

**KILLING THE CHESAPEAKE**

# **The 444 Club: Boating the entire Susquehanna River propels paddlers into another world**



beauty and navigate the dangers.

**Frank Bodani, York Daily Record**

Published 11:11 PM EST Feb. 2, 2021 | **Updated 11:11 PM EST Feb. 2, 2021**

*This USA Today Network special report explores solutions to deep threats that flow through New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland as the Susquehanna River feeds the Chesapeake Bay — with life and death.*

**T**hey paddle every mile of the river in kayaks, through chilling rain and lightning storms. They push 25 miles a day and camp on secluded shorelines and islands.

They want to experience the Susquehanna River in a way hardly anyone else does.

Their mission is to paddle all of its 444 miles, from Lake Otsego in Cooperstown, New York, to the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay at Havre de Grace, Maryland.

To paddle the entire Susquehanna in one trip typically takes about two weeks and includes navigating around numerous dams, unpredictable spring and summer storms — and even wildlife.

The [Susquehanna River 444 club was formed](#) to recognize those who have traversed each mile, either in one trip or in sections over time. The club works on the honor system, with between 75 and 100 members since it was created six years ago.

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The ever-flowing water fascinates.

"I love the river, it has my heart," said Meredith Holt Grim, who paddled it all with her younger brother, Nick Holt, in 11 days. "I needed to see the whole thing."

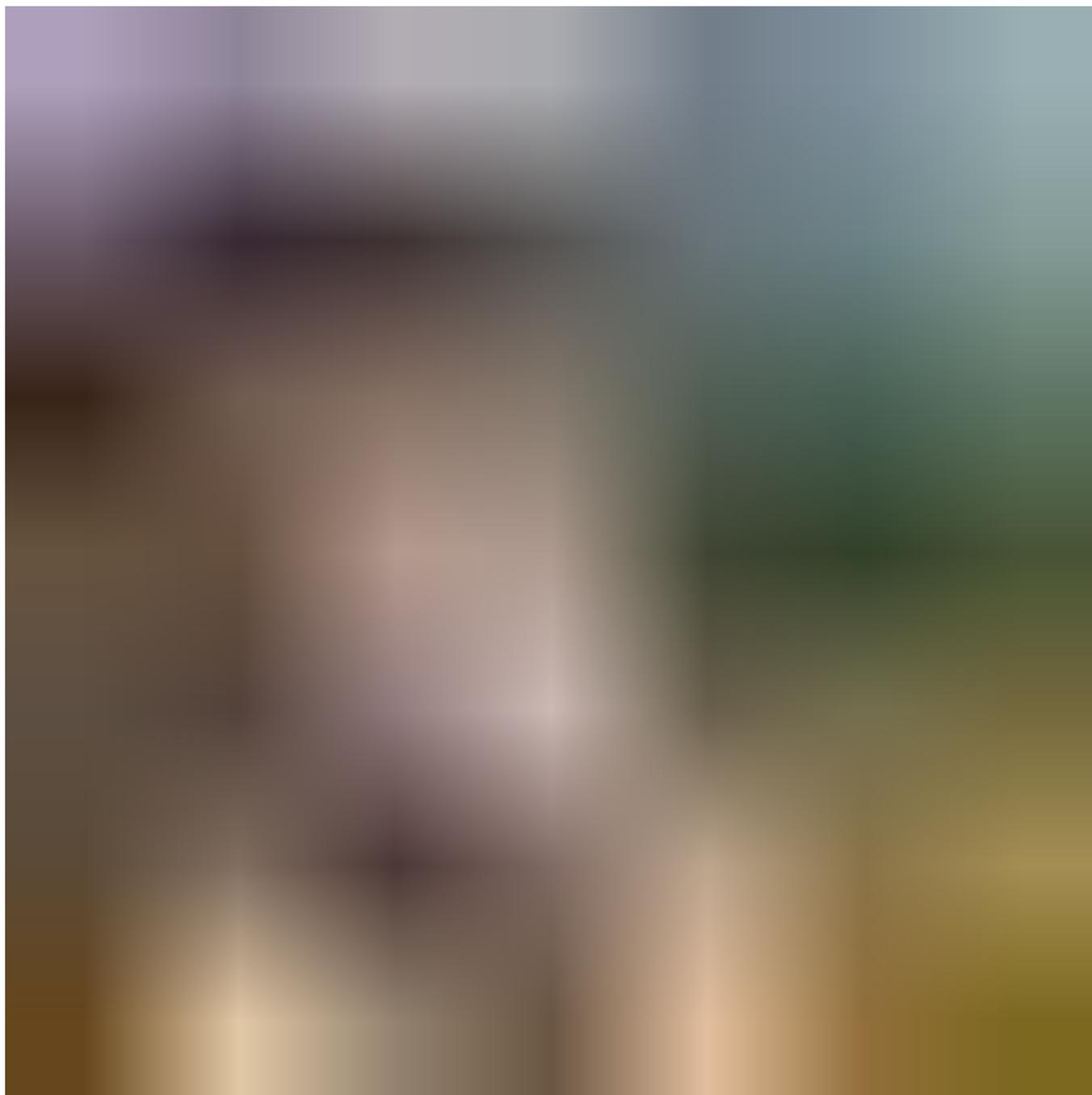
Grim grew up near the river in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. She fed her early river interest with a part-time job at [Shank's Mare Outfitters](#), a few miles away on the river's west side in York County.

