



Level 3: River Packrafting Skills Course

Skills Course Overview

This course is designed as a short program emphasizing safety, enjoyment, and skill development. The skills and knowledge gained through this course can set the stage for a lifetime of exploration, adventures, a healthy lifestyle, appreciation of water and the natural world, lasting memories with family and friends, and a rewarding experience for all - we paddle because it is fun.

If you're a student who would like a resource to prepare for this course, ACA is pleased to provide a free online paddling safety course, [here](#). A certificate of completion is included!

This course is appropriate for all packrafts including traditional decked, non-decked, and self-bailing vessels. The evaluating Instructor, Instructor Trainer, or Instructor Trainer Educator must conduct the course from a packraft.

Skills Course Prerequisites

- Acknowledgment of personal compliance with the [ACA Essential Eligibility Criteria \(EEC\)](#).
- No prior paddling experience or training is required to participate in this course

Course Duration

The course duration should be adjusted to best fit the needs and goals of the participants. Up to 1 day (8 hours).

Course Location / Accessible Venues

Sections of rivers rated up to class I-II, where limited maneuvering in current may be required to avoid obstacles. *A rapid class includes rapids at the lower and upper ends of the difficulty range, designated “-“ and “+” respectively.*

Ideally, this course should include a brief approach to the venue, carrying the deflated packraft.

Course Size

5 Participants : 1 Instructor; with an additional qualified assistant, the ratio can be 10 : 2. The maximum number of participants permitted is 10.

Instructor

This assessment course may be offered by Level 3: River Packrafting (or higher) ACA Instructors, Instructor Trainers, or Instructor Trainer Educators.

Succeeding Courses

- Level 3: River Packrafting Assessment or Certification Course
- Level 4: Whitewater Packrafting Skills, Assessment, or Certification Course

Course Outline

The sequence of this course should be adjusted to best fit the participant’s needs, class location, time allowance, and craft being used.

Introduction, Logistics, and Expectations

- Welcome! We’re so glad that you’ve chosen to further your paddling experience and education by attending this course! Let’s review a few highlights about the ACA
- Let’s talk about the course itinerary, expectations, and limitations
- Lay of the land (and water): the logistics of this venue
- Review liability waiver, assumption of risk, challenge by choice, and medical disclosure
- Life jacket policy: always wear while on the water

Personal Preparation & Getting Started

- Describe and follow safe boating practices (behavior, substance abuse, on water and land etiquette, Leave No Trace ethics)
- Review elements of a float plan (who, what, when, where, filing practices)
- Discuss current weather conditions, forecasts, and other environmental hazards (wind, water, weather, waves) including the approach to the venue
 - River classifications (Understanding of Class I - VI) Water
 - AW safety code
- Discuss importance of developing good judgment, group responsibility, management, and dynamics
- Warm up to reduce injury
- Evaluate individual's swimming ability, water comfort, and confidence prior to beginning the trip
- Review paddling terminology and care of gear (to be reviewed by the instructor):
 - Packraft
 - Types and parts: sizes, geometry, deck, combing, skirt, self-bailer, cargo zippers
 - Outfitting: comfort, safety, entrapment hazards
 - Outfitting: thigh straps, seat height and position, backrest, perimeter lines, tails, locking carabiners
 - Spray skirt and grab loop
 - Stability
 - Tracking
 - Paddle: parts, materials, sizing, hand position
 - How to hold the paddle in correct orientation and grip for effective paddling
 - Spray skirts: types and materials, grab loop*
 - Life jacket: types, materials, fit

- Helmet types and use
- Packing of equipment
 - Methods of packing and transporting packraft and associated gear
 - Securing backpacks and other cargo to, or inside, the boat
 - Entrapment hazards
- Equipment care and maintenance
 - Packraft
 - Drysuits
 - Packs and other equipment
- Review of additional personal and group gear, including, but not limited to
 - Environmental supplies (food, water, appropriate clothing, sunscreen, etc.)
 - Navigational and signaling tools (maps, charts, whistle, etc.)
 - Safety and rescue tools
 - Types of throw ropes, materials, options
 - Where to carry and stow
 - Deployment and re-stuffing
 - Survival equipment (head lamp, fire starting devices, signaling equipment)
 - Packraft repair kit
 - Field repair techniques and materials
 - Home repair techniques and materials
 - First aid kit (appropriate to training)
 - Storage systems (dry bags, dry boxes)
- Review securing boat for transport using proper tie downs, straps, or knots
 - Knots: Figure-8, bowline, truckers hitch, and 2 half hitches
- Review proper techniques to safely lift and carry the boat on shore
- Making safe gear choices while considering weight sensitivity

