Safely down the stream

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO ROWING MONTANA'S SCENIC RIVERS

By Neale Streeks

The downstream pull of relentless currents through majestic, ever-changing scenery makes any river journey a moving adventure. Cliffs, meadows, and forests drift by. Clear water pours around boulders and over colored gravel, then ripples past darting trout. As you come around a bend, boulders appear. Mild doses of adrenaline pump into your system as you make quick directional decisions. Steady backrowing causes a quickening of your heart—an engine fueled by a big river breakfast, sweet mountain air, and the desire to see what's around the next bend.

I've spent the last 30-plus years watching riverbanks glide by as the backs of my hands have grown wrinkled on the oars. The combination of great exercise, adventure, and some of Montana's best scenery makes life in the rower's seat a good place to be. Rowers are drawn by the fishing, the excitement of whitewater runs, and the mayflies, swallows, nibbling beavers, grazing deer, and all the other wildlife seen from a boat.

River floaters can be anybody from weekenders soaking up the sun to serious whitewater runners employing highly technical skills. Regardless of where you fall on that spectrum, every rower should know the basic rules and techniques to running a river:

River Safety

Rivers aren't theme park rides. They are dangerous, powerful, and unpredictable, and people drown in them every year. "Many people don't understand that nature can take you quickly," says Bryan Golie, an FWP game warden who often works along the Missouri River between Great Falls and Cascade. Golie notes that any boat on moving water should carry a throw rope and cell phone (in a plastic bag) and that everyone should wear a life jacket (though it's legally required only for those 12 and under). "You need to learn to read water and to respect its deceiving power," he says. (*See box on page 29 for other essential safety gear.*) This is particularly true for complex whitewater, which often occurs in spring when snowmelt creates dangerously cold water and numerous downed trees, called sweepers.

To safely navigate Montana rivers, you need a sturdy craft as well as skills honed by knowledge and experience. Acquiring these skills takes time. Beginning rowers should start on easier stretches of river and work their way up to water of increasing degrees of difficulty. One way to speed up the learning curve is to hire an experienced river guide for a day.

A few other tips: Always remember you need to be constantly making steering adjustments and scanning downstream to spot the best route to take. If you plant to float rivers with braided channels, ask other rowers at the boat ramp if they know of channels with new sweepers or other hazards to avoid.

Good behavior

Paying attention to river safety prevents injuries. Paying attention to river ethics and etiquette helps you and other river recreationists have a more enjoyable time on the water. As increasing numbers of anglers, rafters, kayakers, inner-tubers, and others mingle on Montana's rivers and streams, conflicts increase. The basic rules of river etiquette:

- **Use ramps quickly.** Ramps are for loading and unloading boats only. Don't prevent others from using the ramp while you inflate your raft or load or unload your gear from the boat. Take care of that elsewhere and then get the boat and towing vehicle off the ramp quickly.
- **Keep quiet.** Most people float rivers for