Soon enough, she was determined to see it all in one trip.

She and others who have paddled the entire length of the river describe being transported into another world as they paddle one long day after another. They are joining the river and its flow, in a

They talk of being immersed in a view different from those fishing or walking its banks or even boating for a day in its deep "lakes."

Grim kept a diary of her trip a decade ago.



Dana Rockwell, 47, spent two weeks paddling all 444 miles of the Susquehanna River with a friend in the late spring of 2017. He said...

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*The sun was sinking. I was squinting, I was tired, and I was having a hard time seeing with the glare. I kept looking at the GPS trying to figure out how close we were to the dam. We were in town so I knew we were close.*

*Nick says, "Mere, I think that is it, just up ahead." I don't see anything marking it but decide to check it out and follow his gut. I am glad I listened because his gut was spot on. My mom would have been mad if I would have taken him over that (dam).*

For Dana Rockwell, 47, the most exhilarating encounter on the river also caused the most trepidation — paddling briefly with a 3-foot-long water snake crawling between his legs.

He discovered the slithery stowaway only when he felt it brushing up against his legs. It must have slipped into his kayak while he was taking a break along the shore in Harrisburg.

He and a friend covered all 444 miles of the river in May and June of 2017.

"You don't even realize that you're passing through towns. It's a remarkable adventure right in the backyard of so many," Rockwell said.

The wildlife viewing was better than he could have imagined — egrets, herons, turkey, deer and probably more than 100 bald eagles from the river's beginning until he reached the Chesapeake Bay.

At times, they paddled hard for hours to keep their journey on schedule. Other times they simply drifted, gliding along with the current and the pace of nature.

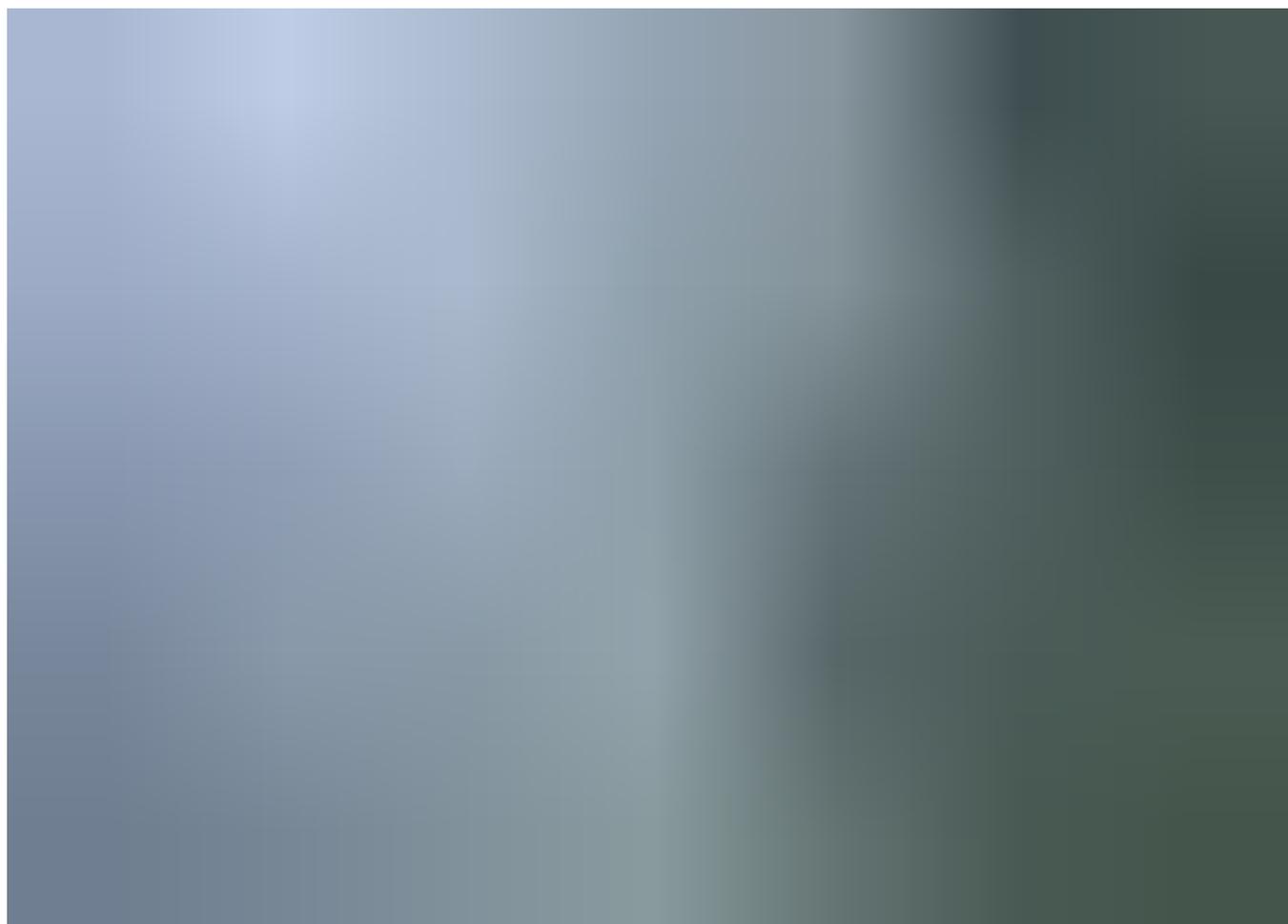
**You don't even realize that you're passing through towns. It's a remarkable adventure right in the backyard of so many.**