- Appropriately use communication (paddle, hand, and whistle) signals

**Not required for those paddling a kayak without a spray skirt*

Paddling Efficiently and Comfortably in Flatwater

- Boat stability (trim, posture, rocking, balance, etc.)
- Efficient and effective paddle placement for intended maneuver
- Safe and effective body usage: bio-mechanics (body, linkage, and rotation)
 - Avoidance of positions that contribute to shoulder injury
- Parts of strokes: CPR (catch, power, recovery), static and dynamic

Flatwater Strokes

- Forward
- Back
- Sweeps: forward and reverse
- Draws: bow and stern (out of water and in water recovery)
- Sculling draw
- Rudder
- Low and high braces to prevent capsize

Flatwater Maneuvers

- Launching and landing: low dock or bank to enter and exit safely
 - Three points of contact, keep weight low, etc.
- Propel the boat forward in a straight line 15-20 boat lengths
- Stop the boat within two boat lengths
- Move the boat backwards in a reasonably straight line 3-4 boat lengths
- Abeam: move the boat sideways 20 feet (6 meters) to each side
- Propel the boat in a figure of 8 course around markers 3-4 boat lengths apart
- Turn the boat while maintaining forward motion 90° to the right and left

River Hydrology Features and Associated Risks

- Currents
- Rocks (upstream and downstream Vs)
- Ledges and low head dams (horizon lines)
- Pins and entrapment
- Strainers/sieves
- Bends
- Undercut rocks or ice
- Dams/flow diversion structures and pipelines
- Holes and hydraulics

Moving Water Maneuvers in Venue

- Front ferries: to a fixed point
- Eddy turns: with boat leans into wide eddies
- Peel-outs
- C-turns
- S-turns
- J-lean (heeling the boat)
- Veering, carving, and paddling the “inside circle”
- Front surfing

Safety and Rescue

- Principles of Rescue
 - Use of safe rescue strategies such as T-RETHROG (Talk, Reach, Throw, Row, Go) including throwable buoyancy aids and throw bag use
 - Rescue Priorities: people, boat, paddle, gear
 - Responsibilities of the group, rescuer, swimmers

- Appropriate use of rescue and safety gear
- Emergency procedures
- River running strategies
 - River classifications (understanding of Class I - VI)
 - Scouting on shore and by boat
 - Portaging and lining
 - Group organization on the river
 - Lead boat, sweep boat, safety boats, spacing, group members with repair kits, first aid kits, and first aid and CPR training
- Self care and care of other group members
 - Importance of fueling, hydration, clothing/insulation, and sun protection
 - Cold shock, hypothermia, and hyperthermia: prevention and treatment
- Calmly exit the boat after a controlled capsize, using proper body position and contact with the craft and paddle
 - When exiting the packraft with a spray skirt* after capsize: must be modeled at least two ways: (1) utilizing the spray skirt grab loop, (2) releasing the skirt off the hip/hull tubes, or (3) driving knee up through the spray skirt
- Self rescue: swim 20 feet (6 meters) to shore in moving water using defensive and offensive techniques
- Strategies and techniques for boat recovery including bumping, bulldozing, towing, or swimming a boat to shore
- Responding to sudden deflation (popped boat or accident cargo fly opening)
- Swimmer tow options
- Self and assisted swimmer re-entry techniques (i.e., heel hook, rescue sling, etc.)
- Assisted rescues: boat over boat or side by side or others appropriate to conditions
- Unresponsive paddler rescue
- Throw rope use

- One and two person wading with a paddle
- Emptying water from the boat (on shore, bailers, pumps, etc.)

**Not required for those paddling a packraft without a spray skirt*

Conclusion and Wrap Up

- This has been a great class! Let's talk through what we've learned with a group debrief and/or Individual feedback
- Course limitations: there is always more to learn, and the skills and concepts we discussed require more practice and experience
- First aid and CPR training is a very valuable tool and could make the difference between a "near miss" and an emergency requiring outside rescue / first responders
- Paddling is a lifetime sport - there are local organizations, clubs, events, competitions, and classes through which you can continue your learning and build community. Get connected!
- Handouts and reference materials (if applicable)

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<https://americancanoe.org>

This curriculum is managed by the ACA Packrafting Committee. To connect with the leadership of this committee, please view the SEIC Committee rosters on [the ACA website](#).