

Basic Paddling Equipment

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Introduction

This rant assumes you are traveling by canoe or kayak and not by paddle board. The paddle boarder will have slightly different requirements because of limited cargo capacity and some items might be considered unnecessary. I break these items down into absolute necessities and handy extras. What you decide is dependent on weather, length of trip and isolation of trip. I also assume you are a relative novice and a more experienced paddler may choose other options.

You can find lots of detailed advice on-line from purveyors of kayaks, canoes and paddle boards. But it is too detailed and confuses the beginner with unnecessary details. This is NOT brain surgery nor is it even basic civil engineering. Just get or rent or borrow or steal some equipment and get out there. See my accompanying rant on Safety, Planning and Weather

Live Vests or PDFs

The Type III or Level 70 life vest is what almost everyone wears for routine paddling. These are good enough for all but the most extreme and turbulent white water, are commonly available and come in many different sizes and shapes. The most important factor is a comfortable fit that does not ride up while paddling and is well ventilated. You should not notice your vest while paddling. A comfortable fit ensures that you wear the damn thing instead of always wanting to take it off. A comfortable fit saves lives.

The water may be dead calm. But on one occasion canoeing with some friends on a mountain lake in Idaho, these experience paddlers suddenly went kerplunk and were quickly swimming the canoe to the

shore. What happened? We don't know. I imagine they both dipped in for a stroke, shifted their weight simultaneously to one side and suddenly they were over. The shore was not far and they were able to swim the canoe to the shore and get it swamped out. Despite a change of some clothing, they were both quite cold during the paddle back to the launch point. Still the life vest was an essential item in their ability to swim to shore and bail the boat.

Borrowing a life vest is a good option to see what works for you. Swap vest with others while on a trip. Vests are not cheap and knowing what works beforehand saves money in the long run. I have owned three or four vests and hated a couple of these. They often tend to ride up while paddling until my chin was resting on the chest of the vest. The back panel would often catch on the top of the seat and push the vest up even higher. Despite all attempts to adjust these vests, I just wanted to take them off. Further they tended to float up while swimming. This is a no-no. The vest should stay in place and raise you out of the water and not interfere with your ability to swim or aid others.

The vests that did work for me were comfortable while paddling and were easy to float in. On the Yellowstone, we flipped our 20' double kayak, Lewis, filled with a week's worth of gear and my wheelchair strapped to the back. Fortunately, the rapids dumped us out in a relatively calm but wide pool but with some considerable distance to shore. Eli, paddling the White Crow, came to my aid while Ms. J hitched a ride to shore on a third kayak. Having Eli pull the kayak directly didn't work. Quickly we figure out that having Eli paddle out pulling just me, then setting the paddles while I pulled the flipped kayak to me using the bow line worked best. This Yo-Yo maneuver worked well but it all would have been impossible without a good fitting life vest that provided me flotation and didn't obstruct my physical efforts.

Another characteristic of a good life vest is its use as a lifting device while getting back into a raft. If your companion reaches down, grabs the vest by the shoulder straps and pulls, the vest should pull you on up. If all your friend gets is an empty vest that is a big no-no. If the vest rides up into your armpits and inhibits your ability to help lift that is a no-no.

In our never-ending quest to blame near death on each other, Scott and I were paddling a medium size raft down the Snake River through the Class IV, Wild Sheep rapids. Scott in his infinite wisdom choose a unique path which was fine until a side wave rose up and slapped us hard flipping us in an instance. Scott clamber aboard and was slightly panicked until he found me calmly hanging to the side. In an instant he grabbed my vest and hauled me up. I will forgo relating my competing dubious route choices till a later date. But score one for Scott. But score one for a good-fitting life vest.

A good vest will have some pockets large enough to carry your phone, a clip for a knife and sunscreen. These choices are not important. Nor is color, although a bright yellow is my preferred fashion statement for improved visibility.

Paddles

The first time you go paddling, you will probably be handed two paddle half's and wonder WTF do I do with these? It most likely will be the cheapest you can buy. Over the years I've collected 5 or 6 of these cheapest paddles. Please note that this is entirely through pure stupidity. Because, despite meticulous planning, we brought everything BUT the fucking paddles and have to stop enroute at a sporting's good

store and buy two more. You will be the proud recipient of such a paddle. Is it the right paddle you might ask? No, it's not the ideal instrument but it will work just fine.

