

## International Scale of River Difficulty

There is an international scale of river difficulty that is used to rate the scale of difficulty of a stretch of river or individual rapid. Paddlers should use caution until they get a feel for the grading system and their ability. River difficulty may change due to fluctuating water levels, new obstacles, or bad weather.

**Stay alert for unexpected problems!**

### Class I:

Fast moving water, riffles/small waves. Few obstructions, all obvious & easily missed with little training. Risk to swimmers is slight and self-rescue is easy.

### Class II:

Straightforward rapids with wide, clear channels which are evident without scouting. Occasional manoeuvring may be required, but rocks & medium-sized waves are easily missed by trained paddlers. Swimmers seldom injured & group assistance, while helpful, is seldom needed. Rapids at the upper end of this difficulty range are designated "Class II+".

### Class III:

**(Considered the limit for experienced paddlers in traditional canoes)**

Rapids with moderate irregular waves which may be difficult to avoid and can swamp an open canoe. Manoeuvres are complex in fast current and good boat control in tight passages or around ledges often required; large waves or strainers may be present but are easily avoided. Strong eddies and powerful current effects can be found, particularly on large-volume rivers. Scouting is advisable for inexperienced parties. Injuries while swimming are rare; self-rescue is usually easy but group assistance may be required to avoid long swims. Rapids that are at the lower or upper end of this difficulty range are designated "Class III-" or "Class III+" respectively.

**Never  
paddle beyond  
your training,  
fitness &  
experience.**

### Class IV:

Intense, powerful rapids requiring precise boat handling in turbulent water. May feature large, unavoidable waves, holes or constricted passages demanding fast manoeuvres under pressure. Fast, reliable eddy turn needed to initiate manoeuvres, scout rapids, or rest. Rapids may require "must" moves above dangerous hazards. Scouting may be necessary the first time down. Risk of injury to swimmers is moderate to high, water conditions may make self-rescue difficult. Group assistance for rescue is often essential but requires practiced skill. A strong boat/kayak roll is highly recommended. Rapids that are at the lower or upper end of this difficulty range are designated "Class IV-" or "Class IV+" respectively.

### Class V & VI:

These rivers and rapids should only be attempted by teams of expert paddlers who know and understand the risks.



Visit the Paddle Alberta website  
for more information:

*Alberta paddling destinations,  
river trip reports and maps;  
safety and environmental programs;  
canoe and kayak Instructor programs;  
and local recreational paddling clubs.*

[www.paddlealberta.org](http://www.paddlealberta.org)  
Toll Free Phone 1-877-388-2722

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and American Whitewater Association:  
[www.americanwhitewater.org](http://www.americanwhitewater.org)

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*Paddle Alberta supports and promotes  
safe and sustainable recreational  
canoeing & kayaking.*

# A Guide to PADDLING SAFETY In Alberta



## Guidelines For Safe Paddling On Lakes And Rivers

- Always be prepared.
- Check the current weather forecast, but prepare for the forecast to be wrong!
- Never paddle alone.
- Drinking and driving whether on land or water is illegal and punishable under the Criminal Code.
- Watch out for fellow paddlers and always keep an eye out for the boat behind you.
- All paddlers must wear an approved personal flotation device (PFD) or lifejacket.
- Never paddle farther from shore than you are ready to swim.
- Be certain your canoe and equipment are in good condition. Carry all equipment that is required and recommended in the **Equipment** section of this pamphlet.
- Ensure that your boat will float even when fully swamped. Install extra flotation if required.
- Appoint a trip leader for each outing who has knowledge of the: river or water body; expected weather conditions; ability of all participants and their equipment.



Learn paddling skills, know your abilities & limitations. Take the online test “*Paddlers Self-Rating Guide*” to give you feedback on your paddling abilities:

[www.paddlealberta.org](http://www.paddlealberta.org)  
Safety Information

### ON LAKES:

- Keep all boats together and close to shore. Watch for changing weather and winds.