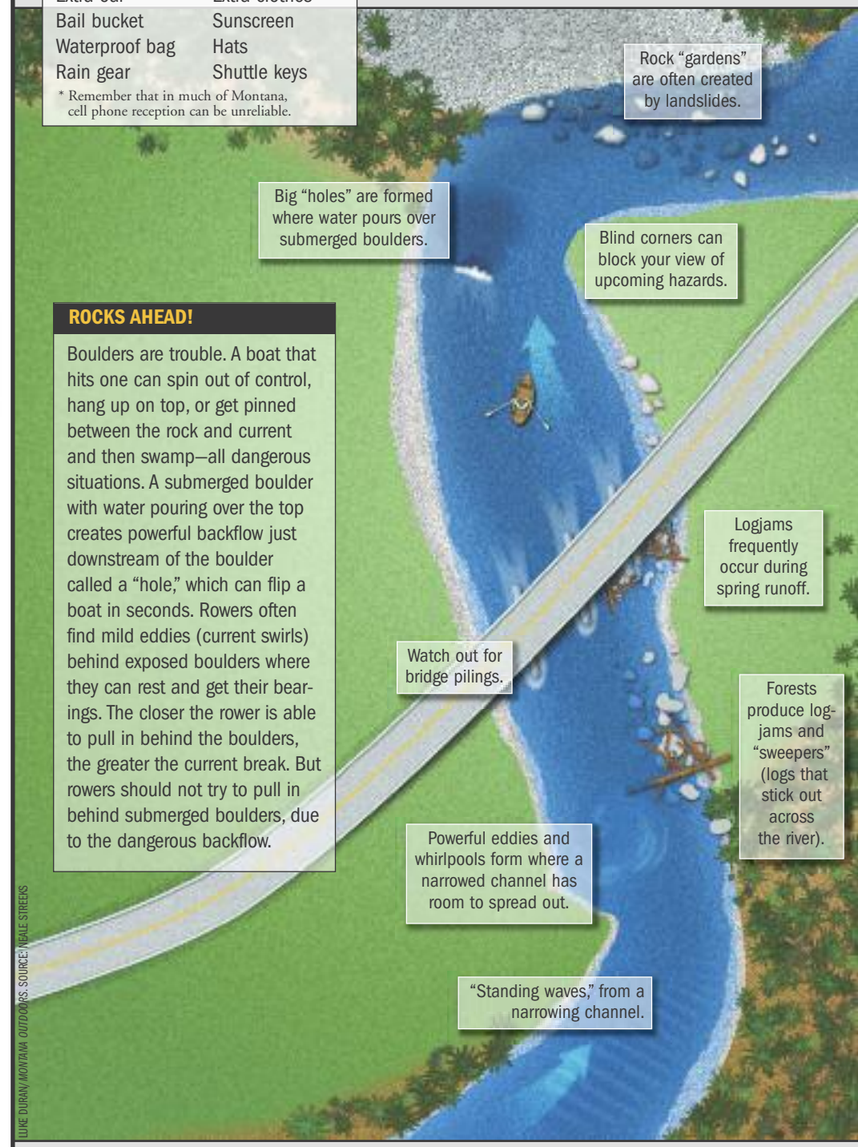
A Thrill, But a Dangerous One

Though running whitewater is exciting, it's also dangerous: The threat of drowning is always present. High water, logjams, and diversion dams can change a moderate Class 3 river into a treacherous Class 5 cataract. Icy water can make a spill especially dangerous due to the likelihood of gasping from the cold shock when falling in and then breathing in water, causing drowning. Most rivers have a least a few tough spots along the way, and some have impassable falls and gorges you'll need to carry your boat around. Always research a float trip before putting in. Check maps, floater guides, agency websites, and river supply shops for updated river information. Talk to people who have run the river, especially those who've been on it recently.

SAFETY ITEMS TO HAVE ON BOARD

Life jackets	Cell phone*
Throw rope	Raft patch kit
Extra rope	Pump
First-aid kit	Tie-down straps
Extra oar	Extra clothes
Bail bucket	Sunscreen
Waterproof bag	Hats
Rain gear	Shuttle keys

* Remember that in much of Montana, cell phone reception can be unreliable.



ROCKS AHEAD!

Boulders are trouble. A boat that hits one can spin out of control, hang up on top, or get pinned between the rock and current and then swamp—all dangerous situations. A submerged boulder with water pouring over the top creates powerful backflow just downstream of the boulder called a "hole," which can flip a boat in seconds. Rowers often find mild eddies (current swirls) behind exposed boulders where they can rest and get their bearings. The closer the rower is able to pull in behind the boulders, the greater the current break. But rowers should not try to pull in behind submerged boulders, due to the dangerous backflow.

