

Description: The Patuxent River Park/Jug Bay Natural Area maintains over 7,000 acres of forest and wetlands. Approximately 12 miles of well maintained and signed trails reach all corners of the park. Trails are marked with white fiberglass markers with color coded diamonds and arrows directing the hiker. Most trails are easy.

Described here is a 6.3 mile circuit through open fields, forest and wetlands. It includes a 1.5 mile road walk part of which is part of the "Critical Area Driving Tour" and is only open to vehicular traffic on Sundays from 10:30 to 3:00. There is very little in the way of elevation change so 3-D maps and elevation profiles are not provided.

The hike starts at the Thomas Church Road parking area.

Trail Notes: With your back to the road pick up the old farm lane to the right of the parking area. It follows the edge of some old abandoned fields and is blazed blue. The fields seem to be abandoned but one is full of Jimsonweed (*Datura stamonium*). A quiet hiker might spot some grazing deer here. In 0.6 miles turn right onto another blue blazed trail (more of a sky blue) and soon enter the woods. Descend and cross a small stream on a bridge. In 0.5 miles from leaving the fields turn left onto the red blazed trail. This trail continues for 0.7 miles, following the edge of a swamp just prior to passing its junction with the orange trail on the left and arriving at a paved road (The Critical Area Tour Road.) Before continuing the loop I strongly recommend turning right and crossing the stout wooden bridge that crosses Mattaponi Creek and its amazing wetlands. Wetlands offer habitat to species not encountered on most hikes so is very unique. You will find a raised platform but the best views are fragmented in the summer. Better views are had further along the bridge as you approach the Merkle Wildlife Sanctuary on the far side (Dogs are not allowed here.) There are great views both up and downstream. You can see an Osprey nest on a platform on the upstream side. After exploring this area return to where the red trail came out and continue on the road (Considered part of the red trail for the next 1.5 miles.). The first 0.5 miles is under a solid canopy of beech and poplar. (Some of the latter are quite large). You'll eventually follow the edge of a corn field –all that remains of the Columbia Airfield, the first ever Black airfield in America that operated from the early 1940s until 1958. 0.9 miles after passing where you first joined the road you'll arrive at a large parking lot on the right – Selby's Landing. The small pier and launch ramp offers a panoramic view of the Patuxent River. You can clearly see Jug Bay to the north. The Critical Driving Tour ends here but the road is not frequently traveled and has a 15 mph speed limit and wide grassy shoulder to walk on. In 0.7 miles the yellow trail crosses the road. Turn right onto it. This is considered a sensitive trail and bikes and horses are not allowed. The trail descends to a somewhat swampy area (I think the long ago residence of beaver that has since dried up) and then climbs to a shallow ridge via a set of wooden steps. Once at the top you'll notice that the "ridge" falls away pretty quickly on either side of you. In 0.5 miles from leaving the paved road turn left onto the blue blazed trail you started on. In 0.3 miles cross a paved park road. Arrive at a junction with the orange trail in 0.2 miles. Turn right to stay on the blue trail. Cross House Creek on a bridge and in 0.7 miles from the orange trail re-enter the fields you followed at the beginning. Retrace your earlier steps back to your vehicle.