

Paddling: Keep it Safe... Keep it Fun

Chuck Horbert

When it comes to fun on the water, it is tough to beat a day paddling your canoe or kayak on your favorite nearby river or lake. But it only stays fun if everyone stays safe. Every year people experience accidents on the water, some fatal, that could have been prevented if the paddler had been aware of dangers or taken simple precautions. This article will focus on strategies for staying safe on most rivers, lakes and ponds.

First and foremost, always wear a life jacket. Nearly 70 percent of all drownings involving paddlecraft could have been avoided if the victim had worn one. Many of these victims were strong swimmers. Life jackets float; you don't.

On rivers, another common killer is a strainer, which is anything such as a tree in the water, an undercut rock, or other debris that allows water to flow through it, but not you. The way to avoid strainers is to always have control of your boat and always be aware of your surroundings. Be especially wary on the outside of any bend of the river, as this is a common place for trees falling into the water. If you find yourself out of your boat and headed for a strainer, that is the time to actively swim away from it or, if necessary, aggressively climb on top of it.

Paddlers succumb to cold water every year. Hypothermia can be an issue any time of the year, not just winter and spring. Sudden immersion in very cold water can incapacitate a paddler quickly, even before hypothermia can set in. If you enjoy paddling in cooler weather, or when the water is cold, dress for immersion in either a wet suit or a dry suit. Stay close to shore on large lakes. Learn, and practice, self rescue techniques such as kayak rolling or boat re-entry.

Other common hazards on local rivers are low-head dams, the most common dam type in this area. These dams are generally unsafe to paddle over, and must be carried around. Be sure you know the location of any dams on your paddling route. And when putting in below a dam, stay well downstream of the turbulence at the foot of the dam. The recirculating currents at the foot of these dams can hold, and drown, boaters.

Large lakes have their own particular hazards. Strong winds can blow you around, and kick up large waves. Learn how to trim your boat (i.e. weight, bow or stern) so that the heaviest part of the boat is pointing into the wind, to improve boat control on a windy day. Avoid taking wind from your side, as a large gust can blow a canoe over. Be aware of approaching storms and head for shore at the first sign of lightning. In winds over 30 M.P.H., a large lake can be even more dangerous than a whitewater river, especially if you are alone and far from shore.

Finally, use common sense based on where you are paddling. Don't paddle alone. Be visible to powerboats. Be careful in fog. Carry an emergency kit. Know your limits. Be constantly aware of your surroundings. Take a course in safety, because what you

don't know can hurt you.

Your enjoyment of paddling will increase along with your confidence in being able to handle anything you encounter.

Note: Paddling coastal waters or whitewater involves additional hazards to be aware of. Take the time to learn about them before attempting to enjoy these areas.

~Chuck Horbert is a former president of the RI Canoe & Kayak Association who has canoed and kayaked extensively throughout New England and Canada.

A basic emergency kit

Keep in small waterproof bag (also known as a "dry-bag") which should include at least the following:

- A spare set of clothes (especially if not wearing a wetsuit or dry suit);
- A small basic first-aid kit;
- Waterproof matches or a lighter in a waterproof container;
- A whistle;
- A cell phone (if you are in an area that has coverage);
- High-energy snack food such as a couple of power bars;
- Water and/or water purification tablets;
- A map of the area, especially if you are not familiar with it;
- Duct tape (it really does almost everything);
- A pocket knife or small multi-tool; and
- A small flashlight.

Additional safety equipment

- A life jacket;
- A throw rope;
- A spare paddle; and
- A helmet (if running rapids; more applicable to true whitewater).

Go Deeper!

To learn more about paddling safety and organized paddle events in Rhode Island visit www.exploreri.org.