



Paddling Montana

By Dave Carty

CANOEING THE WHITE CLIFFS PORTION OF THE WILD AND SCENIC MISSOURI RIVER BY CHUCK HANEY

a beginner's guide to canoeing the scenic and historic rivers of Big Sky Country

IT WASN'T MUCH of a rapids. But we had an audience—another party had pulled out on the gravel bar below us—and my friend and I thought we'd show them our stuff. From the back, I stuck my paddle into the water and began steering the canoe into the current while Bill, in the bow, began pulling the front around.

The rock caught us both by surprise. In disbelief, we felt the boat hesitate for

an instant, balanced on a boulder like a seesaw on a fulcrum. Then, with a *whoosh*, the upstream side of the canoe dipped under, the craft filled with water, and into the chilly river we went. The two of us thrashed around for a moment and then found our footing. Fortunately, the water was less than a foot deep.

It turns out Bill and I had violated the second rule of canoeing through rocks:

When the canoe gets hung up and turns sideways, always lean over the downstream gunwale (side of the canoe), not the upstream gunwale. And the first rule? Avoid rocks.

The man who explained this to me is Terry Johnson, a 65-year-old canoeing expert from Bozeman. Johnson began paddling in Montana in 1959, when he and a friend ran the rapids-filled Yankee Jim Canyon on the Yellowstone River in a

wood-and-canvas canoe—something few people had ever tried before. Since then, Johnson and his boats have been just about everywhere. One river has led to another, and last year he and several companions canoed China's Yangtze River. Despite having paddled some of the world's greatest whitewater, Johnson told me he can't think of a better place for a canoeist to live than in Montana.

MANY PLACES TO PADDLE

Johnson holds that view because Montana offers an enormous diversity of river types, settings, and experiences. Some, like the Big Hole, are known nationwide for their excellent trout fishing. Some, like the Middle Fork of the Flathead, have roiling whitewater that attracts thrill-seekers. Others, like the Missouri, offer leisurely floats through sagebrush steppes. Montana



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RAPID RECOVERY One of the thrills of canoeing is negotiating whitewater. Beginners with a basic understanding of steering can handle some rapids, though stretches like the one shown above are best run by experienced paddlers only.

CANOE CAMPING The most essential equipment—besides PFDs and paddles—are dry bags or other waterproof containers securely lashed to the canoe (right). The scenic Smith River (far right) is an increasingly popular destination for multi-day canoe trips.



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JEFF ERICKSON

contains 6,400 miles of navigable water, all of it open to public use thanks to the state's 1985 stream access law. The law says that all streams and rivers "capable of recreational use" may be used by the public, no matter who owns the streambed, as long as there is public access to the stream.

Most Montana rivers can be run by those with basic canoeing skills. The state has relatively few waterfalls or dangerous rapids, even though many rivers run through mountainous terrain. For those who prefer to paddle in still water, there are dozens of lakes and reservoirs, including the sealike Fort Peck and the sparkling, mountain-flanked Flathead.

To top it off, Montana offers all this and relatively uncrowded paddling when com-

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pared to the traffic jams on other states' waters. Though no one in Montana keeps canoe participation records, many veteran canoeists maintain that the number of people paddling in this state actually appears to have declined over the past 20 years.

"It's hard to believe, considering how popular Montana has become, but for all the cars I see carrying canoes and kayaks, I don't seem to see many people on the water," says Doug Monger, chief of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks State Parks Division and an avid canoeist.

CANOEING BASICS

Like any water sport, canoeing can be dangerous—even for experienced paddlers. "I remember one time we hit a big, long log jam on the Bitterroot," says Johnson. "I went under and was hanging onto my

canoe by two fingers to keep from getting dragged deeper. Those two fingers hurt for half a year after I pulled myself up out of the current."

Most canoe trips don't end with a dunking. But just in case, canoeists should wear a life vest (personal flotation device, or PFD), be able to swim, and understand the hazards of moving water and hypothermia. Life vests designed for canoeing and kayaking are lightweight and have wide arm holes for full-range-of-motion paddling. Avoid those old orange, puffy life vests, which bunch up around the wearer's head when in the water.

One of the great things about canoes (and also one of the bad things) is there are so many varieties to choose from. As is generally true elsewhere, the more you pay, the more you get. That doesn't mean you have

Suggested Paddling

JEFFERSON RIVER: The stretch from Silver Star to Cardwell is perfect for an overnighter. Home to sandhill cranes, eagles, songbirds, and loads of other wildlife, the stretch is best run in early or midsummer. After that, the fishing slows and water flows can drop to a trickle. You'll need to portage around the diversion dam below Parson's Bridge and the one at Parrot Castle Fishing Access Site.

