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Ocean Camp Maine in Review

November 30, 2013 Ryan No Comments Adventures, Course & Camps, Course / Trip Reports



OC Maine – a week of fun & learning for advancing paddlers.

In September, GKC hosted [Ocean Camp Maine](#), a 6-day intermediate and advancing sea kayak skills course. Located in Jonesport, a “Downeast” Maine coastal fishing town, Ocean Camp attracted six paddlers eager for a week of learning, fun and development in the open water environment. [Haris](#), [Ryan](#) (myself) and a few of the clients would then head to the [Bay of Fundy Sea Kayak Symposium](#) immediately after their week in Maine. Ocean Camp is the third in four difficulty levels of [Sea Kayak Camps](#) offered by GKC and is intended for intermediate and advancing paddlers who are looking to gain understanding and competency paddling in the Open Water environment (seas and surf to 5 feet, tidal overfalls and races, winds and advanced navigation). Risk Management, leadership and rescue in the open water environment are all focuses of Ocean Camps.

The Cloud

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Peering through the fog as we return to our guest house.

Location

The town of Jonesport is ideally located for training in the open coast environment. This sleepy fishing town is sheltered by the Great Wass Island Preserve with several large islands and hundreds of islets diffusing incoming swell from the Gulf of Maine. Paddle a couple miles in any direction through myriads of islands and surfing, rock gardens and unique navigation challenges are at your fingertips. The location is also enticing for advancing paddlers as Jonesport is located at the mouth of the Bay of Fundy, which is renowned for its large tidal variance. A nearby tide race at Reversing Falls of Cobscook Bay provided a fantastic learning environment and change of pace later in the week.



The "First" Supper – Swordfish & Scallops

Day 1

Starting off on the right foot is important on a multi-day course where six paddlers with a range of goals and expectations are living, eating and paddling together. Several paddlers drove to Jonesport while others flew to Bangor, and those who arrived in time for dinner sat down to grilled Swordfish with seared Scallops served over pasta. We (Geneva Kayak) are well known for the quality of food served on our adventures and camps, and we source locally when available. By the time we finished dinner the whole crew had arrived and sat down to chat about the course. Later, coaches met with students individually to gain insight into their goals and expectations for the week.



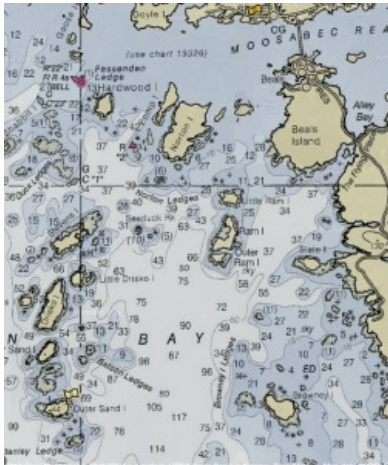
Limited Visibility Navigation

Day 2

Our world had turned to gray. Coastal Maine is renowned for its fog and would provide a good challenge for our students during the first three days of Ocean Camp. Lodging for the week was located on Moosabec Reach, a .4 nautical mile channel separating Beals Island from the mainland. When you can't see Beals, or even 100 feet

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from the shore, you know navigation will be the name of the game! We carefully replaced the artwork hanging in the kitchen with a whiteboard where coaches posted the marine and surf forecast for the day. This would become the responsibility of a different student each day as they assumed leadership for planning that day's paddle. With coaches placing an emphasis Day 2 being a warm-up day, students worked together to plan a 10nm round trip paddle to Outer Sand Island (and back), with time planned for play. Thick fog shrouded both islands and passages as we island hopped our way towards the Outer Sand. While it's important to maintain flexibility as a trip leader, paddling in fog is much about the ability to "Plan your Paddle, Paddle your Plan". Taking accurate bearings and a vigilant approach to checking your heading is crucial as one could easily become disoriented in fog as thick as pea soup.



Our paddle from Jonesport to Outer Sand Island and back.

