

Let's Go Canoeing!

By CLIFF JACOBSON

Illustrations by RON FINGER

Imagine what it would be like to go back in time and see Minnesota the way it was 200 years ago. There would be no paved roads, no cars, no radios or TVs. No big shopping malls or apartment buildings. But you might get a close-up look at deer, black bears, coyotes, foxes, and great blue herons.

Well, you don't have to pretend, if you have a canoe. A canoe trip down a Minnesota river is like stepping back in time. Trees along shore hide most homes and businesses. Everything looks natural, just like it did centuries ago.

Canoes can go where powerboats can't. They can travel along shallow streams and swampy backwaters. They can glide through the big blue lakes of Minnesota's famous Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Skilled canoeists can safely paddle windy lakes and powerful rapids too. I've even paddled my canoe on the ocean.



A Day on the River

You and your dad rent a 17-foot-long canoe. Together you tie it upside down to the top of your car, then drive to a river. When you get there, your dad unties the canoe and carries it to the water. You bring the picnic lunch and canoeing gear—three paddles (an extra in case one breaks), two PFDs (life jackets), and a waterproof pack that contains rain suits, sweaters, and change of clothes (in case you tip over).

Your dad's friend will drive the car to the "take-out"—the place where you want to end your trip—so you won't have to paddle back upstream. You'll be floating with the current all the way. Dad says the river has some small rapids, or *riffles*. So get ready for fun.

The first few minutes you paddle hard, and the canoe zooms along. It feels good to stretch your muscles. Then, as the day warms up, you slow to an easy, all-day pace. Occasionally,

you put down your paddle and lie back in the canoe, just to watch the puffy clouds float by and feel the wind in your hair.

Around the bend you spot a dappled fawn standing ankle-deep in water near shore. The deer freezes and looks straight at you. Suddenly, it turns and dashes into the forest.

A dozen bends later, you stop for lunch on a sandbar. You swim and fish. Then you nap on the sand, basking like a turtle in the sun. Afterward, you pick up your trash and put it into the canoe. Then you and your dad drift down to the take-out point and your awaiting car.

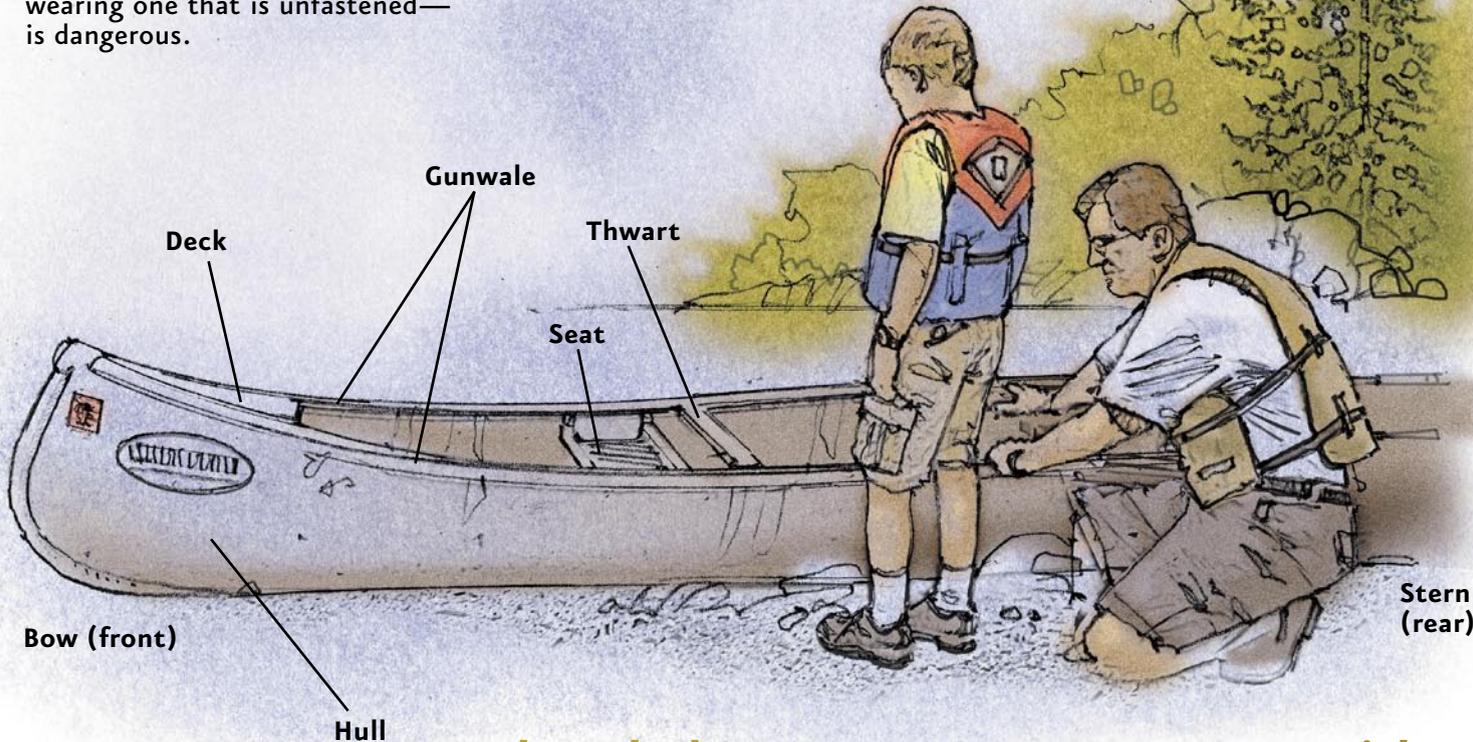
It has been a great day. Just you two, the cool green river, and the magic of your canoe.