LUKE DURAN/ *MONTANA OUTDOORS*; SOURCE: NEALE STREEKS

peace and quiet and to view natural settings. Loud radios and rowdy behavior at accesses, on the water, and at river camps ruin the river experience for others.

Don't trespass. In Montana, river users may wade in the water anywhere, but on land they may set foot only on public property, on riverbanks below the ordinary high-water mark, or on private land with landowner permission.

Don't litter: Bring a bag for your own trash (and human waste), and consider picking up litter you see during your trip.

One of the biggest challenges facing river users is the growing conflict between waders and rowers. Wading anglers complain that boats scare the fish they are casting to. Rowers point out that it can be difficult to safely navigate around waders, especially on smaller rivers, and that often they can't avoid spooking fish. "As rivers see more use, it's likely that conflicts will become more common," says Charlie Sperry, FWP's river recreation coordinator. "But conflicts are not only caused by overcrowding; sometimes it's simply the attitude and practices of people on the rivers." Sperry says all river users need to communicate with each other to reduce conflicts.

If you see anglers in the river ahead of you, pay special attention to where they are casting so you don't ruin their fishing. If the river or channel is so small that you have to float near anglers, ask which way you should go to least affect their fishing.

> "Many people don't understand that nature can take you quickly. You need to learn to read water and to respect its deceiving power."

Further challenges

As if rowers didn't have enough to worry about with rock gardens and wading anglers, they have to contend with Montana's strong winds. Cross winds blow boats to the lee side of the river (and woe to the angler who wades the lee shoreline on a windy weekend day). Tail winds can blow a boat downstream into obstructions. Head winds can significantly slow your progress, delaying your arrival to the takeout into the night. Only skilled, powerful rowers can keep a boat on course in steady 30-plus mph winds on rivers like the Yellowstone and Missouri. On these big waters, casual floaters may want to reschedule their outing if the forecast calls for high winds.

Another rowing headache is very shallow water, something common on smaller Montana rivers once water levels drop in early summer. The boat ends up stuck on gravel bars, requiring the occupants to get out and either walk alongside the craft or drag it until the channel deepens.

Yet another hazard, one beginners rarely consider, is a rising or setting sun. The Blackfoot River, for instance, flows directly west, and at sunset the reflections are so bright on the broken water that it's nearly impossible to see where you're going.

All this talk of challenges, safety, and ethics is important, but don't let it dissuade you from grabbing a pair of oars and learning how to row. Rowing Montana's rivers can be one of summer's greatest pleasures. A boat not only allows you to reach great fishing water that you often can't access by wading, but it also takes you through some of the most scenic valleys in the United States. By being properly equipped and prepared, and learning how to control the boat in all situations, you'll be able to fully enjoy your Montana river experience this summer and for years to come.

Rivers are rated by an international 1 to 6 system, with 1 being easiest and 6 unrunnable. Class 4 or 5 rivers or rapids are for experts only. For ratings of Montana rivers, information on river rescue, and more, visit the American Whitewater Association website at www.awa.org. For additional information on river ethics and etiquette, visit the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov and search

Neale Streeks is a writer and river guide in Great Falls.

THE BASIC BACKSTROKE

When rowing downstream, the bow (front of the boat) faces downstream. The rower sits in the middle, facing the bow. The boat flows with the current until it requires navigation around obstacles. Backrowing is the rule of river navigation. When obstacles and river bends unveil themselves, the craft (be it a raft, drift boat, or canoe) is slowed by backing against the current, before engaging the hazard. This is counter-intuitive to those accustomed to paddling or rowing on lakes, where all the movement is forward. Beginners tend to only row forward, pushing themselves headlong into trouble. However, it doesn't take long to learn that pivoting the boat, done by backstroking with one or the other oar, plus continued slowing by backstroking with both oars, will ease you through the maze.