MISSOURI RIVER: The most popular stretch on this well-known river is from Coal Banks Landing below Fort Benton to the Fred Robinson Bridge on U.S. Highway 191. This five-day trip includes the scenic White Cliffs area, abundant wildlife, and a chance to see what the Corps of Discovery saw two centuries ago. Bear in mind that over the next two years this stretch might be jammed with Lewis and Clark buffs retracing the explorers' route.

KOOTENAI RIVER: The 15-mile float from Libby Dam to Libby is a great one-day outing. The mountainous scenery here is spectacular, and the paddling is fairly easy except for Jennings Rapid, just below where the Fisher River enters, about 4 miles down from the dam. Beginners will want to walk around that one. Also, it's experts only on the Kootenai downstream from Libby, which contains the challenging China Rapids and Montana's largest waterfall, Kootenai Falls.



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PLENTY TO PADDLE Montana contains 68 floatable rivers totalling 6,400 miles. Many, like the Clearwater (above), provide easy paddling for beginners.

TONGUE RIVER: This is a prime eastern Montana float. You'll find easy paddling from below the Tongue River Reservoir to its confluence with the Yellowstone at Miles City. This stretch has plenty of warm-water game fish, including channel catfish, smallmouth bass, northern pike, sauger, and walleyes. This is ranch country, so keep your eyes open for diversion dams and barbed wire.

JUDITH RIVER: Few canoeists seem to know about this beautiful central Montana river, probably because it flows through ranchland for most of its length. The biggest drawback to canoeing the Judith is that it only contains enough floatable water in June, during runoff; otherwise it's too low.

—Dave Carty

to buy your canoe new, however. I purchased my 17-foot touring canoe, used but not abused, for a few hundred dollars—about half what it would have cost off the shelf—and that included knee braces, extra seats, and a shoulder yoke for portages.

Which canoe is right for you? The longer 17- and 18-foot two-seat ("tandem") canoes hold more gear and usually are fast and easier to paddle, but they don't turn well. Short, wide canoes are generally more stable but are harder to track, which means you have to work more to keep them going straight. Most commercially manufactured canoes are made of Royalex or polyethylene plastics (midweight, sturdy, mid-priced), Kevlar (light, expensive), or fiberglass (heavy, sturdy, least expensive). A great option for those looking for an inexpensive canoe is to check the classified ads for a used alu-

minum or fiberglass one like those some of us grew up with in Boy Scout camp. The main disadvantages of these canoes are that they are too heavy to portage far, and the aluminum ones clang loudly when bumped with a paddle.

The only other essential gear besides a life vest is your paddle. Paddles range from inexpensive aluminum and wooden jobs to high-tech, bent-shaft models with balanced graphite shafts. If you canoe only a few times a year for short distances, the cheaper ones will work fine. The pricier models are lighter and more energy efficient for longer trips. The choice is up to you, but you'll need at least three paddles—one for the stern paddler, one for the bow paddler, and a spare in case someone accidentally loses theirs.

Canoe rental is another option. You can rent a two-person canoe, paddles, and PFDs

at outdoors stores in towns near major rivers for roughly \$40 per day. It's a good way to try out different canoe sizes and types.

If you plan to canoe-camp, you'll want gear that allows you to relax after a hard (or not so hard) day of floating, paddling, and fishing. Top priority is to buy a few vinyl-lined "dry bags," which keep your gear dry in case it rains or your canoe swamps. I also bring a lightweight tent, ground cloth, gas stove, synthetic sleeping bag in a waterproof stuff sack (which is stuffed inside a dry bag, just to be safe), rain gear, a change of clothes, and basic toiletries. One other essential: a spare pair of shoes, just for camp. Nothing feels as luxurious as slipping into a pair of dry sneakers after paddling all day with wet feet.

One of the great advantages of canoe tripping compared to backpacking is that you don't need to pay meticulous attention to gear weight. That's why most of the canoe trips I've been on have included various personal indulgences. I wouldn't float anywhere without an inflatable camp seat, for example, or a small solar shower. And when canoeing eastern Montana rivers, I always throw in a tube of hand lotion. My fair skin feels like alligator hide after a day of dipping my hands and arms in the highly alkaline water, an irritation the lotion soothes in seconds.