Canoeing Basics

Anyone can paddle a canoe, but not everyone can paddle one well. Training and practice will make you a pro. To look good the first time you step into a canoe, follow these rules:

Wear your life jacket.

Not wearing a life jacket—or wearing one that is unfastened—is dangerous.



Float the boat.

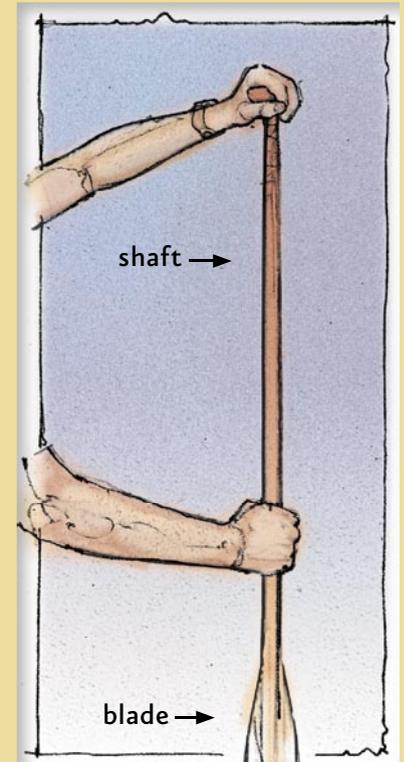
Be sure the canoe is completely floating before you climb into it. Do not climb into or sit in any canoe that is on land, unless it is completely supported by soft sand or grass. Even then, you should ask permission.

Center your weight.

To board the canoe, put one hand on each gunwale, crouch down, and step in. Keep your weight in the center of the canoe. If you step off to one side, you might overturn, or capsize, the canoe.

Choose a paddle.

For a good fit, find a paddle that comes 1 to 2 inches below your chin when you are standing next to it.



Hold the paddle right.

Wrap your upper hand over the top grip. Place your lower hand about a foot above the point where the blade meets the shaft. “Choking” the paddle close to the blade makes you work harder.

How to Paddle

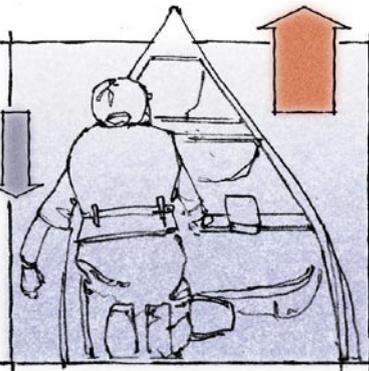
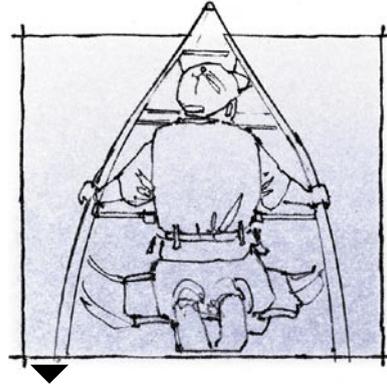
Expert canoeists use a lot of different paddle strokes. You might wonder how you could learn all of them, let alone remember them. Fact is, there are only about 12 canoe strokes. There appear to be more because experts often “reverse” and combine strokes. Figuring out the strokes is like learning math: Once you know how to use small numbers, you can move on to bigger ones.

