

What Newbies Need To Know

10 Lessons For New Whitewater Enthusiasts and the Boaters Who Mentor Them

Teresa Gryder

WHEN YOU FIRST START RUNNING RIVERS, YOU DON'T

know what you don't know. You don't even know what questions to ask. It's a vulnerable stage. Once you go a few times, you start developing real questions, but until then you have two choices.

You can experiment with river running by yourself, or you can find people to teach you. If you go without guidance you are going to take some hits. You'll likely have losses and bad experiences. You could die. The river requires toughness whether you have instruction or not.

When I started paddling I did not know much. I thought I knew things because I had been swimming in rivers since I was a tadpole, but what I didn't know dwarfed what I did. I had no idea how strong the current was, how hard it would be to keep a kayak right side up, or how the cold water would paralyze me.

I started on whitewater that was too hard, and it got the best of me. I didn't have a wetsuit, and it was March on the Nantahala. I swam trying to peel out from the put-in eddy, got rescued, and then swam again at the top of Patton's Run. I swam that rapid from the top, and by the time I washed out the bottom I had given up. I was ready to die. I was so cold I couldn't move—and I didn't care.

Some people have this kind of experience and never get in a boat again. With a little bit of help at the beginning, you can avoid ever having to go there. Get the right gear. Go at the right time and to the right place. It doesn't have to be hell. Playing with the river and bonding with a team are joyful things. I want people to love wild rivers—and river people—like I do.

Running rivers is inherently dangerous. Going down a river is not a competition with other humans. It's a dance with the indifferent powers of nature. The risk is real. Running rivers takes you away from civilized comforts, and sometimes you must either go down the river or hike out through a wilderness to get home.

Whether you are a new boater yourself or are mentoring people new to the sport, here are ten things every whitewater enthusiast should know.

1. You have to WANT IT

Running whitewater is not easy or "safe." Learning it requires fitness, persistence, and toughness. It takes months or years to get the "feel" of it, depending on how often you go. You will never be done learning. Competence comes slowly, and dabblers never get there. The river punishes the underskilled.

Lesson #1: This sport requires courage and motivation.

2. Recognize the HAZARD.

Some hazards don't look that bad. If you don't know any better, you might not know that the water can be so fast, powerful, and cold that you can't really swim out of it. You might not know how trees in the water catch stuff, "straining" it out of the river, or that sometimes the water goes under rocks instead of around them. Sometimes the river traps things in its currents. You will learn, but be cautious. Ask people to explain what's dangerous and what's not. Pay special attention to hidden dangers like high water, cold water, and low head dams.

Lesson #2: Be cautious, because what you don't know can hurt you.

3. Everybody SWIMS

Some new paddlers think that they can avoid going in the drink. This is simply false. Everybody goes in eventually. If someone promises you that you won't flip over or fall out, don't believe them. Sometimes your best option is to abandon ship. Learn how to get out of your boat and what it takes to get back in. Learn how to swim in whitewater, how to avoid foot entrapment, and how to recover your equipment. Always consider the water temperature when getting in a boat, because you might not get to stay in the boat. Dress for the swim.

Lesson #3: Be prepared to swim in whitewater; your turn is coming.

4. The PEOPLE you go with really MATTER.

Yes, you should go with people, because if you go alone who is going to drag you out of the drink? Who is going to chase your equipment? And who is going to tell you the things you don't know yet? Especially at the beginning, find people to show you the ropes. Trust your instincts and find people you trust. Some "experts" are overly confident and potentially complacent about the risk. Some rookies pretend to be experts. Go with humble people who will discuss the risks and challenges and team up to teach you the ropes. Join a club or take classes until you find your crew.

Lesson #4: Go with people who will teach and look out for you.

5. Good CONDITIONS are Key

First of all, river sports depend on having the right water level. Too low can be no fun, and too high is often dangerous. High and rising water is the most dangerous combination. One of the questions you need answered is, "How's the water level?" Eventually, you'll learn how to check the gages and understand what they mean, but at first, you just need to know that it's a good flow, not too high or too low. Flows change with rain, snowmelt, and dams. Weather influences what equipment you need, and season determines how long the days are. Cold water, short days, worsening weather, and poor equipment can add up to disaster when combined.

Lesson #5: Only go when the conditions are right.

6. Get the right EQUIPMENT

Whitewater paddling is a gear-intensive sport. Round up the right equipment and get familiar with it. Beg for help in a club if you can't afford it. Try it on in your living room or garage first. After you have the essential gear, take it out on flatwater, then moving water, then very easy whitewater. A short list for kayaking, for example, includes: helmet, lifejacket, sprayskirt, paddle, boat, floatation, river shoes, drysuit/wetsuit, throwbag, whistle. Better equipment often makes you safer, so upgrade when you can.

Lesson #6: Get the right gear and practice with it.

7. Build SKILLS

As soon as you get to the river, start studying how to read water, so you can predict what the water will do to your boat. If you kayak or canoe, get the scoop on how to wet exit. You'll be working on maneuvering forever, but especially get instruction on how to do eddy turns, peel outs, and ferries which involve interacting with current.

At some point, you will wipe out and learn how to self rescue. It's an essential skill that is different for every boat type. Either swim your boat to shore, get back in it, or roll it up. If your boat can be rolled, learn how. Get lessons, go to the pool, do the work. Being able to roll in whitewater is a magic key because you no longer have to swim just because you flipped over. If you use a raft, IK, or packraft, learn how to unflip and reboard your boat in midriver. Your learning will take off.

You have to mess up. Until you have dealt with problems on easy water, you are not ready for anything harder. When you are learning how to catch eddies, peel out into strong current, boof rocks, and play in waves and holes, you will make mistakes and learn to deal with them. Once all that's not a big deal, you're ready to push it a bit. It takes a lot of river time to get comfortable. Take your time. Part of the joy in whitewater paddling is that you will still be learning as long as you keep doing it.

Lesson #7: Focus on skill acquisition and make mistakes on easy water.

8. We TAKE CARE of each other.

On the river everybody is part of the team. We rescue each other, share costs, and generally expect every person to be awake and responsible. To get a good start, show up on time with your equipment double-checked. On the water pay close attention to the people and the situation, and help when you can.

Everybody helps with shuttling. Everybody helps with situations. We do what we can for each other because we care and because it is our culture. If you want to run rivers without having any responsibility to the people around you, hire guided services where there is no such expectation. If you are a helpful and attentive member of your group, you will have no shortage of people to run with.

Lesson #8: Be a team player.

9. We are RISK MANAGERS

On the river, risk exposure is unavoidable. You are responsible for your own safety and decisions, and I am responsible for mine. The decision to delegate your personal authority to someone else is a decision. Choosing to go—or not—is a decision. You cannot escape your own responsibility to get the information you need to decide well.

The river is dynamic and it forces decisions. Sometimes you will guess wrong and be penalized. People who succeed at river running are able to manage their own mood, stress, and substance intake, and keep making good decisions when the situation gets challenging. This sport is not for everyone, and there is no shame in choosing something less risky.

Lesson #9: Your life depends on your own decision making.

10. Running rivers is REWARDING

There's a reason that people do this sport for life. Being in nature is a balm for our souls. We thrive in the strong friendships we build while facing challenges and enjoying beauty together. Riding a magic carpet of water helps put us in the flow, and many find it to be a spiritual experience. There is nothing half as much worth doing as messing around in boats.

Lesson #10: River running makes us happier than most anything else. ■