

River Safety Guidelines

By Kirk Eddlemon (formatted by jtkcanoes)

1. Don't run a drop blind, EVER. The one time you do may be the last.
2. Rivers and creeks change constantly. I have done multi runs in a day where things have changed in a critical way. Never assume something is good because it was last time. Rivers are forever dynamic places.
3. Practice walking rapids, even though you can run them. Never run a drop just because you want to run everything on the run, and if you would walk it then you wouldn't have. Walking is healthy for the soul and makes you feel smarter and wiser.
4. Take a swift water safety course annually. It's not the techniques but the modes of thinking that will benefit you the most. ANNUALLY
5. Boat with people you trust. Some people can't even throw a rope. Know who should be watching your back and who isn't worthy.
6. Learn river communication techniques and make sure these are always congruent and implemented. Let's go over some. Paddle raised in normal hand position overhead – Stop. Paddle raised vertical – come in this direction. Tap palm of hand to helmet – I'm okay.
7. Class 5 is relative. There are people who think the Gauley and Tallulah are solid class 5 runs. There are also people who think the Green River Narrows is class 4 with sunshine and gorilla being easy 5's. Consult many sources to formulate an opinion on a run. Trust most the people you paddle with and the paddlers that know your skill sets well. Many class 5 big water boaters would get eaten on a class 4 creek, whereas many class 4 creek boaters might have a bad day on the Gauley. Every river and rapid is different, so don't let a number or letter or whatever tell you too much about something you have never seen.
8. There are old boaters and there are bold boaters, but there are no old bold boaters. There's a reason.
9. Accurately assess yourself before every run. You may have certain things in your physical and mental life at the time that could impede your judgment and execution of moves.
Example: hangover, you have already boated for 10 straight days, broke up with girlfriend, etc.
10. Anytime the run is isolated and may require full commitment, make sure your skills are a notch above the run's character. If you get into any trouble on an isolated run, you could be in for a serious situation. Be honest with your guides and the guides should accurately depict the day's whitewater. Know the hike out routes and possibly carry a map and compass so the routes will be found if necessary. Also consider not taking as many unnecessary risks as you would if you were roadside. You should plan on walking rapids that are not worth the risk of a thirty minute rescue. Keep track of time and inflate the times estimated to complete a section of river. There are always unexpected delays, so just don't add unnecessary ones.

River Safety Guidelines

11. On high water... If you don't know the run, don't get on it at high water. There may not be any eddies above class 6 and mandatory portages and you will die. When running high water, consider using an extra buoyant PFD, one that will keep you afloat in the most turbulent conditions. The typical PFD's used today may not be sufficient. High water completely changes a run. There is some formulaic reasoning to the changes, but until you are adept at predicting the changes high water induces, don't learn the hard way. Finally, the worst thing you can do in high-water is to take swim. Don't swim floodwaters. Have a super solid roll. Many flooded runs may be easy, but are class 5 simply because a swim would be the end. Think about this: Watch out for trees running the river with you.

12. Equipment: Do not creek in playboats. Creek in creek boats. One man's creek is another man's river. Here are some borderline creek/river: Russell Fork, Watauga, LRC Suicide, Upper Yough, Tallulah. If you are running these runs in a playboat, then you better be damn good and you still are taking an excessive risk. If in doubt, then use a creek boat. Any runs creekier than these mandate a creek boat. Any runs less creekier are fine in a playboat. Some say paddle what you are comfortable, while others say it's better to be in a creekboat you don't know on a creek, than in a playboat you know well on a creek. Creekboats are designed to stay on the surface and be easy to get out of. Playboats are designed to go under the surface and are very difficult to get out of. Use this definitive explanation to apply to any specific river decision.

Corran Addison suggests being able to get out of your boat without using your hands. This is a good idea, though it can be difficult to attain. This does imply that a skirt should be easy to remove. Inspect them often to insure grab loop durability and always leave the grab loop outside the cockpit.

Helmets: being on the river is not about style so get a full coverage helmet that protects the forehead, temples and back of head. Get one that can take many hits over and over before the structural integrity of the lid is compromised. Face cages are a good idea too.

13. Winter gear: If you don't have sufficient gear to keep you warm, then don't go. You will be a burden to everyone else, and that is not fun.