Our group paddled from island to island with a few "teachable moments" along the way. In addition to good chart work and compass skills, the ability to DED Reckon is equally important while navigating in fog. As one cannot see the next island only 150 feet away, even small crossings can make for interesting challenges. When students decided to land for lunch, coaches took advantage of the opportunity work with students on the skill of landing and launching on a rocky shelf. A half foot swell, shallow shoreline gradient and kelp covered rocks gave students the perfect opportunity to practice reading a wave, timing their approach, gliding up on the slippery rocks and getting out of the kayak.



Good practice spots inside in the lee of the outer islands

As the sea was nearly flat inside the islands, we decided to head for the Outer Sand and Stanley Ledge after lunch. Students were excited to see some small swell creating pourovers on the reef and standing up into small, but surfable, waves on the edges. Calm winds and two-foot surf with lower wave periods created an ideal warm-up for the first day of paddling, and students were able to practice surfing either left or right while next to the rocks at different breaks.



Day Two's Surf – A Nice Warm-up!

After a short play session, we began the return trip to Jonesport. With the students' success navigating before lunch, coaches decided to increase the level of challenge for the group. Instead of making smaller crossings hopping from island to island, the challenge was to paddle from Outer Sand to Outer Ram, a 2 nautical mile crossing. Students plotted the bearing, estimated the time for the crossing and started out on their heading. Keeping a group together and on its' intended course during a crossing is important but can be difficult. An afternoon sea breeze had picked up, and some students were catching rides on wind waves. Weather cocking and surfing had the group a bit off their intended course but they made eyes on what was thought to be a beach on the southwest tip of Outer Ram. Needing a break, we stopped on what was actually the northeast corner of Ram Island. Surfing, an unknown tidal current rate and extremely limited visibility had our navigators glide past Outer Ram and Ram. Knowing where you are is the first step to successful navigation. Assuming you are in one place when you are actually in another can be disastrous when paddling in fog. Fortunately, once on the water, several keen students noticed their heading was off 180 degrees from what they expected. Calling attention to the fact that "something wasn't right", the students successfully rafted up and re-oriented themselves. Now paddling on the correct course, we shortly reached Moosabec Pass and made the crossing to Jonesport. "Trust your compass" was a take-away for many students who had previously not paddled with limited visibility.



The group apres-paddle

The Group

It happened that all the students on this course have long-term student-coach relationships with both Haris and myself. It has been a joy to share experiences with these students in Chicago, the Apostle Islands, Alaska, Maine, Baja and Isle Royale. It also happened that all but one participant was a certified sea kayak coach/instructor, with three being Level 3 Instructors and two being Level 2 Instructors (ACA). Several also have BCU training up to and including 4* Sea Leader training. Furthermore, four of the students had either worked as guides or instructors on various programs for GKC with a fifth planning to assist me (Ryan) on an upcoming Ocean Camp in Georgia.



Limited visibility navigation, rock hopping, surfing and

rough water landings were highlights of Day 3's
paddle

Day 3

Great Wass Island Preserve is such a fantastic paddling venue with myriads of small islets and larger islands jutting eight miles into the Gulf of Maine. On the morning of Day 3, students busied themselves planning a trip to Moose Peak Lt on Mistake Island. Still shrouded in fog, it was extremely important to dial in on the tidal planning and chart work. The swell height and period were slightly increasing and we knew there would be some good play spots / challenges at Little Cape Pt, the Black Ledges and the ledges surrounding Mistake Island. Half the group planned a route along the west side of Eastern Bay while others planned a route along the eastern side of the bay. Knowing of the play opportunities at Black Ledges we decided on the route up the western side of the bay crossing to Mistake Island for lunch.



The morning navigation challenge...plan a trip to and from Moose Peak Light and look for play spots along the way. We then headed out and paddled that route.

Navigation was key and two of the more experienced open water navigators in the group were assigned as "leaders of the day". Even when coaches attempted to cast a shadow of doubt onto their position, they were able to explain where they were and show the group members landmarks as the fog had slightly lifted a few miles into the journey. Reaching Little Cape Point without trouble, we decided to take a stretch and the group was once again able to practice their rocky landings in sheltered conditions.