Monger says his canoe-trip necessities include a book of Robert Service poems, his favorite coffee mug, and a camp chair that allows him to "sit on the bank in the evening and enjoy the river."

RIVER MEDITATIONS

The main advice Monger offers to would-be canoeists—besides being careful to not capsizes—is to not canoe too far in one day. Dawn-to-dusk paddling leaves little time to enjoy the scenery or other parts of the canoeing experience.

"I really don't enjoy going out with people who say 'Let's do that 24-mile stretch of the Missouri today,'" he says. "I tell them, 'Let's do that 12-mile stretch and see how it goes. If it feels good, then maybe we'll do the other 12.' I race canoes, but recently I've also learned how enjoyable it can be just to canoe for the movement of canoeing, to watch wildlife and water go by, and escape my busy life. People who try to pad-



PLEASURE CRAFT Some canoeists use their boats to reach fishing waters far from shore (above). But most simply paddle for the joy of being on the water (right). Canoeing is great exercise, fun to learn and master, and takes you to scenic spots inaccessible by roads or trails. Because it's done on the water, however, canoeing comes with risks. Anyone who canoes should be able to swim and should wear a life vest (personal flotation device, or PFD). Some communities offer classes on canoeing safety, where you can learn how to enter a swamped canoe (left), steer around rocks, and survive a dunking in cold water.



dle too far in one day are missing the trip.”

Monger knows firsthand how that goes. He and his friend Steve Gilbert once paddled 120 miles of the Smith River—in a single day. It took them six and a half hours for the first 60-mile stretch. Then, after being shuttled back upstream, they did it all over again in seven hours. As far as Monger knows, the feat has never been equaled. “Please don’t try that one,” he says. “Then I’d have to go back and do it again, faster, and that would be just awful.”

Canoeing fanatics sometimes do things that amaze the rest of us. Take, as another example, Bill Bartlett and Kay Ruh of Bozeman, who paddled nearly the entire length of the Yellowstone a few years ago. The pair is currently retracing Lewis and Clark’s journey up the Missouri by paddling the stretch from Fort Buford, North Dakota, to Three Forks, Montana. And they’re doing it the hard way, paddling upstream, one weekend at a time. They’ve been at it for five years.

“About 25 miles in one day is the most we’ve done,” Bartlett says.

“We’re also done as little as 5 miles in a day,” adds Ruh. “It depends on our condition and the wind.”

On the broad, flat Missouri, the wind

can turn a moderate upstream paddle into a nearly impossible battle to make any headway. When the wind blows hard, Bartlett and Ruh are forced to retreat to shore and use ropes to pull (or “line”) their single-person canoes upstream along the slack water near shore.

Whenever possible, however, the pair tries to travel in the water. Rattlesnakes, sharp rocks, prickly pear cactus, and other hazards make a shoreline trek along the Missouri treacherous. To paddle upstream in stiff currents or hard wind, they pay close attention to the water.

“We will actually look for any break in the surface of the water, any eddy line, that provides even a few yards of easier paddling,” Ruh says. “We often paddle so close to shore that we disturb a lot of carp, which sun themselves in the shallows. Spooked carp will usually swim upstream, so we’ll actually ride along behind them in their wake.”

She jokes that if she and Bartlett ever write a book about their experiences, one chapter will be called “Follow That Carp!”

Another great appeal of canoeing in Montana is the link its rivers have to western history. Canoe down the Marias and consider Lewis and Clark’s agonizing decision there in 1805. While paddling the

lower Yellowstone, stop to see Captain Clark’s graffiti on nearby Pompeys Pillar. A trip down the Missouri River near Great Falls cuts right through C. M. Russell country, and the Bighorn River runs just a few miles past where General George Armstrong Custer made the greatest miscalculation of his life.

And that’s just for starters. Montana rivers run through the heart of the state’s gold and copper mining regions, wilderness areas, Indian and fur trapper country, and two national parks. With the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial now underway in Montana, many residents and visitors are discovering the state’s diverse and scenic rivers and the joy of traveling those wonderful water routes by canoe. 🐾

Want to know more about canoeing lore and Montana rivers? Look for the classic books *Path of the Paddle* and *Song of the Paddle*, both by Bill Mason; *The Wilderness Paddler’s Handbook*, by Alan S. Kesselheim; *Paddling Montana*, by Hank and Carol Fischer; *Basic Essentials Canoeing*, by Cliff Jacobson; and *Floating and Recreation on Montana Rivers*, by Curt Thompson.