

Safety, Planning and Weather

Petyr Rieke, August 2025

Introduction

This rant assumes you are a complete novice and want to try paddling but can do little more than read some info on-line and you don't have access to any formal training. Don't fret it is not that hard.

Weather

Weather is your first consideration. You may have your favorite weather sites but I prefer [NOAA hourly forecasts](#). You will have to change your location. Pay particular attention to temperature and wind. On big water where the wind has time to churn up waves, winds over 15 mph can lead to considerable chop. Winds over 25 mph will result in white caps. Note the direction. The lee side of the shore will be where you want to paddle or make a quick escape to shore. The temperature should be warm but not scorching for your first paddle. Winter paddling requires dry suits or, at a minimum, wet suits. Hot weather will require extra clothing and water. Cover up and drink plenty of fluids.

For a big view of the weather, I used to go to www.wxmaps.org for the actual American Atmospheric Model results (GFS?) of the weather forecast. But this has disappeared, possibly for political reasons. If you know any similar sites, please share. This site gave a grand view of various sections of the world and I paid particular attention to the North American map. You could clearly see low pressure weather fronts that were coming down out of Alaska allowing the user to see what's coming. Meteoblue seems interesting but I have not ferreted through the menu enough to "see" the weather patterns. Unfortunately, I think synoptic (grand view) weather forecasts will become a paid subscription service.

In summary, knowing the forecast is your first risk evaluation. For rank beginners, pick a warm day with no winds over say 10 mph.

Physical Fitness

How long you can paddle without resting is an important criterion. And I mean without resting – one stroke after another. The weakest person on the trip determines this criterion. In nice weather, it is fun to raft-up, share a meal and drift down the river. But when the wind catches you and you still have two hours before safe landing, you had best be ready for that. An experienced paddler with a smooth efficient stroke can go all day but your average novice may well tire in an hour. Come hell and high water you can always escape to the nearest shoreline but you may not have any walking route out from there. You will be forced to wait for calmer weather.

One day on the Missouri, with only about an hour to go to our take-out at Tosten Dam, we were overcome by a sudden, afternoon thunder storm. I called for an emergency exit and we quickly set up a tent and lashed the boats down just as it began to rain hard and blow gusts over 50 mph. We could see

Tosten Dam in the distance, but there was no way to get there without a steep and long hike or an unsafe boat trip.

Another time, after an already long day coming down the Hanford reach, we were met by stiff but not serious headwinds. Two of our crew were paddling crappy rotomolded boats and instantly they lost forward momentum and were blown back up-stream. So, we literally towed these boats another 10 miles down to the Ringold Springs take-out. It was three hours of non-stop, full tilt, power strokes. Damn I was indeed tired but food and water taken on the fly kept me going.

Planning

Once you have a feeling for the weather and the physical fitness of your crew, you can then plan the trip appropriate to the conditions. Consider your first trip a success if you manage to get 10 minutes of paddling done. That first trip is more about organizing gear, getting everyone prepared and keeping them happy. With fussy kids or scornful teenagers in tow just making sure everyone has fun is the main objective. It's about strapping boats onto the car or truck. It's about not forgetting the essentials like PDFs and paddles. I must assume you remembered to bring the boat? But I too am guilty of forgetting the obvious. Indeed, our first trip out every year is about organizing gear.

If it is a non-family trip, you may not know the participants capabilities. It is an art form, but after decades of running logging crews, leading climbing trips and running week long kayak adventures, I can evaluate most people in about 10 minutes by simply watching them move. That wizened old woman may well kick your ass, but it will show by how she handles her gear, lifts boats and rigs strap downs. That strapping young buck might stand around with his thumb up his arse. Put him to work. Poor clothing choices are an obvious give away. Check in with each individual and scan their gear. Watch how they paddle. Are they "Wind Millers"? Can they steer the boat?

From these observations you can judge the length of a trip and cut the original plan short if necessary. An out and back trip from the original launch point is useful for evaluating a new crew. Paddle up stream first and turn around when your weakest paddlers begin to tire. On the plus side you may well meet some highly skilled folks who can teach you a thing or two or organize up for more difficult trips.