You’ll learn fast and avoid confusion if you practice by using one hand as a paddle and observe how the canoe reacts.

Climb aboard.

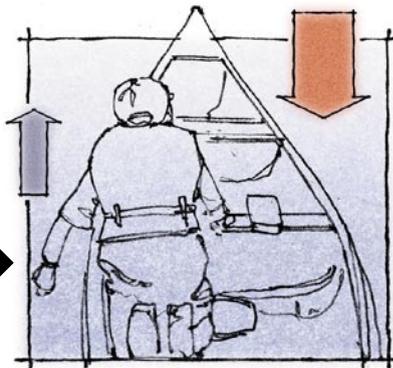
Set the canoe in 6 to 12 inches of calm water. You’ll need some cushioned pads for your knees. Be sure to wear your life jacket. An adult—who is also wearing a life jacket—must be standing by.

Climb into the canoe alone and kneel just behind the center thwart (yoke). The thwart should nearly touch your chest.



Forward paddle.

Now, scoot to one side of the canoe. Put your hand (the one nearest the side of the canoe) in the water and dog paddle forward. Notice that the canoe goes forward and slowly turns away from your hand. Keep dog paddling until the canoe goes around in a circle.

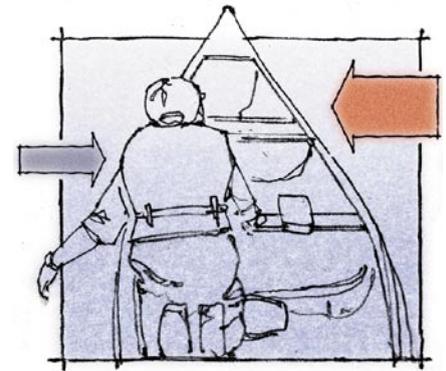


Back paddle.

Now, reverse your hand and paddle backwards.

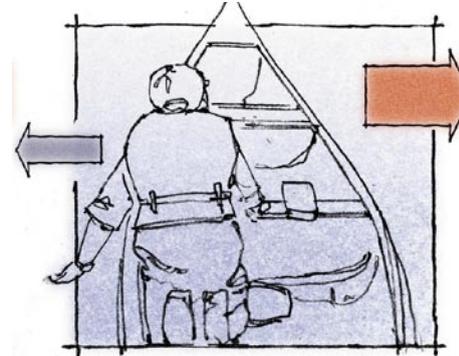
Draw.

Keep experimenting. Reach out to the side and scoop water toward the canoe. The canoe will move toward your hand.



Pry.

Now, push your hand away from the canoe. The canoe will move away from your hand.



If you change the direction of your stroke, or the angle of your hand, the canoe will move differently. You’ll discover that you can make the canoe go in any direction you want with just one hand—and without a partner.

Once you get the hang of hand paddling, move on to a real paddle. A canoe paddle is simply a powerful extension of your hand.

The Hut. The Minnesota Switch (sometimes called the hut stroke) is one of the first strokes you’ll want to learn. It is very powerful and efficient. It is the best stroke to use when you are racing or canoeing into a headwind.

Procedure: You and your partner paddle forward together

on opposite sides of the canoe. When the canoe begins to turn off course, the stern person (the person in back) calls “Hut!” and you both change paddling sides at the same time. (Switch hand positions too, so the opposite one is at the top of the paddle.) This corrects the course of the canoe.



Kinds of Canoes and Canoeing

Touring canoes. These range from fast lake cruisers to husky but slow “trippers” that can carry heavy loads through big rapids. If you want an all-round canoe, a touring canoe is the way to go.



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Racing canoes. Race time on the Rum River. Sixty canoes are lined up, eager to go. You admire the sleek 18½ foot racing canoe nearby, which is much faster than your aluminum canoe. No matter: You’re paddling in the “aluminum” class and other aluminum canoes are your only competition.



BRUCE ADELSMAN

The gun fires, and you and your mom take off. You stroke hard with your paddle. After about five strokes, your mom calls, “Hut!”—the signal for you two to switch paddle sides. Five more strokes and you Hut! again. Soon, you are neck and neck with the leading aluminum canoe in your class. You zoom past the finish line, winning by a yard. Proudly, you accept the trophy and \$30.