### ON RIVERS:

- River levels can change drastically especially in the spring or during periods of heavy rainfall. River flows can suddenly rise to dangerous levels. Know the characteristics of the river you are paddling and its current water level. You can get recent river flow information from [www.environment.alberta.ca](http://www.environment.alberta.ca) *Programs-River Basin Advisories and Information*. Low river levels can expose additional hazards such as submerged rocks.
- Cold river water can cause hypothermia within minutes. Wear synthetic or wool clothes appropriate to the weather and water temperature.
- Be aware of any possible hazards along the section of the river you are paddling.

- Watch out for and avoid dangerous obstructions such as deadhead logs, logjams, strainers (partially submerged trees), sweepers (trees hanging horizontally over the river), rapids & falls.
- Avoid outside bends on rivers where undercut river-banks and sweepers are common.
- If you capsize, hold onto your paddle and the upstream end of the boat; float on your back, feet pointed downstream.
- Learn self-rescue procedures.

## Equipment Required by Transport Canada

### Non-powered canoes and kayaks under 6 metres (19'8") in length:

- One Canadian approved personal flotation device (PFD) or lifejacket of appropriate size for each person.
- A throw bag with no less than 15 m of buoyant line.
- Paddles.
- One bailer or manual water pump with enough hose to discharge water from the bilge over side of the vessel.
- A whistle or a sound-signalling device.
- A waterproof flashlight if vessel is operating at night.

For non-powered canoes/kayaks over 6 metres (19'8") in length require additional equipment, consult: [www.boatingsafety.gc.ca](http://www.boatingsafety.gc.ca)

## Paddle Alberta Recommends Additional Equipment

- First-Aid kit, equipment repair kits, fire starting equipment, rain gear, sunscreen, bug spray.
- Wear good non-slip footwear that can get wet.
- Be sure to stow the throw bag rope so that it cannot come loose unexpectedly.
- One paddle for each person in the boat plus a spare for the boat.
- Pack extra items: dry synthetic or wool clothing; drinking water; and food, e.g. energy bars.
- Communication equipment: mobile or satellite phone and emergency locator in a waterproof case.
- Navigation equipment— maps (route, topographical and highway), compass, GPS with extra batteries.
- Additional equipment for river paddling:
  - \* helmet for each person.
  - \* river knife or rescue scissors.
  - \* river rescue gear.

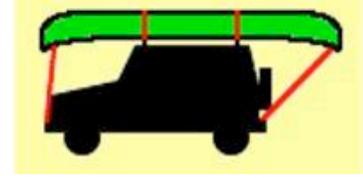
## Transporting Your Boat

When transporting your boat on top of a vehicle, do not rely on roof racks alone. A boat offers strong resistance to wind even at slow speeds & roof racks can be pulled off the vehicle by a boat caught in the wind. Secure the boat in 4 places including with strong bow and stern ropes to the bumpers or framework of the vehicle.

Use 3-point tie downs

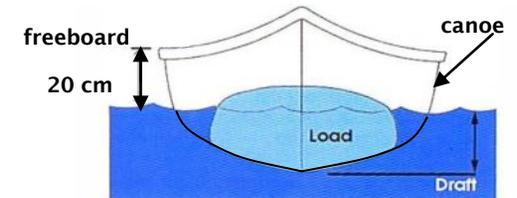


Keep knots close to canoe



## Watch Your Weight

Do not overload your boat. There should always be at least 20 cm (8 inches) of freeboard in a fully loaded canoe (including paddlers). Secure your gear in waterproof containers to protect contents and increase buoyancy. Keep weight low in boat.



## Leave No Trace Paddlers' Ethics

Minimize your impact on the environment. Educate yourself & others at [www.leavenotrace.ca](http://www.leavenotrace.ca)

### The 7 Leave No Trace Principles:

1. Plan Ahead and Prepare
  2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces
  3. Dispose of Waste Properly
  4. Leave What You Find
  5. Minimize Campfire Impacts
  6. Respect Wildlife
  7. Be Considerate of Others (including landowners and other river users)
- Use only marked access points and public land for getting to the water and taking rest stops.
  - Give people fishing a wide berth; paddle down the far shore if possible; don't play in their rapids! There are other rapids for you.
  - Help conservationists protect and improve our natural water & watershed environments.