

# Circumnavigation of Inner Malletts Bay - A Dramatic Day on Malletts Bay

**Date:** 7/16/04

**Distance:** 12.5 miles

**Weather :** warm but threatening

**Birds:** Great Blue Heron, mallards

I'm sick of this poopy weather" said Margy on the phone as we conferred for the fourth time that day about where we were going to paddle the next day. For two weeks we had had a forecast of "Mostly cloudy with 30% (40%, 50%, 60% 70% - take your pick, it doesn't matter) chance of showers in the morning and then showers and thunder showers by afternoon. South wind forecast to be light and variable, (10 MPH , 10-15 MPH , 10-20 MPH - take your pick, it doesn't matter)." The prediction for the percentage risk of rain and wind speed changed 3 or 4 times a day, and there was no correlation between the prediction and what the weather actually turned out to be. One day we had a passing shower, another day gave us thunderstorms with hail and high winds. One day it just threatened dark ominous clouds all day, the kind that scare the bejeezum out of you, but it never rained. And one day dawned clear with a light wind that increased to 20-30 MPH by noon . The problem was that we just didn't know what to expect and it made a BIG difference if you were out in the middle of the lake and we had guessed wrong! Poopy weather indeed! Having cancelled out on two trips this week, one because Mark Breen, our most trusted weather man, told us there was a 70% chance of rain and storms all day when, in fact, it turned out to be sunny and beautiful all day. The second time we scrubbed was because the wind picked up from a gentle 10 MPH from the south to 20-30 MPH between the time we made a "go" decision and the time we were actually driving across Sandbar headed to Malletts Bay with kayaks on the car. Sandbar runs east-west and is wide open to wind and water on both sides. The wind was pounding the kayaks so hard we had to stop and tighten the straps holding the kayaks to the roof rack. One long look at the water and the clouds over Mt. Mansfield moving north west made us decide right there to cancel the trip, only to have the wind die down and the sun come back out by 2:00 PM . So by Thursday night we were tired of being pushed around by this poopy weather system that just wouldn't go away. We were going kayaking on Friday, one way or another. The only question was where.

By 6:30 AM I had logged on to the Weather Underground and checked the weather radar, listened to Mark Breen's "Eye On the Sky" weather report on Vermont Public Radio, taken note of the National Weather Service report from the weather radio, and checked our own anemometer. Margy called to get my summary. "60% chance of rain, 10 MPH south wind, showers and thundershowers likely by afternoon". But the south wind was already blowing 15 MPH and gusting to 20. We both agreed that we would head for the sheltered waters of Inner Malletts Bay , not far from home, and do a circle around the shoreline. The sooner we started the better. Now Margy and I have different definitions of an "early start" -- which we are working on reconciling. On this day she picked me up at 10:00 . Inner Malletts Bay looked like just a short paddle; so I was surprised when I

measured the distance and found it to be 12.5 miles. I was so surprised I measured again, getting the same result. I even measured a third time thinking I was perhaps using the wrong scale on the map, but I was not. The Malletts Bay shore is deceptively convoluted.

Malletts Bay lies just to the east and south of Grand Isle/South Hero. It is actually two bays in one and when looked at sideways resembles a snowman with a narrow neck and long nose. The head of the snowman is the inner and smaller bay. It is a naturally occurring bay with a shelf of shallow water around MUCH of the shore and a depth of between 50-70 feet in the middle. The land rises significantly from the shore in most places. The narrow neck leading northwest into the outer bay is about a half mile wide and 90 feet deep. The inner bay is one of the most sheltered harbors on the lake, near one of the most populated areas on the lake, Burlington and Chittenden County, and within a little more than an hour's drive of Montreal (there are roughly three times more people living in Montreal than live in all of Vermont!). There are more boats anchored in Inner Malletts Bay than anywhere else on the lake, and many of them are big (by Vermont standards). On summer weekends there is a steady stream of boats of all sizes, traveling at all speeds, moving in and out of the bay.

We had both been to Inner Malletts Bay many times. Margy used to teach swimming at Colchester Beach at the east end and I used to crew for a Lightning class sailboat that was anchored there. Our memories were of a lot of camps and houses packed closely together and constant boat traffic. Neither of us was excited about paddling this piece of Lake Champlain. However we figured the south wind would be tempered within the confines of the bay; with all those camps surely there would be lots of places to get out early if the weather forced us to; and we did not have to spot a second car.