It took me years to train up young men and women, including myself, for more grueling mountaineering trips. Paddling flatwater is a walk in the park.

Route Planning

I will have a separate section on suggested trips along the Chiawana Water Trail. But on a big river, the main obstacles will be motor craft and their wake, distance to an emergency shore stop and distance to your planned take-out. Keeping the group together is important as many people will get anxious if left more than 100 yds from the main group of boats. Experienced paddlers will sometimes lose sight one another without concern.

While your phone might have wi-fi and google maps, these are difficult to fiddle with while paddling and often the screens are too small and you need shade to see the screen. Bring along a hard copy of the map. In the U.S., we have the Delorme Atlas and Gazetteer; this is an excellent map source. Just rip out

the pages you need and put them in a large freezer bag. Fish-n-Map makes excellent water proof maps that give a lot of information on water depth and hot fishing spots. Never-the-less a hard copy of the river map is easier to use and safer than electronic devices. And a cheap \$10 compass should be in your day bag. (Alas, I feel as though I am pissing into the wind. Many people rarely use hard copy maps and don't know how to read one. God forbid you should hand them a compass or ask how far they think it is to the take-out. Unless I'm buried in the twists and turns of a large office complex with few windows, I know which way is north. Someday I will rant on this subject as well.)

River crossings take some thought as you may well have to pass across a major motor craft route. Most of the traffic will follow a deeper channel in the river, so the region where you might cross paths is actually fairly narrow. Understand that most skiers, tubers and speed boats don't come out until 10 am or later and you may find it convenient to plan a crossing prior to that time. Observe the main flow of boat traffic and note the areas where the jet skis like to hang out. The fishermen are usually puttering along and are not a problem until they decide it is time to race back home. Choose a narrow crossing point even if the current is stronger. Remember you can hug the shoreline, make a quick dash across and be on the opposite shore in short order.

But in a worst-case scenario, a craft is headed towards you on an apparent collision course. Usually, they will signal their intent by steering to pass in front of or behind you. Respond accordingly by turning back or downstream or speeding up your crossing. They will get the message. The reality is most boaters are fully aware of local traffic, have no intent of harassing you and will give you a wide berth. Along the Columbia, the Pasco side of the river usually has less traffic as it is mostly on the inside bend of the river where the water is shallower.

In summary keep your crossings short and time them to avoid rush hour traffic. If someone does pass within say 30 feet of you at high speed simply turn into their wake and ride it out. You could also mount a 50-caliber machine gun on the bow and make a big statement.

What is Safety?

Safety is really about knowing your current limits based upon the discussions above and then planning a trip that extends you from your comfort zone. If you can't join a group or club, then start with a simple "test your equipment" trip. Choose a quiet area in your region. Along the Columbia River the shoreline along Chiawana Park in Pasco or the Yakima Delta in Richland provide easy access and quiet conditions. Work on your stroke. You can read-up on different types of paddle strokes. A good inside and outside "J" stroke is invaluable. And it is just what it sounds like; near the end of your stroke pull water into or push water away from your boat. This gives you a subtle steering maneuver. In reality, good paddling is about combining various strokes into what you need right now. Plan a "swamp and swim" trip to these same quiet areas where the objective is just to figure out how far you can swim a boat to shore. Having two boats is handy for these trials. Use the same quiet areas to experience high winds and learn how to steer into the waves. Finding and maintaining that balance point is an essential skill. Turn around and let the wind and waves be at your back. A following sea, as it is called, is a difficult situation and boats will react differently. A little rotomolded boat will be almost impossible to steer and my 20' freighter Pygmy boats take some muscular paddling skills to keep from broaching sideways. The nimble "White Crow" is a joy to surf a following sea.

Remember you probably have most of the clothing and other gear you need. You can buy, rent, beg, borrow or steal the rest. Unfortunately, the outdoor equipment industry makes you think that safety depends on buying the latest and greatest gear. No, it is about knowing the limits of the gear you currently own, the groups skill level and everyone's physical fitness. Still, it is nice to have a few key items on your birthday or Christmas wish list. Read my rant on basic paddling equipment.