“We’re eating out tonight,” booms Mom. “And maybe next year, we’ll get a real racing canoe.”



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Whitewater canoes. Your aunt is an experienced whitewater (rapids) paddler. She plans to take you whitewater canoeing after you have mastered the basic canoeing strokes.

You have learned your strokes and are ready. It’s late May, and the water is cold, so you take precautions. You wear fleece clothing and a waterproof paddling suit to protect you from chilling if you capsize. Your life jacket and helmet are specially designed for running rapids.

All set and away you go. You are paddling bow in a 15-foot Royalex whitewater canoe. As your aunt instructed you, you yell out when you see rocks. Ahead you see foot-high dancing waves, called *horse tails*, that mark the start of a deep, safe rapid. Your heart thumps. You have never seen such big waves.

The canoe rides the rapid like a bucking bronco. First, the bow buries into a wave and you get soaked from spray, then the boat leaps toward the sky.

Up and down, like a roller coaster. But unlike a carnival ride, you and your aunt are in control. What a rush!

Freestyle canoes. This is like figure skating in a canoe that weighs barely 30 pounds. Freestyle canoes can be spun like a top. They feel tippy until you get used to them. Some small Freestyle canoes are the perfect size for kids.

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Light, Fast, Tough, or Stable

Some canoes are aluminum. Others are plastic (Royalex and polyethylene), Kevlar, fiberglass, or wood. Some canoes are inflatable. Some fold to fit into a car trunk. Each kind of canoe has advantages and disadvantages.

Shape is more important than material, because shape determines how the canoe moves. No single canoe design can do everything well. For example, long, skinny canoes go fast, but they don't turn well. They're good for lake travel. Short, stubby canoes are easy to handle but slow. They're good for rivers.

A flat-bottomed canoe that feels

rock-steady on the water might capsize if you lean out too far. Better to choose a round-bottomed canoe that feels tippy at first but "firms up" as you lean.

Although a keel (a finlike piece on the bottom of the boat) will help keep a canoe on course, it can catch on rocks and capsize the canoe. Good canoes don't have keels. They rely on good design to stay on course.

First, choose a canoe shape that meets your needs. Then, consider how the canoe is built. For example, if you want a fast, lightweight canoe for cruising big lakes in the Boundary Waters, Kevlar and carbon-fiber materials (composites) are the way to go. But they are expensive and easily damaged by rocks. Royalex, polyethylene, and old-fashioned aluminum are much cheaper, heavier, and more durable.

Cliff Jacobson, Hastings, is a canoeing and camping guide with 50 years of paddling experience. He teaches and writes about outdoor skills.

Are kayaks cooler than canoes?

No. They're just different. The Inuits (Eskimos) invented kayaks for ocean travel; American Indians developed canoes for use on small lakes and rivers, like the ones in Minnesota. Canoes can hold more gear than kayaks can, and they are easier to portage (carry). You might say that canoes are like pickup trucks, while kayaks are like sports cars.



on line

American Canoe Association: www.acanet.org
Minnesota Canoe Association: www.canoe-kayak.org
Northwest Canoe Company, St. Paul: www.northwestcanoe.com

Learn More

Minnesota has more than 10,000 lakes, and you can canoe on any one. Minnesota is also blessed with thousands of miles of rivers and streams. The Boundary Waters offers 1 million acres of canoeing wilderness. For more than 100 lake and river trips, check out *Paddling Minnesota*, by Greg Breining.

Get a canoe

Some state parks, county or city parks, and nature centers rent canoes. To find a canoe-rental store near you, or close to the place you want to canoe, just type in "canoe

rental Minnesota" on a computer search engine.

Always try a canoe before you buy it. Stores such as Midwest Mountaineering, REI, and Hoigaard's bring canoes to city lakes for potential buyers to try.

For information on popular canoe routes, rentals, and more, contact the DNR Information Center, listed on page 61.

Study the strokes

You might want to join the Minnesota Canoe Association and attend its free paddling clinics (see Online, above).

Or pick up a book: *Basic Essentials Canoeing*, by Cliff Jacobson, is small and easy to read. *Fieldbook*, from the Boy Scouts of America, has a canoeing chapter that teaches basic strokes. *Paddle Your Own Canoe*, by Gary and Joanie McGuffin, includes beautiful pictures and illustrations.

If you've read this far, you have the canoeing bug. So, begin bugging your parents or a grown-up friend to take you canoeing. When they see how much fun canoeing is, they'll be hooked too. ●