
Advanced Paddling Skills

by Joanne Schwartz

Learn to Swim

Be comfortable hanging out in the water and swimming in conditions you paddle: surf, rocky areas, cold water, etc. Never paddle where you aren't prepared to swim. Your skill, conditioning and clothing must be suited to your paddling conditions since you never know when you'll get into trouble.

Capsize Recovery

Be able to recover from a capsize in conditions you paddle. If with other paddlers, assisted rescues and re-entries are acceptable IF your paddling partners are fully prepared to help. Be able to swim your boat to shore if you can't immediately reenter. Said another way, don't paddle away from shore if your rescue and reentry skills are very reliable. Be able to reenter your boat and drain it well enough to paddle in the conditions which tipped you over. Be able to roll in surf, on both sides, reenter and roll, or push and swim your kayak to shore through any surf you launch/land in.

Gear Repair

While on your trips, be able to repair everything on your boat that might break. Rudder cables, foot braces, cracks in your hull (no matter whether it is kevlar, fiberglass, plastic, wood or skin). They all get sliced, shattered, crunched and otherwise broken.

Strength and Endurance

Develop techniques and strength to paddle twice the distance you expect to go. Paddle well within your distance limit given the conditions because you never know when they'll deteriorate.

Seamanship

Develop seamanship skills to determine weather and sea conditions and determine when they might be changing. Know the international toots, whistles and flags shown by ships in commercial harbors and boating lanes. Three toots isn't a ship's way of saying "HI." It means we're backing up - NOW! And five toots isn't a ship's exclamation at how beautiful your kayak flotilla is. It means "collision imminent - take evasive action!"

Surf

Your best teacher of rough water skills, of bracing and kayak maneuvering, and of your roll is the surf. Practice going out through the waves at every stage: rollers, up steep faces, through the breaking crest, breaking upon you, and through the whitewater after they have broken. Then practice handling all these stages while you face shore. Paddle among the breaking waves for hours, letting them hit you from all directions. After you're comfortable, close your eyes, relax and let your body and responses flow with the wave as it breaks on you. Side surf until the wave lets you go, then open your eyes and laugh a little. If you're lucky enough to have big, thick ocean whitewater to play in, brace into the wall as it hits you, then lower yourself very gently under the foam by carefully extending your paddle a little above your head. Look around, in the foam. Sometimes you can even breathe in the highly aerated foam - the closest most of us will ever get to being amphibious. Lower your brace and bring your head above the foam to get a look around. Then go back under. Be very sensitive to the forces on your shoulder to prevent a dislocation.

Crossings

Develop your confidence and ability to handle long and difficult open ocean crossings. After you're comfortable with coastal cruising and your seamanship skills are strong, begin making crossings of increasing distance and complexity. Make sure you have the endurance and have made other preparations (food, water, sun protection, etc.) to turn back if conditions worsen. Try short (3-5 nautical mile) crossings with mild currents (under 2 knots) and work up to 15-20 mile crossings in rolling seas with occasional whitecaps. Your freedom at selecting interesting chains of islands for exciting trips increases at each step. Whether traversing the West Indies, the Channel Islands in California, the Maine Island Trail, or our Southeast states' barrier islands, the world opens up when you're safe and comfortable moving in really open water.

River Paddling

Slipping into a little whitewater kayak and getting comfortable in class three whitewater develops your ability to handle ocean currents, rock gardens and the surf. You'll learn to rudder and change direction with your paddle at the bow. You'll become fluent at drawing your boat to the side, using the current as your power. You'll learn to hide behind rocks, spinning your boat into an eddy. And best of all, you'll learn to read moving water and to use it to your advantage when ferrying across currents or maneuvering near rocks.

Racing

Developing a very clean race stroke develops strength and endurance. It gives you options in paddling styles so you can vary your technique to match changing conditions or to spread the work over a variety of muscles. And, racing is run in itself, whether you're competitive or just looking for a social way to get a good workout.

Paddle Flexibility

Be able to paddle with both feathered and non-feathered paddles to take full advantage of the wind conditions. Be able to brace on both sides with either feathered or non-feathered blades. Be able to paddle a variety of strokes, each appropriate for different situations: from a vertical racing stroke for getting power through waves, speeding up to help someone in need, and for fighting head winds and currents, all the way to a very horizontal touring stroke with minimal arm movement, depending mostly on your torso for covering long distances. Try paddling with a canoe paddle or a short Greenland storm paddle which you might carry as a spare. They both use different muscles and techniques so offer a refreshing change on long days.

Problem Simulation

When you and friends are paddling along, pretend you capsize at any time. Stop the group and have everyone describe the current conditions of every paddler, their boats, the shoreline, the sea and weather. Have them describe what each person would do next to get the team safely paddling again. Simulate a paddler becoming very sea sick at an inappropriate time. Simulate a major leak in your hull or an immediate need to land at any particular time.

Team Paddling

For the safest kayaking, develops a team of paddling friends who know each other's strengths and limitations. They'll have a common knowledge of rescue techniques, of gear on each other's boats, of common gear and of hand signals to use over expanses of water or in noisy areas. Support each other's skill, knowledge and attitude development.

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