Food & Water: Bring adequate nutrients and sustenance, especially on overnights. Always bring water, ALWAYS.

Rescue Gear: If you don't know what these are, take a SWR course and you will. Always have these available in your boat: 2 carabineers, 2 prusiks, 2 pieces of webbing, pulleys are optional but are nice, and a ROPE. Ropes break. Inspect them for frays and wash them free of dirt with every use. On creeks, a rope of 40-50 feet will do, but on big water, 70 footer is nice. Belt worn ropes are good; just make sure they are not going to be a snare hazard. Know how to take it off.

River Safety Guidelines

Knife: If you have a rope, have something to cut it with. Simple Blunt ends can help with freeing tight knots, and don't use a double edge. Size: the smaller the better. You don't need a big knife. I prefer lock blades as opposed to sheath knives. A serrated edge makes the knife much more useful as well.

Whistle: This always comes in handy when least expected.

First aid kit: These fit nicely into a Nalgene bottle. Matches are nice to have, emergency blanket, bandages, gauze, tape, drugs, etc.

Don't assume someone else will have these things. Their boat may be the one under the rock.

14. When on a run no one knows, never boat past the last seeable eddy. It is better to spend the night in a gorge than under a rock or tree. Look at the type of run and the typical size of eddies and see to it that your group is not getting bunched up and crowding in the eddies. Have an official lead and sweep, and consider rotating this position among all the eligible paddlers in the group. Pick out the weaker paddlers in the group and assign more competent partners. If the size of the group is excessive, then split into sub groups, which keep a distance from one another. Eddy hopping and the communication involved can be tricky so work out the communication skills and if in doubt, don't go. Wait until motioned into the next eddy by the person already there before coming over. Poor communication and eddy etiquette can result in collisions, multiboat pins, running of class 6, social tension and possibly death. If you are one of the best paddlers in the group and are clearly "the man", don't think that gives you the right to barrel down the creek squirting into and out of the eddies that less experienced paddlers are in. Yes, downstream always has the right of way, but if you see a less experienced paddler getting ready to go for a serious move that requires concentration, consider waiting for them to make their move. The experienced paddlers should be the last people getting the way, however often they do get in the way. When passing slower groups on the river, do so at a safe spot, not on the bigger rapids. It's just like golf. If you are being passed, grab an eddy and wait for the whole group to pass by before resuming. If groups do get intermingled, grab an eddy. Offer to show someone of the other group down if they don't know the way. Ask for guidance if you are unsure yourself.

15. Don't base your decisions on other people's decisions, only answer to yourself. Make your own decisions. When in doubt, walking around a hazard is a good option.

16. Expect the unexpected, and be ready to deal with it.

17. Gauge your paddling intensity to the run. If on a roadside run with safe and fun playful rapids, I will play till I puke. If on a 10-mile in accessible run in January with a foot of snow on the ground, take every move deadly seriously. Be efficient and conserve energy.

River Safety Guidelines

18. Respect the group you are with, know their limits and adjust position of yours with theirs, and make your decisions based on the success, safety and ultimately the quality of experience, of the group.

Paddling is a group sport. When assembling a group, see to it that the goals of everyone interested are somewhat similar. Some people hate hiking with a boat. Some hate running the unknown or floodwaters. Some like to float, some paddle. Know your group. Group size is very important. If the run is very easy for everyone, then one person in six who knows the run is OK. However, if the run is very demanding for the average person in group, consider having a one to one ratio of paddlers who know the run. In general, any more than six people on a creek are too many. Split into sub-groups.

19. This sport can be ultimately safe, we just need to watch each other and realize the dangers and not be afraid to confront them in the safest way possible.

Enemies of safe boating:

- Drugs, Alcohol
- Balls
- Complacence
- Cockiness
- Showoffs
- Laziness
- Underlying social tension
- Inelastic Goals
- Being Cheap
- Selfishness
- Ignorance
- Bad Technique
- Poor and improper Equipment/lack of
- Hormones
- Something to prove
- Ill Communication
- Lack of group mentality
- Lack of information
- Impatience
- Action in the presence of uncertainty

It just takes some skill, experience, and preparation to boat safely.

These guidelines will improve your experience and ultimately the quality of every river trip.

Electric Bilge Pump Kits for Whitewater Canoes/Sea Kayaks at <http://jtkcanoes.weebly.com/>