

Packing and Securing Gear in Your Canoe

Assembling and inspecting all your gear well in advance of any trip is a wise use of your time. You'll likely remember things that need fixing, like a broken jacket zipper, and have plenty of time to take care of these repairs or replenish any supplies. In addition to reminding you of equipment maintenance, laying your gear out will help you determine if you can fit all of these items into your canoe. Again, discipline yourself to remove unnecessary gear if possible.

Keeping It Dry

It's a matter of fact that water will enter the canoe during a paddle. To keep gear dry, waterproof all items. You can do this in two ways. One method is to line regular backpacks and stuff sacks with heavy duty plastic bags, and then pack in your gear. The second is to purchase and store items in heavy-duty, waterproof containers.

There are many options available when it comes to size, material and shape of waterproof carriers, but most fall into soft or hard-cased options. Vinyl dry bags come in various sizes, and some feature transparent sides, which is handy to quickly identify items. Boundary bags are a level beyond basic dry bags. Still made with vinyl, boundary bags feature padded shoulder straps to make portaging easy. Hard cases and waterproof marine boxes come in a variety of shapes and sizes and are good for packing lanterns, stoves, cameras and other fragile items.



"I told you to keep the rice in a plastic bag."

Packing Your Gear

It's a good idea to continue your visual inspection by packing gear into the carry containers you'll use to load the items into the canoe. Many veteran canoeists will tell you to keep like items together. Having designated bags for food, cooking, clothes, first aid, and sleeping and camping gear is a good idea. Remember that if you portage your canoe, you will need to carry these things, so it pays to try and keep items in large containers to reduce the number of trips from take-out to the next put-in points.

Once you've organized your gear and stored it in protective storage bags, the next step is to pack it correctly inside your boat. There's no single "right" way to pack a canoe. But there are a few important considerations that you should keep in mind:

Access

As you store your gear and clothing in your boat, consider how likely it is that you'll need access to it during the day. Pack equipment that you'll need to get to (like your lunch or an extra clothing layer) near the top of your load, and less crucial gear (like your tent, which you probably won't need until nightfall) near the bottom.

Safety Concerns/Special Placements

- **First-aid kit:** A first-aid kit needs to be close at hand. Store yours under your seat, or in a nearby seat or thwart pack.

- **Emergency paddles:** Emergency paddles must be immediately accessible, yet secure enough that they aren't dislocated in rough conditions or capsizes. Most canoeists store them flush against one of the gunwales on the side of their main gear load, shock-corded in place.
- **Signaling devices:** Flares, whistles and other signaling devices should be carried on your person at all times. Most PFDs have small chest pockets that are perfect for the job.
- **Safety lines:** Safety lines should be immediately accessible. Make sure these coiled ropes are secure so they can't come loose and entangle anyone during a capsize.
- **Navigation equipment:** You may have to consult your map and compass a number of times during the day. Store them in a waterproof case, either tied/taped to a thwart, attached to a gunwale nearby, or stuffed in one of your paddling jacket pockets.
- **Incidentals:** Keep a supply of water and/or your water filter nearby so you don't have to stop paddling every time you get thirsty. Store a light snack or lunch nearby as well. Keep your sunglasses handy, either in a pocket or around your neck on some kind of leash. Stash your camera and binoculars close at hand, too, so you're ready for action.

NOTE: Consider storing small items like the incidentals above in a seat or thwart pack along with your other day-use items, so they're easy to reach but aren't loose all over the bottom of your boat.

A Few Hints for Efficient Packing

- Make it as difficult as possible for water to get into your most important gear items. Wrap items like sleeping bags and stoves in extra plastic bags for additional protection, then bury them deep in reliable waterproof dry bags.
- Pack a full set of dry clothes and a pair of shoes in a separate, small dry bag (apart from your main clothing bag), so that should something happen to your main clothes bag(s), you'll still have access to warm, dry clothes.

Test Loading

Continuing on the above step is test loading your canoe with gear. With time, you'll learn the carrying capacity of your canoe, but at first, you'll literally have to practice packing it on dry land. This step might seem overly meticulous, but it's better to test pack your gear on a sunny day on dry land and trouble shoot your cargo strategy in comfort. You don't want to find yourself trying to figure out how to load your canoe in the rain at the start of your camping trip.

Test packing your gear will also get you thinking about how and where you'll want to place items in the canoe. For example, consider the items you want within arm's reach, such as water, sunscreen, bug repellent and a spare paddle. Also take the time during test packing to ensure you have the proper straps and ropes to tie down gear.

