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Paddling to Maclellan Island: A Guide to Accessing the Urban Wilderness in Downtown Chattanooga

By [Sarah Joyner](#) on **Jul. 26, 2023**

Smack dab in the Tennessee River between Chattanooga's bustling Riverfront and vibrant Northshore district, sits an 18.8-acre island that's easy to overlook. **Maclellan Island** is a refuge for wildlife and offers a unique experience for hiking, camping, and views of Chattanooga. And it's easily accessible to the public via kayak and paddleboard.



Paddling to the Island

If you bring your own gear, **Coolidge Park** offers multiple put-ins for accessing the river. If you'd rather rent gear, **L2 Outside** offers stand up paddle boards, single, and tandem kayaks with a convenient launch spot underneath Market Street's John Ross Bridge, right between Coolidge and Renaissance Parks. L2 Outside will gear you up with the right-sized life jacket, carry your craft to the water, and even give you a nice little push off—it's a breeze!

Depending on the weather and the river's current, it's a 15–25-minute paddle upstream to the island, passing under Walnut Street Pedestrian bridge along the way. The views of the city and sandstone cliffs beneath the Bluff View Art District from this vantage point will have you in awe your entire trip!

If the river's current is strong, hug the shore and check out Coolidge Park from this new perspective until you're parallel with the island, then cross over. Barges, riverboats like the Southern Belle, and more can heavily traffic this section of the river. So, stay alert and be aware of your surroundings as you cross!

If the river's low, it's easy to paddle right up to the island and pull your craft onto shore. After heavy rain this can be a little tricky, but circle around the island until you find a spot that works for you.



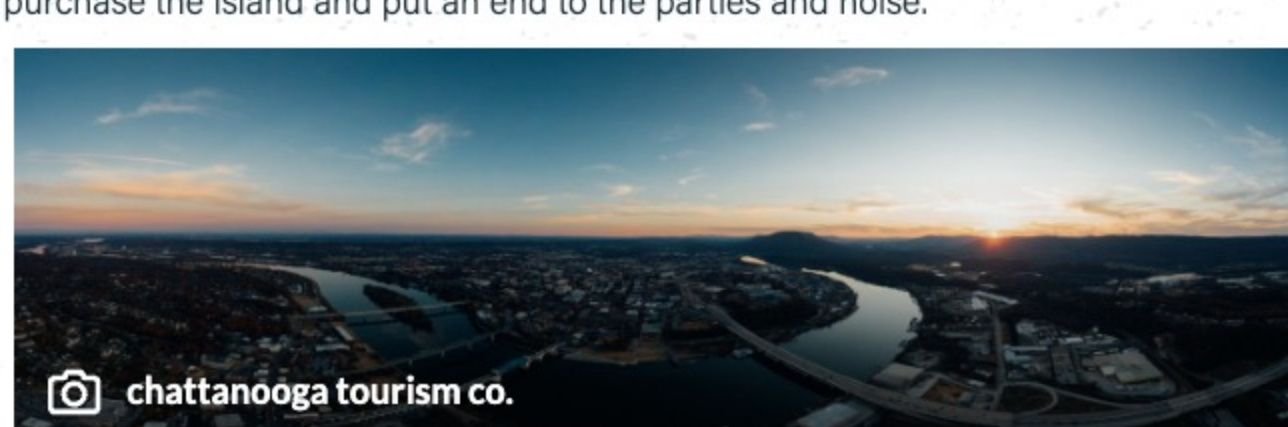
Exploring Maclellan Island

Owned by the Chattanooga Audubon Society, Maclellan Island is a nature sanctuary boasting a great diversity of plants, animals, and birds. Explore the 1.5 miles of hiking or **reserve the island's campsite** ahead of time. Fair warning: there are no offices or permanent staff on the island. The campsite offers a picnic table, bunk house, fire ring, and nearby toilets, but there is no electricity or running water. The island is an absolute playground for birders, with Osprey nests, a Great Blue Heron rookery, and many more birds like seasonal Cormorants nesting in the treetops visible from both the trails and the waters.