You may observe others with seemingly "special" paddles. They will be of the finest carbon fiber and weigh a quarter of the hunk of plastic and aluminum you've been given. People will covet these, fawn over them and mutter things like "my precious." I have a pair of these as, in our house, the cost of paddling is keeping my dear wife happy. And the price of some nice carbon fiber paddles seemed minor compared to divorce.

Slide the halves together and notice that the paddles can be angled. A push button allows you to rotate the blades. Start with the middle where the paddles are matched and symmetric. Try clicking them one notch one way and then other notch the other way. This is apparently to reduce wind drag someone points out. But really "how much drag can such a small area induce? Turns out -- a lot. But leave it dead center. You don't know yet what handedness, by which you will paddle, nor even what the term handedness means in this context.

By watching others and not wanting to look stupid you see them holding the blade with the curve to the back and any "droop" in the shape down to the water. Assuming that you are not a highly experienced paddler, your choice of paddles is almost immaterial. Your technique will suck and that will tire you more than the specifics of your paddle. Just go with it.

You undoubtedly will be a "Wind Miller." One paddle plunged deep and the other high and dripping water on you. And from the back it resembles a classic Dutch windmill. This is an admirable fault. You might also notice banging the side of the boat or cracking your knuckles on the cowling. And maybe your companion in the rear complains of the spray. Like swimming, paddling is an art form of motion, a dance. One day soon I will tell you how I paddle and why.

Some high-end paddles will come with crook for each hand. This reduces stress on the wrists and, for some like my wife, is an indispensable feature. But fear not, a short trip with a cheap, heavy, straight paddle will not cripple you for life.

Trade paddles and politely ask those with high end paddle if you can briefly try theirs. But keep it short. I guess it would be hyperbole to compare this to asking a new mom if you can hold the baby.

Practice with the blade rotation angle. You will find one rotation direction more comfortable. Note how you use one wrist to angle the opposite blade and then grasp the shaft firmly with the other hand for a powerful pull on a straight wrist. You then rotate the other blade straight for the opposing stroke. I use my left-hand for grasping the paddle and let my right-hand slip around as necessary. Your handedness is that which you decide to be the control wrist? (Or is it the one you decide to let slip?)

Once you get over the windmill jitters, get a little tired and are comfortable with the boat balance, try varying your paddle stroke. Forward, backward, pull in, push out, reach out, dig deep, twist and turn. Relax the shoulders and combine these movements. The objective is to look like it is effortless. We will not be "slobbering down the river."

Boats

God forbid your first trip is with one of the super cheap, plastic, rotomolded boats they sell in sporting's good stores. Every single stroke will send you spinning and, if the wind comes up, head for shore. These are great for dinking around at the beach or even fishing small ponds. Great for kids to play with but set a distance limit based upon their swimming ability. For long trips of even a couple of miles these boats will kill any desire to continue with paddling. But, unless you have money to burn, do not buy one at least new. I'd bet after asking around someone will give you one, paddle and all, or sell it for dirt cheap. The same goes for canoes although a canoe is much classier ride.

Canoes are great but don't paddle with your spouse until you both know the ropes. They are a sure path to divorce or at least counseling. Still paddling with a canoe teaches you a lot about how to use a paddle, keep your balance and how to steer into waves or wind. Don't pass up an opportunity to paddle just because it is with a canoe. I own an old Grumman aluminum canoe, the "Exxon-Valdeze", that I modified with a chair/chaise lounge affair that gave me back support and just got me high enough to paddle using a conventional kayak paddle. I could use my elbows and forearms to steady me in rough water. I also used it as the first prototype for mounting wheelchair wheels on a boat. These proved invaluable when an afternoon wind caught up with us in the river bends near Three Forks Mt.

Just because it's called a kayak does not mean you need to learn how to "roll" one. No one I've ever seen tries to "roll" a canoe. Whitewater rafting is a sport of its own but for us flatwater paddlers were just going to have to learn to swim for shore probably with boat in tow. Just use common sense and try actually swamping one on purpose. WTF does "common sense" mean anyhow, you might ask? Risk, safety and weather are subject matters for an entire article. Which I promise you is coming.