Swell + the Black Ledges = Fantastic Rock Hopping!

Once on the water, we worked our way out to Black Ledges for some work on Rock Gardening. Keeping "one eye to the sea", reading waves, wave selection and timing is important to safe and fun rides on pourovers. From a coaching perspective, it is important to set up an area with few consequences. Paddling near and amongst the rocks carries inherent risk and we were fortunate to have a small day and plenty of spots to choose from. We were able to find a small pourover in which any capsizes would (and did) push the paddler into calm water. Adjacent to this spot was a slot in which paddlers could point out to sea, time their approach for when the swell washed over the slot and paddle into swell. A few fun surfs were had when swell would fill the slot and reflect back in the direction the paddlers were moving! Our third spot provided the most challenge of the morning when paddlers were asked to paddle a circle around a house sized ledge using as few strokes as possible. Many students made their first orbit in 40 to 50 strokes. With coaches encouraging paddlers to lessen the number of strokes by utilizing tactics of surfing waves on the edge and using a pourover to surf through a small slot, some students made their next orbits using half the number of total strokes! Rock gardening involves all things TTPP – technical (kayak handling), tactical (understanding of the environment & strategic route choices), physical (can you accelerate to catch that wave?), and psychological (paddling next to rocks looks and sometimes is scary) and is a good exercise for advancing paddlers to improve/test their skills. As the level of challenge increased, some of the paddlers chose to take more conservative routes as challenge by choice was

emphasized during the course.



Working it at the ledges!

Energy level dictated we leave our play spot and paddle in bumpy water to Mistake Island. One of the participants was asked (and did an excellent job) to put himself in the position of maximum usefulness as the rest of the group paddled through a slot between some smaller barrier islands and into sheltered water. Another rocky landing (with good use of kelp covered rocks) allowed us to pull boats out of reach of the flooding tide. After a short lunch break we were on the water and headed towards the most dynamic rock hopping spot of the day – the rocks and ledges at the end of Mistake Island. Plenty of confused water and larger swell increased the level of challenge as everything surfable was close to the rocks. In order to catch the wave, you have to be near the rocks! While some paddlers chose not to surf, others “tore it up” and there was plenty of bumpy water to work in!



Fog, Fog & More Fog. It's Maine, what did you expect?

Alas, it was time to return to Jonesport and we headed into the protected waters of Eastern Bay. Fog hung thick in the air and students were challenged to navigate while on the move. Stop to look at the chart and one of the coaches shouted out “don't stop paddling”. Developing both situational awareness and the ability to navigate “on the move” are key to leadership of a group. Everyone was dialing into their navigation and we made it to Jonesport easily. We settled in for the night and re-filled our tanks with burgers on the grill and plenty of good wine and beer.



Plenty of Smiles to Go Around!

Day 4

Managing paddlers' energy level is key on longer courses. For group members headed to the Bay of Fundy Symposium, this would only be the third of 10 straight days on the water! With a longer paddle on Day 3, we

utilized the morning for coach led sessions on tidal planning and VHF radio use. Fortunately, our house was less than an hour's paddle from a fantastic play and learning feature – Sea Duck Rock. Two ledges just south of Sea Duck Rock have a shallow bar running between them with but are surrounded by deeper water. As can be seen in the photo, at lower tides the shallow water depth and the closeness of the rocks causes otherwise small swell to funnel and build up into a surfable wave between the two ledges. 2-3 foot swell built to 3-5 foot surf and then dissipated as it ran into deep water at this reef break. Deep water outside and inside the break allowed paddlers to set-up, surf through the ledges and paddle back out in green water! All the students on the course were from the Great Lakes region where surf is wind driven. Paddling out almost always involves a battle into wind and breaking waves. Surfing through the slot and paddling out in deeper water (with no wind or breaking waves) was a real treat! Many quality surfs by students, a few swims and rescues, and some “high visual quality” rides by coaches had us ready to land for lunch.



