

COLD-WEATHER PADDLING

By Kevin Estela

Canoeing and kayaking are activities generally reserved for the summer. The adventurous may dare the spring runoff in pursuit of bigger rapids and early fall is a more relaxing and popular time for others to see changing foliage from the water. Late fall, winter, and early spring are times not generally associated with boating given the hypothermia and exposure risks. While the following isn't advised for everyone, advanced avid boaters need not hang up their PFD or spray skirt just because it is snowing. Cold-weather paddling is possible and relative safety can be assured if you follow certain guidelines.

1. KNOW YOUR LIMIT Warm-weather paddling does not translate directly to cold-weather. The harmless splash or pour over from summer-river running can be detrimental over time in colder weather. You need to accept the reality of what you are about to do. There is no room for mistakes and even though this time of year is great for observing nature, you have to be on your game at all times. Knowing your limit includes accepting winter canoeing and kayaking may simply not be for you. Ignoring the fact or inflating your ability is a recipe for disaster.

2. BE PREPARED FOR THE WORST CASE SCENARIO What is the worst case scenario you can think of? Capsizing? Springing a leak? Losing some important gear? By playing the what if game, you can better prepare for the remote possibility of this happening. I generally keep a kit handy for starting a fire (without much fuel) that can be used



The author solo canoeing in the Adirondacks.



When carrying a heavy load, it is important to make sure the trim is correct. Disperse weight evenly and prevent the bow from lifting up out of the water.

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The author's weekend camping load out. Note the closed foam pad used to insulate from the cold.





Paddle in with warm weather, paddle out with? In a pinch, an overturned canoe provides an expedient shelter.

in conjunction with a space blanket to recover from accidental immersion.

Remember, if you do need to warm yourself, remove your clothes and wring out as much water as possible. Dry out the lightest layer first. Keep moving and be thankful if you packed wool as it will retain its insulation qualities even when wet. Open the chemical hand warmers to help the process and put them near your kidneys, armpits, and groin. Sit on top of your pack or on top of a sleeping pad.

3. OUTFIT YOUR BOAT The water you're paddling on may be a few degrees north of freezing. Given the speed conductive heat loss happens, you need to insulate your boat. Thin layers of closed foam, old sleeping pads, even mouse pads hanging

around the office can help keep you from being a thin layer of plastic or fiberglass away from cold water. Also consider equipping your boat with a bailing device and sponge. If you are able to self-rescue and return to the boat, you want it to be water free as quickly as possible. Finally, make sure to pack essential equipment in floating bags. If you are unable to self-rescue, you can use the packs as a makeshift raft to help you stay afloat as you swim to the nearest shore to warm up.

4. ACCIDENTAL DRIPS HAPPEN When canoeing or kayaking, you must accept the fact your paddle will drip on you and your gear. Minimize this by paddling slower and more deliberate. Your paddle should create almost no disturbance in the water when placed properly at the

“catch” portion of the stroke. It may create a small whirlpool during the “mid-pull” and again no disturbance on the “release” and “recovery.” Bad form is the culprit in accidental drips. In the summer, these drips are an inconvenience. In the colder weather, the drips become part of a larger problem when water forms on gear necessary for warmth, when wet clothes distract you, and when water dripping on your hands prevents full dexterity and grip strength necessary for paddling.

5. START SMALL When you first try cold-water paddling, start with short trips. Try paddling close to shore and begin with day trips. There is no reason to tempt fate by advancing right to overnight trips on your first outing. Remember, in the colder weather,



you're carrying more equipment to stay warm. A pair of boots instead of water shoes, pants instead of shorts, the extra clothing you wear will add pounds to your boat and will affect its performance. Start slowly and start small.

6. TEST YOURSELF FIRST It is easy to say you will be able to swim to shore if immersed. It is easy to say you will be able to warm yourself. Have you ever been in near freezing water? Have you ever tried making a fire after submerging your hands in ice water for minutes before? Unless you test yourself, your understanding of your ability will only be theoretical. Seek professional supervision and test your limits. Learn how to use the Heat Escape Lessening Position (H.E.L.P.) if you feel you can't swim further and are awaiting rescue. Know your limits before you are surprised by your limits.

7. EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED I've been on plenty of canoe trips where it was mid 60 degree weather on the way in, and snowing on the way out. Other times, I've been able to paddle in easily but was forced to crack through a thin layer of ice on the paddle out. Summer routes normally unobstructed may be damned thanks to the winter anticipation of the local beaver. Also, while your skills may be up to par, those of your group may not be. An accidental cold-water immersion can be a trip ender and you must be prepared to call your trip early. This is usually not the case in the summer. Expect the unexpected.

Slow, steady and deliberate action is ultimately the key to successful canoeing and kayaking. Learning how to use watercraft in all seasons helps make you a more well-rounded outdoorsman or outdoorswoman. With careful planning and presence of mind, cold-weather paddling will give you a new perspective on the outdoors during a season traditionally admired from foot paths exclusively. With cold weather coming, reconsider hanging up your PFD and try your hand at some late season paddling. ⚓



Fall weather can be very mild. This is the view from the author's canoe on a completely still lake.



Have your immersion kit items ready in case of accidental capsizing. Here is the author's fire kit along with an AMK emergency bivy and pack towel.

