



RIVER SAFETY:

THE GEAR YOU SHOULD NEVER BE WITHOUT

by Bob Hicks

The essence of accidents is that they occur quickly and unexpectedly. Nearly everyone who sees or survives a serious accident, on a river or anywhere else, says two things later: "No one expected that," and, "It all happened so fast!"

In a touring kayak on a slow river, you face fewer risks than a whitewater boater in rapids. But rivers, like mountains, present inherent dangers you can never safely ignore. Even a relatively calm river moves with the power of several coal trains, and all rivers have rocks, bridges, and strainers. Getting pinned could mean someone coming home in a body bag unless you know how to react and how fast you must move. A simple flip in cold water demands a quick response. Should you be constantly fearful? No, but you must always be alert, and learn enough to appreciate why all wise and prudent boaters seek out good safety training, carry the right rescue gear, and practice how to use it.

Here are three things you can do to help protect yourself and the people with you from harm.

•First, buy the book *River Rescue* by Les Bechdel and Slim Ray. Read it carefully twice. As you read, be aware that Mr. Ray, despite his skills and expertise, was himself pinned a few years ago. In the few minutes before he could be rescued, the force of the water shattered three of his vertebra; he is now a quadriplegic.

•Second, join the Colorado White Water Association and take the basic safety class. Taught in one day, the class will not make you a safety expert. But you will learn some fundamental concepts and techniques which could one day save your life or the life of a friend. CWWA membership is \$15, and the class is cheap, perhaps \$10.

•Third, use what you've learned from the book and the class to put together your

own safety bag, to hold the emergency gear you might want in a moment of trouble. This presumes you already carry a first-aid kit and a throw bag where you can reach them in a hurry.

A brief word about throw bags: Don't buy one and cram it, new and unused, behind your backrest; if you do, it will be utterly useless when you really need it.

Safety Bag

•Two or three long pieces of climbing webbing and two pieces of cord for prusik loops.

- A roll of duct tape.
- A capilene t-shirt.
- A waterproof headlamp.
- A space blanket.
- A wire saw.
- A patch kit for flotation bags.
- A separate small bag containing a locking carabiner, three or four regular carabiners, two pulleys, and a descender ring.
- A set of waterproof "River Rescue Crib Cards" with diagrams of knots and Z-drag systems.

You must practice using your throw bag, not in your back yard, but on a moving river. CWWA makes you do this, and it is a truly humbling experience. Without practice, the odds are nearly certain that, under the stress of a real emergency, your toss will land helplessly far away from the swimmer, or the rope will snag on itself coming out of the bag and drop by your feet in a tangled mess. The only way to

prevent this is to practice throwing and restuffing the bag on a river.

Back to your safety bag...Different boaters select different gear, depending upon personal preference and the risks presented by their type of boating. As a starting point, here's what's in my bag:

1. Two or three long pieces of climbing webbing and two pieces of cord for prusik loops.
2. A roll of duct tape.
3. A capilene t-shirt.
4. A waterproof headlamp.
5. A space blanket.
6. A wire saw.
7. A patch kit for flotation bags.
8. A separate small bag containing a locking carabiner, three or four regular carabiners, two pulleys, and a descender ring.
9. A set of waterproof "River Rescue Crib Cards" with diagrams of knots and Z-drag systems.

Each spring, I re-check the bag's contents, think about my boating plans for the season, and decide whether to add or remove anything. Most items in the bag have never been used, but they provide an extra margin of safety and peace of mind. This year, be wise; read *River Rescue*, take the CWWA class, and start carrying the gear you might need to save a life, maybe your own.

Flatwater paddlers, even those who never run rivers, should be aware of and learn several different safety skills, such as self-rescue, to cope with sudden wind and waves. Especially on cold mountain lakes and reservoirs, a seemingly placid day trip can become a nightmare in minutes. Don't invite trouble! Take advantage of RMSKC's library and safety instruction at your earliest opportunity.