Wildlife Refuge, and it still looks a lot as it must have in Smith's time, except for supporting the U.S. Route 40 and Amtrak bridges. And as it must have been then, it is ringed today with underwater grasses like wild celery and hydrilla, especially at the downstream end.

Garrett Island really marks a transition between the Susquehanna and the Chesapeake, and its fish population reflects that fact. Throw a Texas-rigged 5" Senko or Yum Dinger into the pockets, cuts, and edges of the grass and you could find a smallmouth, a largemouth, a rockfish, a big white perch, or even a walleye eating it. While you're at it, try running a firetiger crankbait through the eddies that form both upcurrent and down of the bridge pilings. And since you're already out there, try the same baits on the nearby Susquehanna Flats, especially early and late in the day.

### **Belvidere Shoals, Upper Bay—39 degrees 07.4'N/76 degrees 21.8'W**

In June of 1608, Capt. Smith and his crew sailed up the Bay's western shore, looking for a large river that the Nanticoke Indians had told him about. He skipped the

West, Rhode, South, Severn, and Magothy, dismissing them as “some small, shallow creeks” before turning into the first river “large enough to admit a ship.” That turned out to be today’s Patapsco. Amazingly, the English still firmly believed that the Chesapeake was actually the entrance to the fabled Northwest Passage through the New World to China and India. Smith and crew explored and mapped the Patapsco up to Elkridge, where the river’s rapids stopped them.

As he entered the mouth of the Patapsco, Smith must have had to navigate through a series of oyster reefs that had grown all the way to the surface. Since 1608, sea level has risen about four feet, and many of those reefs have been dredged repeatedly, but today they remain as Belvidere Shoals, a series of hard-bottom lumps that top out at 12-15’ with 20-25’ of water around them. Fish them with grass shrimp and Gulp! Alive Sandworms to catch white perch and spot. Ice down the largest of these tasty panfish. Put the smaller ones into the livewell and use them to liveline the lumps for rock.

### **The Fish Hook Shoal, Tangier Island—37 degrees 48.2’N/75 degrees 58.6’W**

Capt. Smith and crew put into then-uninhabited Tangier Island in June, 1608 to recover from a thundersquall and look for fresh water. Anybody today who knows Tangier knows they didn’t find any springs, but they did get their *Discovery Barge* back into operating condition for their trip up Tangier Sound.

Today, visiting anglers will find a warm welcome, great crab cakes, and plenty of soft drinks on Tangier. In addition, they’ll find good fishing around the island’s various marsh points and drains.

One of the most interesting spots on the island is the tide rip that forms on the bar that extends offshore from the Fish Hook, the beach at the south end of the island. Whichever way the current is running, a strong rip will form over the bar. In a shallow-draft skiff, try drifting over the bar, working both the up- and down-current sides with a bucktail jig tipped with a piece of Fishbites EZ Crab or a strip of squid. You might also try walking a Spook or a DOA 5.5” soft jerkbait over the rip. Rockfish, specks, puppy drum, and big croakers feed there.

### **Stingray Point, Rappahannock & Piankatank Rivers—37 degrees 33.7’N/76 degrees 16.2’W**

At this spot, where the Rappahannock and the Piankatank meet the open Bay, Capt. Smith inadvertently ran the *Discovery Barge* aground in a grass bed. While he and his crew waited for the tide to rise, they got out of the boat and began spearing fish with their swords, which led to his painful encounter with the ray. Based on Smith’s report that the fish’s poisonous barb was in the “middest” part of its tail, it was probably a southern stingray, not a cownose, whose barb is at the base of its tail. If you catch now-more-common cownose, note that you too can fillet the wings and grill them.

The best deal here, though, is the restoration oyster reefs in these two rivers, built by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission and stocked with oysters grown out by local volunteers and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Oyster Restoration Center in Gloucester. Like the reefs that Smith would have seen here, these reefs are hazards to navigation. Per today's U.S. Coast Guard regulations, they have a *REEF* day marker on each end. To fish one, watch the tide and the current. If the tide is high, try a Chug Bug, a Mirrolure Top Dog, or a suspending X-Rap over the top. Otherwise, bounce a jig head with a Fin-S Fish, a Bass Assassin, or a BKD down the side for a puppy drum, a speckled trout, a rock, a croaker, or a flounder. On a fly rod, do the same with a 3", 1/0 Clouser in chartreuse and white.

### **Nansemond River—36 degrees 50.8'N/76 degrees 31.8'W**

At the end of their second voyage up the Bay, in early September, 1608, Capt. Smith and his crew decided to explore the Nansemond River, on the south side of the James just inside Hampton Roads. The Nansemond Indians were well aware of the English and their Jamestown colony just upriver. They set up a clever ambush by luring them upriver for a visit to one of their longhouses, built on a marsh island along the river's channel. Smith, an experienced warrior himself foiled the plot, captured several Nansemond canoes, and negotiated a peaceful trade for corn before heading home to Jamestown.

The best deal up the Nansemond is big croakers. This river has some of the strongest tidal currents in the Chesapeake, and the fish hang along channel edges during the day, moving up to the marsh edges evening and morning. Work a high-low bottom rig in deeper water and a fishfinder in the shallows, baited with a bloodworm and a strip of squid or a chunk of food shrimp. For an alternative in weaker current, try jiggging a 1/2-oz. PJ (pompano jig) tipped with bloodworm, with a 1/0 TurTurn Inshore hook, tied on the line a foot above with a Palomar knot and baited with a strip of squid.

**NOTE 1:** Over last year and this, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) had built and deployed four "talking buoys" to mark Capt. Smith's Trail with its Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System. These buoys offer lots of real-time information that is useful to anglers, including, wind, wave height, water temperature, and dissolved oxygen, as well as geographical and historical information on the buoy sites. The four online by the time you read this are at Belvidere Shoals off the Patapsco, Point Lookout at the mouth of the Potomac, Stingray Point, and Jamestown on the James River. They will deploy two more in September, in the mouth of the Susquehanna near Garrett Island and in the Elizabeth River between Norfolk & Portsmouth. To get information from them, call 1-877-BUOYBAY or visit [www.buoybay.org](http://www.buoybay.org).

**NOTE 2:** For more information on the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, visit [www.cbf.org/johnsmith](http://www.cbf.org/johnsmith), which offers not only information on Capt. Smith's Trail but also links to several other great Smith web sites, especially those of the National Park Service, the Friends of the John Smith Chesapeake Trail, and the National Geographic Society.

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