

FAQ – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (ABOUT GETTING STARTED IN THE SPORT OF PADDLING)

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River running is a fun and dynamic activity that we all love to do. Many of us have taken a winter break from paddling and so before spring it is prudent to think about all those decisions we have to make before we put on a river. Here are some thoughts to help you out. Think of this as a quiz if you like.

How do I know if it is legal to run a river?

In Kansas the Missouri, Kansas and Arkansas (if it has water in it) rivers may be run legally. For all other river it depends on whether the river runs through private property. In such cases you will need landowner permission. The law varies from state to state.

Does being unprepared for the river affects anyone besides me?

Yes! If you are boating with a group, whatever you do affects the whole group. If you are poorly prepared, the whole group suffers. As an example, if you become ill through some environmental cause such as hypothermia due to you not being prepared for cold weather, the rest of group may have to stop to warm you up or paddle quickly to the take-out. Being ill prepared will not only disrupt your river trip, it will disrupt everyone else's trip as well.

Do I need to know how well prepared other paddlers in my group are?

Yes! Once you leave the riverbank it is often difficult to summon help quickly, you are basically a self-supporting group. Remember you will be the one helping them out if there are problems and if your group is ill prepared, there are more likely to be problems.

Is it safe to boat alone?

There is an element of risk in any paddling and boating alone just increases the risk. You need to think about the kinds of problems you are likely to have when boating and then decide if you wish to accept that risk. On flatwater I always try to have at least one (and preferably two) persons with me. I never run whitewater alone. Here I prefer a larger group since potential problems can be more difficult to handle.

How are rivers classified?

Rivers are classified from I through VI with increasing difficulty. Here are brief descriptions of the first three classes.

Class I: Easy. Fast moving water with riffles and waves. few obstructions, easily missed.

Class II: Novice. Straightforward rapids with wide, clear channels which are evident without scouting. Occasional maneuvering may be required, but rocks and medium sized waves are easily missed by trained paddlers.

Class III: Intermediate. Rapids with moderate, irregular waves which may be difficult to avoid and which can swamp an open canoe. Complex maneuvers in fast current and good boat control in tight passages or around ledges are often required. Scouting is advisable for inexperienced parties. For more detail on this classification, check out: <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/safety/> then click on 'Safety Code'. If you have not read this safety code, it is really important that you check it out. It gets across the dangers inherent, and the risks you decide to take, in paddling.

How do I learn to paddle?

Whether you want to learn to canoe, kayak or row a raft, the most important thing early on is to take a lesson from someone who is qualified to teach the skill. In this newsletter there are classes advertised for canoe and kayak skills.

If I am scouting out a river, what should I look for?

Is the river regulated by any state or federal agency – do I need a permit? Check out the put-in and the take-out. Make sure you will recognize the take-out from the river. What is the water flow on the river? Is it high or low? What is the water temperature? Check out the class of rapids. Are there any weirs or low head dams? Are there any known strainers? Talk to someone who has run the river recently.

How do I decide if my skill level is right for a certain river?

Seek information on the river- especially the class of the rapids. If the river is class II and you have paddled lots of class II your next step is to look in more detail at the river and talk to people who have ran it.

How do I decide if my group is qualified to run a river?

Here are some red flags, which should give you second thoughts about running a river with a given group.

- 1) You are scheduled to do a class III river and the best paddlers in your group have only just graduated to class III – this is not a strong group.
- 2) You are about to get on a class II river and no one has a throw rope or any other river rescue gear.
- 3) The water temperature is 50 F and some of your group are wearing T-shirts.
- 4) Some of your group are using their lifejackets as cushions to sit on.
- 5) No one in your group has run the river and you have no info on the river.

What are the purposes of the “Lead and Sweep” boats?

The lead is usually someone who is familiar with the river you are running and has the skill to run it in a safe manner. No boat should get ahead of the lead boat. The sweep boat is the last boat of the group. This boater should also be a good paddler and should be well versed in river rescue. The slowest paddler determines the speed at which the group moves down the river. If the group starts to get spread out the boats near the front need to slow down and wait for the boats in the rear.

What should I do if I swim?

If you swim in current, keep your feet up to prevent foot entrapment, and have your feet pointing downstream to fend off rocks. In this position you are on your back with your head upstream. Get upstream of your boat and, if possible, hang onto your paddle. Look for a safe eddy and ferry into it using a backstroke.

When do I need to wear a helmet?

Short answer – any time there is the possibility of bumping your head. Long answer – if you intend to roll your kayak or canoe (even on flat water), consider wearing a helmet. If you intend to run whitewater in a kayak or canoe you most definitely should be wearing a helmet. While the chances of bumping your head in a raft are less likely you should also consider a helmet here, especially on the more difficult technical runs.

What clothing should I wear?

Here you need to consider the air temperature, water temperature, and possibility of precipitation. You also need to decide how susceptible you are to the cold. When the water temperature is less than 50 degree F., a wetsuit or drysuit is strongly recommended. A layer of polypropylene may also be needed. Steer clear of cotton. Immersion in cold water rapidly weakens you. For water above 50 F you need to decide if you need to take such precautions or whether light paddling jacket and pants is necessary. For cooler air temperatures but warmer water you may opt for a light waterproof paddling jacket and pants.

What extra clothing should I bring?

This is determined by conditions (water, air temp, possible precipitation) and how long you will be out. Unpredictable changes in weather are possible. On a warm day on the Arkansas River in CO it is possible to have a sudden cold rain shower. Without an extra outer waterproof layer you would, at the least, be very uncomfortable.

What gear do I need to bring with me?

A life jacket that is worn and fully fastened. A spare paddle. Also consider the following. River rescue gear (throw rope, carabineers, prussiks) – bring enough to set up a z-drag. If you are on more difficult whitewater, bring enough gear to set up two z-drags and make sure each boat has a throw rope. It's NOT enough to just bring the gear. Make sure you know how to use it. There are dangers inherent in running rivers and further dangers in using river rescue gear. A class in river rescue will educate you in river rescue skills and alert you to risks associated with this equipment. One is offered in this newsletter.

What about hygiene?

For an overnight trip set up a hand wash close to your toilet set-up. Remind the group to wash their hands after using the toilet system. Before any meal or food preparation, make sure you wash your hands. It is no fun being out on the river 'roughing it' and being ill.

Is there any other gear I might need?

Yes, A partial list includes Sunblock, drinking water, sunglasses with keeper strap, snacks, and a trashbag.

Do I need a first aid kit?

Yes! The longer and/or more difficult the river section is, the larger the first aid kit you need. Make sure it is waterproofed and secured in your boat. There are a range of first aid kits sold at outdoor stores. Of course you need to know how to use the items in the kit. The American Red Cross and the American Heat Association offer basic first aid and CPR classes. You can search the web for a class near you. Such classes are often taught at a local technical college.

What is the most dangerous part of my river trip?

Often, it is the drive to and from the river. Make sure you don't drive while extremely fatigued. Make sure your load is adequately secured.

The Kansas Paddler website at <http://www.tfsksu.net/~tjhittle/> is a great place to get more info. Look under 'trips, events, & float tips' for more information on many of the above subjects.