Surfing at Sea Duck Rocks

As we paddled to Sea Duck Rock we talked about the options for landing. The windward side was exposed to 2-3 foot swell and landing would be an exercise with a higher challenge level. An option to land on the lee side was presented, but students who voiced their opinions chose for the windward side. On days 2 and 3 of the trip, the flat to small waves we had landed in allowed students to paddle up onto the ledge. A different approach was needed as landing on this ledge would require precise control while surfing and there was a high risk of boat and paddler being surfed into the rocks. One of the coaches demonstrated the technique for landing while swimming and then pulling their boat onto shore with attached towrope. The other talked the group through the exercise and concepts of the landing technique. We also discussed different approaches for performing this landing both assisted and un-assisted. The first four students chose to work on solo landings and did so needing various levels of refinement on the skill. After the fourth student landed, a “larger than average” set came through and the on-water coach moved the two remaining paddlers to a position further away from Sea Duck Rock. The larger set increased the level of perceived risk and the three paddlers decided for a landing on the lee side of Sea Duck. There were nice, but smaller, waves wrapping around the point and we found an appropriate spot to practice the assisted method for landing on rocks in waves.



Sea Duck Rocks – Rough Water Landing & Launching Spot

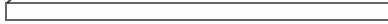
One student had not completely closed the bum zipper and had water enter her drysuit on the swim towards Sea Duck. However, she was properly prepared with a change of clothing and was warm and ready to go after lunch. The larger set of waves was a good reminder to stay vigilant of the sea state and “keep one eye to sea”. With that in mind, we kitted up and prepared to get back on the water.



SpeedLaunch(short)

from [Ryan Rushton](#)

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[SpeedLaunch\(short\)](#) from [Ryan Rushton](#) on [Vimeo](#).

With the boats of the four most experienced paddlers' on the windward side of Sea Duck, and the other two students still on the lee side, Ryan (the lead coach) chose to bring everyone over to the windward side for the teaching portion of the launching exercise. Ryan explained two different methods for launching the craft both starting with the paddler holding the bow pointed into the incoming wave. The first method incorporated clipping into the boat the waist worn towline, launching the kayak away from the rocks and swimming after the kayak. Once the paddler makes contact with the boat, they unclip and perform their self-rescue of choice to re-enter the kayak. The second method incorporates timing the swell and performing a "speed launch" to ride the kayak in a manner similar to paddling out on a surfboard (see video above). The paddler then scrambles into the kayak. The first method could be considered more conservative while the second more efficient, but more challenging as well.



Preparing to demo the rough water launch

The first paddler to launch had worked on this skill previously and I was confident he could demo good technique for the other students. He chose to demo the speed launch method and rode his kayak well away from the rocks. As he scrambled forward towards the cockpit, he slid off the kayak but performed a quick scramble to re-enter the kayak. The second paddler had the most efficient launch as he timed a swell, sat into the cockpit as the wave came over the ledge, and rode the swell away successfully! While it was the most efficient, it was not one of the two methods explained. The third paddler attempted the speed launch method but slid off the back deck of the kayak, swam the kayak away from shore, and then performed a re-entry once in deep water.



Hands On Rescue

At this point, we had one remaining paddler left to launch from the ledge. Attempting to use the speed launch method, the paddler had a rough time launching as she did not launch “cleanly”. Without much boat speed, her position ended up being too close to the rocks and an incoming wave turned her boat parallel to the break. The next wave capsized the kayak and surfed her back towards the ledge. A cardinal rule of boating in surf (if you come out of your kayak) is to keep the boat between you and the shore. Unfortunately, the paddler was between the boat and the rocky shore and the next few waves pinned her between a rocky shore and breaking surf. As it became apparent that she was struggling, I started moving towards the paddler and her boat. As I entered the water, she swam free from the boat and moved outside the break. I shoved the boat away from the rocks out to sea and swam to make contact with the paddler. Although dazed, she was aware of the situation and I did a quick “field” check for CSM (circulation, sensation and motion). Judging that she was okay to move, and I was able to help her re-enter her kayak while being stabilized by another paddler. The two other paddlers on the water joined us and we initiated a rafted tow. Haris had entered the water and I directed him to work with the crew on the water while I made the short swim back to the island.