We started and ended our trip at the Public Boat Ramp between Coates Island and Malletts Head. Despite the fact that it was a Friday, the questionable weather seemed to have kept the boat traffic to a minimum, a real plus for us. To the west we could see dark clouds building over New York State and very slowly progressing eastward toward us, but the forward progress was very slow indeed. As we left the marina and its many boats behind, but protected from the south wind by the land behind us, the first thing we passed was a shoreline rising sharply from the water along the east side of Malletts Head. This shoreline was beautiful. The spring time high water mark, a good two feet about the current water level was clearly visible on the steep rock. The water level of Lake Champlain fluctuates each year from an all time high of 101.89 ft above sea level to a record low of 92.4 ft. It is highest in the spring after all the snow has melted and lowest in late fall. The Lake's average level is about 95 ft. The steep shore soon opened up to a series of small bays created as much by small offshore islands as by the land itself. In the first bay campers from Camp Brown Ledge were busy learning to dive, swim and wind surf.

One of the small islands to the east of Malletts Head is called Cave Island, for good reason. It has several small caves carved out of the rock by the waves and water. It would have been fun to stop and explore, but we knew at some point bad weather would catch up with us, so we were eager to keep moving. We were also not sure if Cave Island was

accessible to the public or not.

The last and largest island off this shore is Marble Island. It lies only 150 feet from the shore of Malletts Head with cliffs rising sharply from the water. It is 2.75 acres in size and approximately 160 feet high at its maximum elevation. The entire island is declared "Natural Area" managed by the Lake Champlain Land Trust.

Back in the late 1800s the dolomite rock the island is made of was actually quarried. Evidence of that quarrying activity still exists on the rocks on the south side of the island. Mainly the island is covered by dense woods and extremely shallow soils. There are five rare plant species on the island. Kayakers and canoeists are welcome to stop on "Picnic Rock" on the north end of the island but because of the rare species, steep cliffs and shallow soil, are prohibited from the rest of the island. We were sorry we could not stop there for lunch or even just to enjoy the incredible view east and west but weather and time discouraged us. As it turned out there were three wonderful places to have a picnic lunch this day, had the weather cooperated. We think the only way to resolve such choice conflicts in the future will be to bring multiple lunches along with us so as not to miss a picnic opportunity!! (Have we told you yet that we love to eat and that paddling only enhances this natural instinct!)

By now we were far enough from the south shore of the bay that the waves were propelling us forward. Leaving Malletts Head behind us, we crossed the narrow half mile opening to the outer bay in no time and turned east at Red Rock Point and wound our way along the convoluted northern shore with the south wind and waves now hitting us broadside. We passed yet another island, appropriately named Beer Can Island, to the right. This island also has been conserved by the Lake Champlain Land Trust. It was the second great place to picnic. Unfortunately today was not the day to do so. It was fun rolling with the waves, and having them splash over the bow and side of our boats but it was clearly time to attach our spray skirts if we did not want to take on too much water. So we scooted behind a small house boat tied to a private dock to get out of the wind enough to attach our skirts, and then moved on, turning our heads frequently to note the progress of the dark clouds which were slowly working their way east.

The north shore of the inner bay is dramatic. The shoreline is wooded and rocky with an incredible number of little convoluted bays where the shore alternates between steep rocky banks and low lying rock and pebble beaches. The houses, which sit HIGH on the cliffs are not fully visible from the water, and there is plenty of land between them. Each bay brought a new view.

About noon Margy shouted over the wind to me that she needed a back rest. Looking at the rocky exposed shore we were passing, I yelled back "No". I think she was surprised because I had never failed to agree to stop before. She then yelled back "What about lunch!" Again I responded "No". It is not that I was not hungry or that my back was not tired also but I was pretty sure we were just one bay away from Niquette Bay State Park, and its friendly sheltered shore. I was the only one with a map this day, Margy having mistakenly left hers at home. In this situation in heavy water where it is difficult to hear,

and getting too close in kayaks is not a good idea, trust becomes a factor. When one of us shouts an idea and the other responds with what sounds like a non negotiable response, we have to trust that there is a reason which we would both agree on if we had the same information. Meanwhile our attempts to communicate over the wind reminded us that we needed to develop some hand signals for such moments.

We rounded the last point of land on the north side of the bay well off shore to avoid chop from the backlash of waves and then paddled north toward the pristine sand beach of Niquette Bay State Park. It is amazing to be able to find this kind of beach on the Vermont side of the lake with no one on it. It would not have been deserted had the weather been better. Established as a small and little used state park in the 1970s, it grew by an additional 290 acres in 2000 when the Lake Champlain Land Trust conserved the additional land and gave it to the state. There is an extensive network of hiking trails and in the springtime the wild flowers are exceptional. On this day we, and one fishing boat cruising offshore, were the only people present. Because of a little point of land to the west, the beach was somewhat sheltered from the south wind. We landed, got out of our kayaks and took both a well deserved "back break" and lunch stop! Unfortunately the dark cloud that had been following us all morning was finally catching up with us. It now looked very dark and very close. So once again, we did not dally. On a clear day, with no threat of storms, and we do have such days on Lake Champlain, we would have taken a long and relaxing lunch break. Not so this day.