Rockwell grew up in Susquehanna County in Northeast Pennsylvania, a few miles from the New York border. He fished, camped and explored along the river for years, even paddled it for a few days at a time.

of the river from just a nuisance as a flooding hazard and a garbage dump to a valuable resource."

So he spent the winter of 2016-17 building his own kayak, the wood frame lashed together with waterproof Nylon. It needed to be long enough (19 feet) for stability, speed and comfort but also light enough (about 50 pounds) to carry on the portages around the dams.

He seemed unfazed that it rained nine of his 14 days on the water.



Meredith Holt Grim says paddling all 444 miles of the Susquehanna River in one trip a decade ago pushed her family toward a life of adventure and nature travel.

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He said he felt an unexpected, deep connection to the river when it was over. He was even more emboldened to help protect and promote river clean-up, especially after seeing acid coal mine drainage near Wilkes-Barre stain streams and parts of the river orange.

The experience led him to become a water trail manger for a 17-mile stretch of the Susquehanna

Day 5 ... Nineven, NY – Conklin, NY

*I found a series of islands on the GPS when I scrolled ahead and that was our target. We paddled between islands and found a perfect spot. There were deer and goose tracks everywhere. Perfect. We set up and grabbed a can of Spaghetti-Os and settled in for the night.*

*We had four dams in Binghamton to face the following day. No maps, so we needed to be aware.*

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## 'Totally immersed in nature'

New Jersey's Cathy Mumford completed her "444 trip" in the late spring of 2017, though she did it alone.

The 57-year-old mother of two spent 26 days reaching the Chesapeake Bay. [She told Men's Journal](#) about reveling in the "wild and remote" sections of the river — and the welcoming help of those she met in towns along its banks.

Several people in small-town Marietta, Lancaster County, helped her track down her kayak and gear, which were stolen during a break there.

"People talk about being in the moment," she said in the online article. "When you're out there on the water, you have to be. Your phone is turned off and you tune in to what's going on around you. When you're out for more than a week you feel totally immersed in nature. That's spiritual for me."



Meredith Holt Grim, far right, and her younger brother, Nick, paddled the entire length of the Susquehanna River in 2009. Their grandfather met them as...

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*Day 8 ... Mocanaqua, PA – Sunbury, PA*

*Up to this point, we had great weather. Only a few spurts of heavy headwinds, but beyond that we were lucky. I guess we were due and boy did we get hammered. I don't mind paddling in the rain and actually enjoy it, but this was a cold rain. The glass half full side of it says that the rain helped us move along a bit faster... or so we thought.*

*We stopped in Bloomsburg at a public launch and stood in the pouring rain, shivering as we ate our cold Spaghetti-O's mixed with goldfish crackers for lunch. The only thing on our minds was the tent and stopping for the night.*

Meredith Grim and her brother paddled the final six miles of the Susquehanna on a Saturday, from the Conowingo Dam to Havre de Grace and the bay.

Meredith's husband, Jason, joined along.

Her grandfather watched them finish.

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They were won over by the graciousness of park rangers and fellow paddlers along the way.

Since that journey, Meredith, 38, and Jason Grim, 40, have been raising four children. They have moved frequently with his U.S. Marine Corps work and have lived near the water in Hawaii, Southern California, Kansas and Louisiana.

"I'm in awe of all these (waters), but none have captured me the way the Susquehanna River has," she wrote in a recent email.

"Watching storms roll in over the water, the glassy look it has on a zero-wind morning, or listening to the ice cracking on a cold winter night from the Shank's Mare porch — it is my favorite work of art. Offering something different on any given day.

"It is powerful, it is peaceful, it is home to me."

*Frank Bodani is a reporter for the York Daily Record, part of the USA Today Network. Reach him at 717-771-2104.*

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### ***In low water paddle river right, count***

*- "How to Run the Rapids at Shocks Mill Bridge" written and performed by poet Michael Garrigan*



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