Kayaks come in a wide variety of shape and sizes. I currently have in my possession, as mentioned above, the Exxon-Valdeze canoe, as well as Sacagawea, a lovely 14' Pygmy (forgot model), current on permanent loan. It was too unstable for me. Lewis and Clark are 20' freighter class kayaks, Pygmy Cohos. They are rock stable and glide through heavy water with ease. Load capacity is near 750 lbs. You can still swamp one but you ain't getting a fully loaded 2-man kayak rolled back up right. And you probably forgot to hang on to your paddle so it doesn't make much sense to even try.

So, I recommend the Swim and Pull technique, don't try to tug the boat to shore in one continuous motion, swim out a couple of meters, stop, make yourself big and pull on the bow line. When the boat comes to you swim out again. Rinse and repeat. Well, the rinse part of it comes free of charge. And this maneuver is also how you judge the bow line length. I like a distance of about 15' of 3/8 or 8mm diameter cord. Smaller cord is difficult to pull on as it cuts into your palms. 15' gives you a good bite on the swim part but doesn't get tangled in your feet when you're trying to pull. But rigging boats is incredibly fun and deserves, again I promise, an entire new rant.

But back to the boats. I have a 16' Eddyline, on loan from my good friend Jon-lars. This is an excellent "lead" boat, as it carries about 150 lbs. of gear, and is agile enough for scouting. My boat, named the "White Crow", is completely white. I find it just a bit too tippy for me but Eli can swing the boat around and eddy out with ease. Then of course he has to give recommended paths. So, it takes a talent in reading the water.

I also own an Ocean Kayak with a drop-in electric motor. It is an older, clunky platform but rock stable for fishing. With the motor, you get the equivalent to about 2-man power of paddlers. This is the power you need to fight a wind and heavy wash without losing sight of your shoreline escape point. In fact, you should always have a best escape plan. Still the "A10 Hogwarts" was magical. It gave me the freedom to paddle the marsh lands from Hood Park on the Snake River and down to the Casey Pond take-out or down to Madame Dorian Park. Completely and fundamentally alone.

I also had an early 60's vintage foldboat, it was probably a "Pioneer – Foldboat." It was owned by a close neighbor and friend of my fathers; he was happy to see it used. But "He who paddles owns the boat." It was a double seater but short enough you had to time your strokes with the Bow paddler. It packed a lot of gear was fun to put together. Being captain on the lead boat down the upper reaches of the Skagit River, I got too far left and the boat was sucked up under some stiff overhanging brush. Flipped us faster than I can possibly remember. But we floated out the other end just fine and from a rocky spit managed to warn everyone to keep right. That is except for the next boat down. By the time we got our act together they were in the midst of it too. It was educational to see a boat do exactly what we had just done. While bailing boats and drying gear on a warm rocky spit, I remember apologizing to the Scout Master for being so stupid.

Choosing a boat is not really that complicated. If you're young and single then a 12 or 14-footer is a good choice. For a couple, a double kayak might do well but you may still prefer two singles. A major consideration is storage and transportation. Look on line and see what's for sale; you can probably find a good used one. If you are worried about stability then rent a few type boats and see what works for you. You will quickly find that your balance and paddling improve dramatically and what once seemed a highly unstable craft is now just fine. Indeed, most kayaks will be quite stable enough for the average paddler. I don't have torso muscles so I can't use my hips to balance the boat hence many normally stable boats don't quite work for me. If a rough wave tosses me to the side and I lose my center of balance, I will take a dive. Not a hundred yards out from the put-in on the Yellowstone, Josh flipped the 14' pygmy. It was a quick lesson; he made the rest of the trip without incidence. The objective is to get a boat and paddle. Worrying over the details of chines and hull shape and length is mostly a distraction. You can always sell it and trade up. Just don't get a short, plastic, rotomolded boat and expect the paddling to be a pleasure.

Transportation and Storage

Storing your boat and getting it to the water will depend upon your living space and your vehicle. I drive Ford Rangers and have a full roof rack equipped with two pair of kayak saddles. I use the regular ratcheting tie downs that I can find at the hardware store and mounted a couple of eyebolts in the front bumper for tie downs. The rear bumper has plenty of tie off points. For most trips, the boat is tied down with two cross straps and a bow and stern strap. These will need adjusting after a few miles as the boats settle into the cradles.