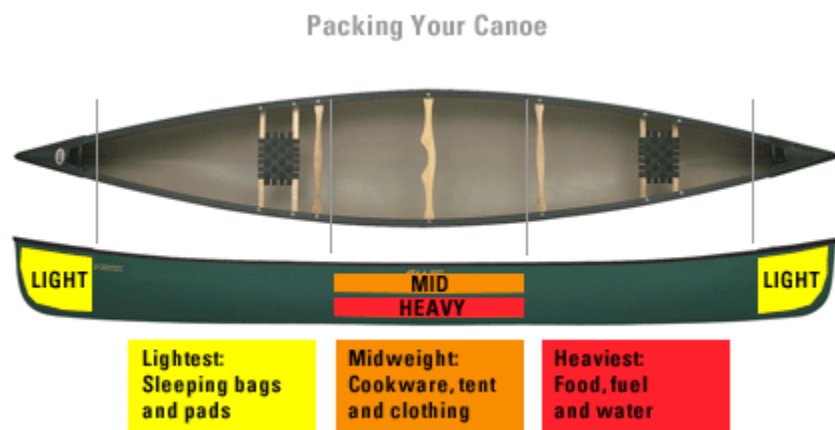
Loading Strategy

Beyond the basic loading strategy of fitting all of your camping gear into the canoe, there are more factors to consider. Weight distribution is one. The same principles apply to loading a canoe as do filling a backpack. Put the heaviest items where they will have the least impact on your balance and maneuverability.

In canoeing, this equates to packing the heavy gear on the bottom and in the center of the vessel. Medium-heavy items can be placed over heavier gear, and lighter items can be placed at the far ends of the canoe. This tactic will keep the canoe balanced and properly trimmed. It's likely you may need to

shift some weight around once paddlers are in as well, but for the most part, the strategy of centering the majority of the weight is a common practice.

You should also keep the gear below the gunwales of the canoe or limit their height as much as possible. Loading items upwards will impact your balance and the canoe's centre of gravity. It will also provide more surface area for the wind to catch. Both of these two scenarios impact the overall stability and maneuverability of the canoe, which can get dangerous in high winds and rough water.



Trim

"Trim" refers to the back-to-front, front-to-back tilt of your boat. A well-trimmed boat lies flat in the water from front to back.

The reason that trim is important is because canoes tend to act like weather vanes in the water. When winds (or currents) start pushing, the end that's sticking out of the water often turns downwind or down current, making staying on course much more difficult. A well-trimmed boat will drift sideways to the wind or current, making it easier for you to stay on course.

Poor trim is often at the root of common paddling problems. If one paddler consistently out-powers the other, for example, or both paddlers have to paddle on the same side of the boat to stay on course, the trim may be to blame.

To ensure proper trim, pack while your boat is in the water whenever you can. When checking for correct trim, keep in mind that your own weight (and the weight of your paddling partner) will affect the tilt.

NOTE: There are situations in which adjusting the trim so that it's a little tilted can actually make paddling easier. When traveling downwind, for example, a boat that's slightly bow-light may catch some wind and travel more quickly. Until you have a few paddling trips under your belt, though, concentrate on keeping your boat as flat and level as possible in the water.

Tie It Down

Different canoe camping trips require different levels of load security. The main purpose of tying equipment down inside a canoe hull is to keep it from floating away or sinking should your canoe suddenly capsize. Always prepare as if you might "go over" during your trip. The chance of capsizing is never zero.

Also keep in mind that fast currents, big waves and winds can grab hold of storage bags and carry them off very quickly. Unsecured bags can be miles downriver or downwind before you have a chance to begin looking for them.

Once you load your canoe, secure the gear to prevent it from shifting around. This is critical to maintaining stability in rough water and to ensure you won't lose items in the event of a swamping. That said, use quick-release knots, tie-down straps, and bungee cords to make it easy to remove gear. Keep this step as uncomplicated as possible to make emergency maneuvers or multi-day portages straight forward and simple.

The most common way to secure equipment loads in place is with a single tie-down line. This involves running the tie-down line from a secure anchor point (usually one of the thwarts) over, under and around your bags until they're lashed securely in place. This approach works best when bags are already wedged securely under your thwarts. A single-line tie-down may loosen up during travel if your bags start shifting around.



Flat-water trips

On short trips across calm, protected waters, paddlers typically secure their gear by either running pack and dry bag straps around their thwarts, or by tying short load lines from each storage bag to the thwarts. These techniques won't keep your gear bags in place in the event of a capsize. But they will keep your gear connected to the boat so it's easier to collect should your boat go over.

More challenging journeys

On longer, more challenging journeys (especially those which involve rough water or rapids), you'll need to make sure that your gear remains securely in place inside your canoe. This is important because:

Bags that are tied in loosely can "bob out" and get caught up on rocks, stumps, or trees.

Properly-secured dry bags and dry boxes provide added buoyancy (as long as they're sealed correctly and the weight of the items inside does not exceed the weight of the water the bag displaces). This added flotation can mean the difference between a sunk, pinned canoe and one which is quickly righted and paddled to safety.