The lee side.

Once back on land, we still had two paddlers left to launch. Launching after seeing an “incident” can be quite intimidating. As written previously, the two remaining kayakers were on the lee side of Sea Duck Rock in a more sheltered launch site. We chatted about the exercise and utilized some of the lessons learned from what had happened on the windward side. Both students launched by tethering to their kayaks, pushing them out to sea and swimming to their boats before performing re-entries. Having been joined by one of the paddlers from the other side, our group of four paddled back towards Jonesport. Aided by the flood and small following sea, we quickly reached Moosabec Reach and then turned towards Jonesport. Once in Moosabec Reach, we would have line-of-sight with the other group and tried to hail them with the VHF. They explained they were back on shore and that the paddler was doing “okay”. We set off to re-join them at the house.



Fair Seas on the way back from Sea Duck Rocks

Upon arriving back on shore, I checked on the paddler who was in good spirits despite some soreness and bruising. She also showed off some “war wounds” – a crack on her helmet and some good dings to her boat. The paddlers from the other group shared that they had been paddling back under two when some lobstermen noticed that “something did not look right”. The friendly locals stopped to check in on the group and asked if they wanted transport back to town. While the group could have easily paddled the remainder of the stretch back to Jonesport, they accepted the offer and half the group was transported back into town.

While rock gardening, surfing rocky breaks and practicing advanced skills involves inherent risk, any time that boats, kit or people are dinged should result in reflection and lessons learned. If interested, please read the [“Lessons Learned from Sea Duck Rock Rough Water Launch”](#) post in which I share a personal/coaching perspective of the lessons I learned from this incident.



Nearby Reversing Falls of Cobscook Bay – another delight of the Bay of Fundy

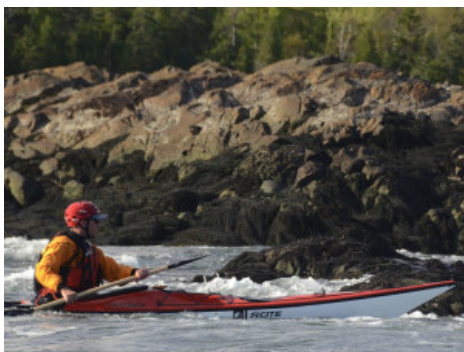
Day 5

Three days of open water paddling has us “jonesing” for a different paddling environment. Fortunately, a day of tide race paddling at the Reversing Falls of Cobscook Bay was only an hour’s drive from Jonesport and all the students had been eagerly awaiting this day. Unfortunately, the corporate world came “a calling” and one of the students had to return for an urgent business meeting. While our “hurt” paddler was in good spirits and “ready to go”, another one of the other students was shaken by previous day’s experience and decided not to continue with the course.



Reversing Falls, a Class II-III rapid that forms on both the flood and ebb.

The clouds and fog had lifted and the four remaining students and two coaches were in high spirits for a fantastic drive along the breathtaking coastline of Downeast Maine. Reversing Falls park is near the border of Maine and Nova Scotia at the mouth of the Bay of Fundy. We would have 18-foot tides to work with as we were headed towards spring tide. The “falls” are a Class II-III rapid which forms on both the ebb and flood as the sea is works its’ way though a constriction between the mainland and Falls Island in its’ attempt to fill Cobscook Bay. Six hours later, the waters of this 40 square mile estuary out through this 300 foot passage during the ebb tide. The narrowness of the constriction and ledges inside the constriction create a tide race / overfalls with pushy eddylines, standing waves and holes (features usually found on high volume whitewater rivers).