Unfortunately, every car is different and I cannot give much specific advice. Nor are racks particularly cheap but you can find plenty of used equipment on-line. There is not much to do but go shopping and watch a bunch of YouTube videos and figure out what will work for your vehicle. Ask others and examine rigs you find in the parking lot of the grocery store. Often the fundamental and most expensive problem

is mounting the crossbars to which you then mount specific kayak, ski, or storage racks. The key is to focus on the weak link and that is how the cross bars bolt or clamp onto the car. The stronger this connection point the more secure the entire system will be. Many cars will have a built-in rack mounting system and this should be a major concern when buying a new or used vehicle.

You then need to practice how to tie your kayak to the rack. Everybody always miss threads the strap buckles and many ratcheting buckles are so crappy they just are a pain in the arse. Don't wait to the day of departure to figure out the mechanics. Practice until you can do it right and quick. And when you find the right gear keep it together and dedicated to tying down the boats. Otherwise, you will be spending time looking for that second strap and have to make a trip to the hardware store for spare parts. Mount your boats the night before departure if possible. We have a two-rung step-ladder that turns out to be invaluable in rigging the boats onto the racks.

Alas, you will probably spend more time on figuring out transportation than you will in selecting a boat and paddle. But figuring this out is a major step in looking like a pro. Indeed, how badly you fumble with your rigging is one of the major things I notice when going out with a new group. Practice, practice, practice.

Clothing

What you have around the house for daily wear may well do the trick. No need to go out invest in lost of new gear. The main rule is to not wear thick cotton. Don't wear jeans as they get very heavy when wet. Tight woven, cotton polyester blend, Khaki slacks work well. Even a pair of dress slacks is a better choice than jeans. Tuxedo and Tie are always optional.

A long sleeve shirt is essential for both warmth and sun protection. Sunglasses are essential but frankly a cheap pair from the convenience store will do the job. Choose a dark pair that wraps around and protects your side view. Water shoes are nice but sneakers are just fine. A wide brim hat or a ball cap with a bandana is a necessity. In our old Boy Scout troop in Mukilteo WA, we were awarded an extra-large green and gold bandana after passing the tenderfoot test. The extra size made for a better head cover and made for a cool drape after soaking in the water.

When the sun comes out with a vengeance, the pros roll down their sleeves, hitch up their collars and pull their caps low. The novice dresses in a "wife-beater" and gets the most painful sunburn they have ever experienced. The pros applied plenty of sun screen back at the put-in. The novice fumbles around for a while finding the tube of sunscreen, haphazardly applying it in gobs all the while trying to keep to their boat straight in twisty water.

I prefer "capri" length pants rather than shorts or full-length pants. With the shorter length, the bottoms don't get soaked getting in and out of the boat and they provide good sun protection. Soak them down with the bandana as necessary. They are also warmer when a cold wind comes up and the sun hides behind the clouds.

I also bring along a larger dry bag with gloves, a woolen cap, a windproof jacket and a spare shirt or jacket and pants. You might skip these at first but if you plan to be going to be out all day or longer you need to collect this equipment.

Misc. Equipment

The raw basics are described above but you might also find a small dry-bag handy for short day trips. Heck you can use a heavy-duty zip-lock bag but they will leak after a trip or two. Sun screen, knife, lighter, phone, compass and a paper map are all essentials. Lunch can go in this bag too. A few water bottles are good and even disposable soda bottles will work. Just don't expect them to not eventually spring a leak.

Every item should have a way to attach it to the boat. You can for example duct tape some small cord to your water bottles and use inexpensive, non-climbing, carabiners to clip them to the boat. A good piece of woven 2 and/or 3 mm cord is cheap and easy to clip up for each item. A sharp knife and a lighter to seal the ends make quick work of rigging up tie lines. You may want some things on a short leash and others on a long leash. Paracord works but is not my preference as the ends tend to fray even after sealing and knots can become brutally difficult to untie. I run a length of 6mm cord around the inside of the cowling and keep a bunch of cheap carabiners clipped to it. This makes clipping in gear pretty straight forward. Keep the biners in the boat. Tossing a dry bag ashore to a mate might cause some cursing when they get clunked with a swinging chunk of metal.

Summary

Just jump in the deep-end -- with a life jacket. Literally, take a boat out on a warm day, in calm water and flip it on purpose. Swim it to shore and bail it out. Almost every boat you can beg borrow or steal will do the job. Almost every paddle either a single canoe paddle or a two-blade kayak paddle will work. Even a poor fitting life jacket, with some tightening of straps and adjustments to your body, will do the job. After couple of trips, you will know so much more about what works and what doesn't. Read my rant on Safety, Weather and Planning.