Niquette Bay is almost at the most northeastern end of Malletts Bay and from here we would be paddling south/ southwest into the wind for about 3 miles to get back to the busy and developed south end of the bay. We passed some camps stretched along a sand beach just before we turned south. The dark clouds now filled the entire western sky, and South Hero and the outer bay had disappeared into what was obviously a heavy rain storm but we saw no lightning and heard no thunder. We paddled by the entrance to Malletts Creek the sole body of water feeding into Inner Malletts Bay. This exceptional wetland, the first 70 acres of which were conserved by the Lake Champlain Land Trust in 2003, has an extensive wild rice marsh, which makes it attractive to wading birds including the American Bittern, Least Bittern, and Black- Crowned Night Heron. It is also a spawning ground for many fish species including Northern Pike, Largemouth Bass, and Yellow Perch. This wild area is crossed at this point by I-89, Vermont 's major superhighway, and a major line carrying electricity from Quebec to Vermont. What a juxtaposition! We have so often driven over it traveling between the islands and Burlington, and now we were seeing it from the water's edge. From both vantage points, we could see several osprey nests on the platforms built for them by the power company atop the huge power poles. We desperately wanted to paddle up the creek a ways but the approaching clouds and the threat of deer flies in the protected waters deterred us. We mentally added Malletts Creek to our rapidly growing list of places we will paddle at another time.

Instead we hugged the eastern shore. Paddling hard against the wind, we continually looked back and forth between the approaching clouds and possible take out places along the shore. Short of seeing lightning or hearing thunder, we figured we did not need to get

out, if at all, until Malletts Head disappeared in the rain. We finally pulled into a small pebbly beach that was protected from the south wind by a small point of land. We did not get out of our boats, but rather turned them toward the oncoming clouds and rain and waited to see what would happen. If the clouds were bringing only rain there was no need to stop. We were already wet. But we were worried about a sudden wind burst and shift. We waited there as the rain approached until it became obvious that a wind burst was not going to materialize. We then set off again toward the busy and populated part of the bay. The clouds were spectacular, as was the view. From where we were we could see east as far as the Green Mountains dominated by a partially visible Mount Mansfield, and west to South Hero, which was now out of the rain cloud, and then New York State. The degree of visibility came and went with the rain clouds, and as the storm we had been watching all morning eventually passed over us and to the northeast we were beginning to feel more relaxed and anticipated a spectacular rainbow ( in the Frank family this phenomena is more commonly called a "rainboat" having been identified as such by our 3 year old daughter to her 1 year old sister many years ago. "Tink. Look, look at the rainboat!")

There was a very dark cloud to the south and east which we assumed had passed us, the last storm having traveled a common storm track from southwest to northeast. As we merrily paddled on commenting on the huge length of sand beach along the eastern shore, Margy suddenly said "Does that cloud look like it is getting bigger to you?" In fact it was clearly getting bigger and darker and had dark little fingers stretching part way down toward the horizon. And it was moving from southeast to northwest, exactly opposite of what the previous storm had just done! ( How can this be? Where is Mark Breen when we need him!) So once again on alert and eagle eyed, we paddled a little faster by a large marina and boat anchorage, around the south end of the bay and then north along the east shore of Coates Island. The cloud continued to grow and just as we rounded Coates Island, opening our view to the west and to the south where the boat access was, the rain torrents began. The entire bay was being hit by this rainstorm. Fortunately for us there was still no thunder or lightning; so we pressed on, knowing we were almost finished. This time the wind did pick up, but it was manageable. As we got close to our take out, Margy pointed out a very wet but beautiful great blue heron that was standing on a rock not more than 10 yards from us. Normally a heron would fly away to another spot along the shore before we got that close, but this heron was either conditioned by the large amount of regular boat traffic at this spot or just did not want to fly off in the downpour. He was beautiful and I was sorry my camera was confined to my waterproof pouch because of the rain. The rain stopped as soon as we got to shore, and by the time we had the boats back on the car, two other larger boats had been launched, the sun was out and our clothes were almost dry. Our trip around Inner Mallets Bay had totally exceeded our expectations. The clouds added a mystic sort of quality as we discovered that not all of Mallets Bay is congested and busy. In fact most of it is spectacularly beautiful. Once again we were reminded that the view from a low riding, slow moving kayak, is very special and not easily replicated in a power or sailboat. We do realize, however, that our attitude might have been somewhat different had the day been clear and all those many boats been in action.