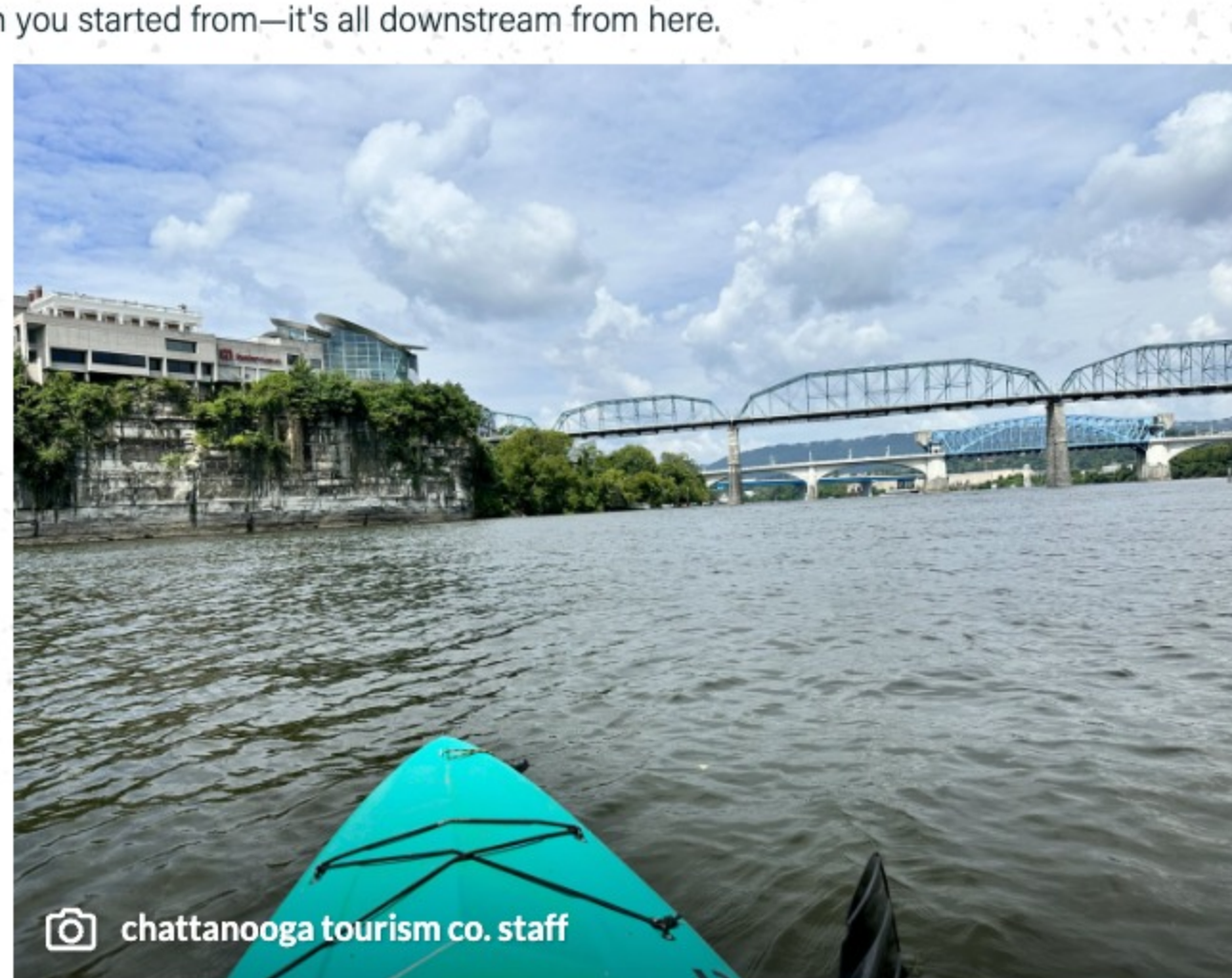
History of Maclellan Island

Evidence of human inhabitants and visitation on the island dating back tens of thousands of years have been discovered by nearby University of Tennessee at Chattanooga's archeology program. More recently, the island played a part in a swing ferry operation, as farmland, and a **popular spot for late-night parties until around 1917**. The neighboring "cliff dwellers"—families who lived in the neighborhood that is today's Bluff View Art District—eventually pooled money to purchase the island and put an end to the parties and noise.



Paddling Back

While you're on the water, take advantage of this new view and check out the sandstone cliffs beneath the **Bluff View Art District**. Paddle around Maclellan for a full 365 view of the island you just explored. Then enjoy an easy paddle back to the put-in you started from—it's all downstream from here.



Post Adventure Meal

You've earned a beer or sweet tea and a hearty meal! Now that you're back on land walk through Coolidge Park to grab some food and drinks on **Basecamp's** shaded patio! Take advantage of their stellar draft menu and gorgeous river views. We recommend pairing them with the Gourmet Mac 'N' Chz, BBQ Sliders, or Basecamp Melt!



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