Nearly 20’ of water are gained or lost in 6 hours of ebb or flood creating whirlpools, standing waves and hydraulics to learn/play in.

We arrived just after max ebb and started to teach/practice on a small eddyline above the main falls. Most of the students had previously paddled sea kayaks in current either on their own or as part of one of GKC’s

courses. We utilized the gentle eddyline to refine maneuvers and take a conceptual approach to paddling in current. As the speed of the current decreased, we paddled into the main race and continued to work on skills/maneuvers until slack. Arriving on shore for a lunch break, we were greeted by two picnicking couples whom shared some of the history of Reversing Falls. Regaling us with stories of shipwrecks caused by the ledges and 30-foot sailboats doing 360 maneuvers on eddylines, we ate lunch with visions of bountiful treasures lining the sea bottom of Reversing Falls!



Assisted Re-Entry in Reversing Falls

from [Ryan Rushton](#)

02:00



HD

[Assisted Re-Entry in Reversing Falls from Ryan Rushton on Vimeo.](#)

The direction of flow had changed and we began working on skills at the start of flood. With water just starting to move, coaches challenged students to practice easy maneuvers “switch” – in reverse! Paddling backwards in current as a great way to increase the level of challenge when in slow moving current. Students practiced, played and worked (sometimes getting worked) in the ever-increasing flow as we paddled for the next four hours! “Features” constantly changed as water levels increased and coaches worked with each student on fun and challenging exercises. As the sun set, all group members made their way back to the launch site. With students now off the water, the coaches (who still had a bit of energy) stayed out for a little playtime. Satisfied with the day, we went to a local restaurant for dinner and drove back to Jonesport a “happy” crew.



The sun sets on our “fun day”.

Day 5

The sea matched our mood– chill. Tired from four days of intent paddling, we were happy for a slow morning and decided to paddle to the nearest place with “any action”. Back to Sea Duck Rocks we went and students worked on increasing efficiency of their maneuvers around the rocks. Both coaches and students agreed to practice the rough water landing/launching at the site of the incident from Day 3. Incorporating the refinements made from the earlier exercise, students successfully performed the landing and subsequent launch. While on Sea Duck, the wind speed had increased and by the time we were on the water, winds were blowing offshore 15-20 knots and gusting. Student leaders had were given the challenge of choosing a route which “required the least amount of effort” to get back to our lodging.



Returning to Sea Duck Rocks for more practice.

Once back in Jonesport, students and coaches dug into the task of rinsing gear and preparing for the trip home / to the symposium. Ryan and one of the students walked down to the harbor and purchased lobster for dinner. A feast of epic proportions ensued and we sat around the table for hours sharing both memories and lessons learnt from Ocean Camp Maine.



Fun, learning, fantastic paddling and a gorgeous seascape were lasting memories from Ocean Camp Maine!

Day 6

The air was cool and crisp as we packed our gear and cleaned out our wonderful rental house on the sea. With the exception of one student to whom we bid farewell at the airport in Bangor, we would continue to the Bay of Fundy Symposium and our days on the Shubenacadie Tidal Bore. [Read more about the Bay of Fundy Sea Kayak Symposium in this review.](#)

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About the Author

Ryan Rushton is the founding owner of the Geneva Kayak Center and has been paddling whitewater and sea kayaks for the past 14 years. Ryan holds awards in both the ACA and BCU in both the sea kayak and swiftwater rescue disciplines. Ryan has lead paddling expeditions in Alaska, Canada, Maine, Georgia, Florida, Wales and the waters of Lakes Superior and Michigan. In addition to his role as operator of Geneva Kayak, Ryan is a sales agent and brand ambassador for Tiderace Sea Kayaks and a member of the "Wrecking Crew" for Lendal Paddles. Ryan is a regular contributor to Ocean Paddler Magazine. In 2010, Ryan became a L5 Advanced Open Water Instructor Trainer and is a voting member of the ACA's Coastal Kayak Committee. Learn More at: <http://www.genevakayak.com/about-us-2/meetteam/ryan/>

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