

Canoeing: Safety Activity Checkpoints



Canoeing is a great team-building activity and an enjoyable and relaxing way to experience the outdoors. Compared to kayaks, canoes tend to be larger and uncovered, and usually accommodate several people kneeling or sitting on a seat. Canoeists use either a single- or double-bladed paddle, and kayakers almost always use a two-bladed paddle. The grade level of participants is dependent on the facility and conditions, with instructor guidance. Girl Scouts of any age are not permitted to paddle Class III or higher rapids.

Caution: You must seek council permission for watercraft trips with uncontrollable and highly changeable environment conditions, such as unclassified rivers. Keep in mind that girls are never allowed on Class III and above whitewater.

Know where to go canoeing. Just about any body of water (lake, stream, river, or ocean) is suitable for canoeing, as long as the proper equipment, instructions, and safety precautions are used. Canoeing is done only on water that has been approved by your Girl Scout council or that has been run and rated. For whitewater, only Class 1 and II difficulty, as defined by the American Version of the International Scale of River Difficulty may be used for canoeing. The American Whitewater Association provides information about American and some international river locations, classes, and levels. Connect with your Girl Scout council for site suggestions.

Include girls with disabilities. Communicate with girls with disabilities and/or their caregivers to assess any needs and accommodations. Learn more about the resources and information for people with disabilities provided by the [British Canoe Union](#), the [American Canoe Association](#) and [Disabled Sports USA](#).

Required Canoeing Gear

- Participants wear a U.S. Coast Guard–approved life jacket (Type III recommended) that fits according to weight and height specifications. Inspect life jackets to ensure that they are in good condition and contain no tears. Read about Coast Guard life jackets.
- Safety helmet (of flexible, strong, plastic with a chin strap and openings for drainage) when canoeing in waters that are Class II.

- Paddles (select appropriate size and style for the canoeists and the activity). Have extra paddles on hand as follows: on longer trips or trips involving whitewater, one extra paddle per canoe is carried; on trips of 48 hours or less on flat water, each group carries two to three extra paddles.
- Emergency repair kit, as needed for longer trips: duct tape or electrical tape, screwdriver, pliers
- Bailer (a bucket used to remove water from a boat), secured to the canoe
- Emergency sound device, such as a whistle, compressed air horn
- Line for towing or rescue

Recommended Canoeing Gear

- Layered clothing that's easily changeable depending on temperatures (wool, nylon, or polypropylene pile)
- Waterproof jacket and pants
- Hat
- Change of dry clothing (store in waterproof bag)
- Boat shoes, closed-toe and nonslip hiking/sport sandals with heel strap, or water socks or shoes (no flip-flops)
- Waterproof sunscreen (SPF of at least 15), reapply every two hours
- Sunglasses with retainer strap
- Protective clothing is recommended when the water temperature is below 70 degrees.
- Painter line (a strong line that floats and is used for securing or towing a canoe) secured to each end of the canoe; should be at least half the length of the canoe
- Flashlight (and extra batteries)
- Dry box/bag
- VHF marine radio
- Rescue sling to get paddlers back into canoe
- Compass and chart of the area (for each adult)

Emergency survival packet: raincoat, waterproof matches, lightweight/space blanket, hat, raincoat, pocket knife, minimum of ten-foot by ten-foot tarp, rope, drinking cup, duct tape, food, and appropriate liquids. Food and water bottles should be secured in the canoe.

Prepare for Canoeing

- Communicate with council and parents.** See the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints.
- Girls plan the activity.** See the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoint.
- Ensure participants are able to swim.** Participants' swimming abilities are classified and clearly identified (for instance, with colored headbands to signify beginners, advanced swimmers, and so on) at council-approved sites, or participants provide proof of swimming-test certification. In the absence of swimming-test certification, a swim test is conducted before or on the day of the activity. If this is not possible, presume all participants are nonswimmers. Consult with your Girl Scout council for additional guidance.
- Practice capsize and recovery procedures.** The instructor demonstrates effective self-recovery and righting techniques and allows girls to practice them, as