On the opposite page are the basic steps necessary to navigate the illustrated run. The methods and observations apply to most river-running scenarios you'll find in Montana:

START HERE

9 Just before getting centered in the chute, the rower makes a few hard pulls on the right oar to straighten the raft in the current. It's important to not overrow, because momentum built up during the cross-river ferry can continue to take the boat to the right, even after the rower stops rowing. As the boat drops over the ledge, the rower keeps the bow pointed into the biggest standing waves. Wave troughs, turbulence, and foam can make some oar strokes ineffective. Quick additional oar strokes and maneuvering may be needed. While enjoying the ride, the rower looks for boulders and "holes" (powerful backflows) hidden in the waves. Upon leaving this run, the rower continues to look ahead, searching for new dangers and plotting out the best routes. In the quieter stretches, the rower can relax and enjoy the panoramas that surround Montana river runs.

8 While maintaining a 45-degree backrowing ferry, the rower looks ahead for the best entry through the upcoming ledge drop. Right of center is an inverted V, framed by waves, indicating a channel. Threatening holes lie to each side of the V, so the rower must get the correct "setup" (boat positioning) before entering the slot. To get the right setup, sometimes it's helpful to stand up in the raft for a second or two to better see what lies ahead. Do this only in places where the water is calm, and keep a firm grip on both oars.

7 Noticing that downstream are big "ledge holes" that could flip the boat, the rower decides to get over to the right channel and pulls hard on the left oar only, but just a few times. (Pulling too many times on that oar would put the raft sideways in the current, making it more likely to slam into boulders and flip.) Next the rower pulls hard on both oars to ferry to the right.

6 Approaching the left channel, the rower takes slower backstrokes, allowing the momentum from the previous backstroking to carry the craft along. Upon entering the channel, the rower straightens the boat by pulling back hard a few times on the left oar only. The rower scans the upcoming run and plots a course. At this point, the rower could pull in behind Boulder B and rest in the slow eddy water while checking the situation downstream.

5 Continuing to backstroke with both oars, the rower maintains the 45-degree ferry (which occasionally the current will try to push you out of).

4 A more experienced rower could squeak through the narrow chute on the right up ahead, but this rower plays it safe and decides on the more forgiving left channel. To get there, the rower pulls back hard on the right oar a few times, pointing the stern 45 degrees left. By pulling back hard and continuously on both oars, the rower maintains the 45-degree ferry to the left, avoiding the rocks directly downstream.

3 Once in the right-hand channel, the rower straightens the raft by pulling back on the right oar a few times. More rapid pivoting can be achieved by dragging or pushing forward on the left oar, while pulling back hard on the right.

2 Having chosen the channel on "river right" (the right bank when facing downstream; "river left" is the left bank), the rower pulls back a few times on the left oar only, until the stern (back of boat) is pointed 45 degrees toward the right shore (and away from Boulder A). Next the rower pulls back hard with both oars, continuing the 45-degree crossing angle, with enough strokes to miss the boulder. The combined forces of the backstroking with the downstream current slides the boat sideways across the river. Known as "ferrying," this technique allows you to slow down your boat and move left or right across the current at the same time. The key to ferrying is to aim the stern away from obstructions and toward the way you want to go.

1 The rower sees the upcoming rock "garden" (a run filled with boulders) and backstrokes with both oars to slow the boat and look over the situation before getting into it. If there's a logjam ahead, or the rapids look dangerous, the rower will pull ashore, beach the boat, and walk downstream to check out a safe route. "If in doubt, scout," is the basic guideline. If it looks impassable, the rower will tie a rope to the stern and "line" the boat through a tough spot while walking on shore.

ROW, ROW, ROW

It takes practice to know how many oar strokes are needed to cross a width of moving water. Too many strokes can take you too far. Not enough and you end up careening off boulders, bouncing people out of boats, and spinning out of control. Water speed, wave height, turbulence, wind, oar length, and rower strength all factor into how many oar strokes are needed to accomplish each maneuver.

ILLYE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS, SOURCE: NEALE STREEKS