- appropriate for the trip, so suddenly being pitched into the water does not disorient or frighten them.
- **Arrange for transportation and adult supervision.** For the recommended adult-to-girl ratios see the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints.
 - *** Verify instructor knowledge and experience.** Ensure that the skill level of the adults is higher than the difficulty of the intended activity and that they have firsthand knowledge of the hazards and rapids on the river to be run. For each of the following types of canoeing, one instructor or qualified adult is currently certified by the American Canoe Association, the American Red Cross, or other sponsoring organization approved by your council with the following certification(s) appropriate for the activity, or equivalent certification, or has documented experience according to your council's guidelines, as outlined under "Experts" in *Volunteer Essentials*:
 - Flat water canoeing: ratio of instructor to participant is 1 to 12, plus an additional adult watcher/helper.
 - American Canoe Association—canoe touring level 1 or higher instructor appropriate to the activity
 - American Red Cross—small craft canoeing or lifeguard training with waterfront module
 - Whitewater canoeing: ratio of instructor to participant is 1 to 8, plus an additional watcher/helper.
 - American Canoe Association—river canoeing level 2 or above instructor. The level required is determined by activity and level 5 advanced swiftwater rescue skills assessment.
 - American Red Cross—small craft canoeing with moving water module
 - Canoe trips—flat water and whitewater canoeing: ratio of instructor to participant is 1 to 5 or 1 to 10 with a qualified assistant. The instructor must have the appropriate certification as noted above for flat water or whitewater canoeing.
 - American Canoe Association—river canoe day trip rescue skills assessment (for river trips)
 - **Compile key contacts.** See the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints.
 - *** Select a safe canoe site.** Trips are not taken to unknown areas, and locations of all boat channels are known. Canoeing is not permitted further than one mile from the nearest shore. Also make sure of the following:
 - Busy channels are avoided when possible, and crossed carefully when necessary.
 - Surf zones and areas with standing waves are avoided.
 - On long passages, canoes are close enough together so that a group decision can be made if wind and water conditions change.
 - **Research river condition and select canoes appropriate to skill level.** Consider weather and water conditions, weight of passengers, and equipment. Also make sure that craft weight and capacity are not exceeded—some crafts clearly display maximum capacity.
 - Canoes that are 15 feet or shorter hold no more than two people.
 - Each canoe is sized for the number of people using it.
 - You are knowledgeable about the difficulty of the water run and the [International Scale of River Difficulty](#).
 - You are aware of possible changes in river level and weather and [their effects](#) on the run's level of difficulty.
 - **Prepare for emergencies.** First-aider requirements: If a lifeguard is not on duty, an adult with rescue and resuscitation experience and/or certification is present. Ensure the

presence of a waterproof first-aid kit and a first-aider with a current certificate in first aid, including adult and child CPR or CPR/AED, who is prepared to handle cases of near-drowning, immersion hypothermia, and sunburn. If any part of the activity is located 30 minutes or more from emergency medical services, ensure the presence of a first-aider with wilderness first-aid training. See [Volunteer Essentials](#) for information about first-aid standards and training.

- ❑ **Respect the environment.** Make sure canoeing on whitewater or semi-protected waters meets the [Safety Code of American Whitewater](#).
- ❑ **File a float plan.** If participating in a long-distance canoe trip, file a float plan with a reliable person who will notify local authorities should your group not return. Float plan must include names of people on board, destination, craft description, times of departure and return, and additional details about routes and marine communications. The Coast Guard provides an [electronic, printable form](#).
- ❑ **Know the universal river signals.** The qualified adult and/or canoe instructor understands the [American Whitewater codes](#). Also, a set of whistle and visual signals is established that allows messages to pass between canoes.
- ❑ **Take river-rescue precautions.** Instructor/qualified adult attaches a locking blade knife to life jacket or secures it inside the canoe in an easily accessible place.
- ❑ **Transport canoes safely.** Canoes are transported on car-top racks or trailers designed to haul canoes. Canoes are secured with two lines across the top and a line at the bow and the stern. Drivers must have prior experience hauling trailers.
- ❑ **Encourage girls to pack wisely.** Additional gear (clothing, sleeping, cooking) is stored in waterproof containers or packages and secured in the canoe. Do not overload the canoe.

On the Day of Canoeing

- ❑ **Get a weather report.** Never canoe on a stormy day. On the day of the activity, visit [weather.com](#), [intellicast.com](#) or other reliable sources to assess weather conditions, water temperature, and river/wave conditions. If weather conditions prevent the trip, be prepared with a backup plan or alternative activity.
- ❑ **Review rescue tips.** Know how to [right a tipped canoe](#) and other river-rescue techniques.
- ❑ **Use the buddy system.** See the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints.
- ❑ **Be prepared in the event of a storm with lightning.** Exit water immediately and take shelter away from tall objects, including trees, buildings, and electrical poles. Find the lowest point in an open flat area. Squat low to the ground on the balls of the feet, and place hands on knees with head between them. During storms, if shore cannot be reached, secure all loose gear, keep a sharp lookout for other boats and obstructions, and stay low.

Canoeing Links

- American Canoe Association: www.americancanoe.org
- American Whitewater: www.americanwhitewater.org
- Beginner's Guide to Canoeing: <http://canoeing.com/beginner>
- International Canoe Federation: www.canoeicf.com
- U.S. Coast Guard's Boating Safety Division: www.uscgboating.org

Canoeing Know-How for Girls

- **Master canoeing strokes.** The more you know about strokes, the better the canoeist you'll be. Learn about the five essential canoeing strokes [here](#).

*These checkpoints must be reviewed with the vendor and/or facility, when appropriate.