



True Stories of Survival,  
Bravery, and Quick Thinking

# WHITEWATER RESCUES

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**MENASHA RIDGE PRESS**

Your Guide to the Outdoors Since 1982

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# 1

## THE EARLY YEARS: BETTER BOATS, RISKIER RUNS

**ALTHOUGH PEOPLE HAVE BEEN PADDLING** rapids for hundreds of years, boats used before World War II were easily damaged, and this made paddlers extremely conservative. Soon after the war, the first aluminum canoes arrived on the market. They were incredibly tough, which changed everything. People attempted steeper, rockier rivers and started developing better techniques. Over time, the sport drew a number of engineers and scientists who studied hydrology and developed new, dynamic river-running skills that form the basis of our sport.

The Europeans were years ahead of us, as American paddlers competing in the world championships in the 1960s quickly found out. Our guys may have finished at the bottom of the results, but they were fast learners. They brought home new designs and techniques that jump-started the sport. Several European experts who moved to the United States after the war helped teach and inspire a generation of paddlers.





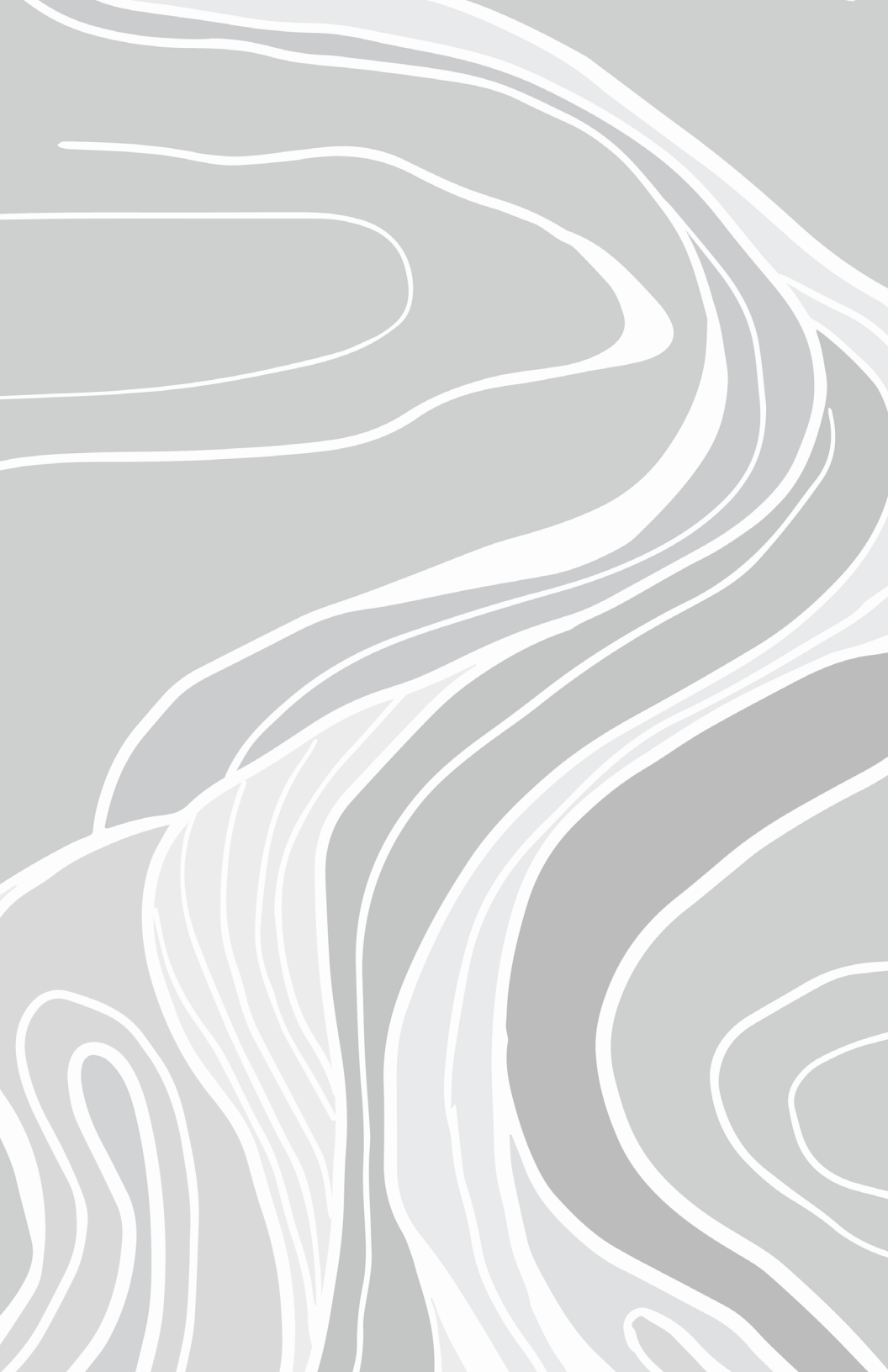
Swiss slalom canoeist Eduard Kunz competes in a folding kayak in the 1949 ICF Canoe Slalom World Championships in Geneva.

I began paddling with a group of friends from college in the 1960s, a time when whitewater sport was small but growing. Almost all decked boats in the United States were homemade or built by small, one-man shops. Much of the gear was homemade as well. Paddling was usually done in Class II–III rapids, serious rescues were infrequent, and few paddlers carried ropes or other rescue gear. There was no real rescue training, and paddlers confronting a problem scratched their heads and developed their strategies on the spot. Here are accounts of a few rescues from that era.

## **BAD PIN ON LOYALSOCK CREEK**

**IN 1966, I WAS PART OF A GROUP** of friends who started the Outing Club at Bucknell University in central Pennsylvania. My roommate was a counselor at a canoe camp and was very enthusiastic about whitewater. One trip down a local Class II creek in an open canoe and I was hooked! By April 1969, my buddy Jim Love and I were both kayakers. Thanks to the Penn State Outing Club pool sessions, we both had pretty good rolls. We'd run some Class II rapids and were looking for more excitement. We called our contact at the Penn State Outing Club and got invited on a trip down Loyalsock Creek, a Class III run in north-central Pennsylvania known for its frigid climate and icy water. In addition to our two kayaks, there were four tandem Grumman open canoes in our group. Putting in a few minutes behind us was a nationally known group of expert C-1 racers I'd met at Penn State's pool sessions.

All went according to plan until we reached the S-Turn rapid, one of the hardest on the run. I flipped and immediately executed my first-ever river roll in painfully cold water. I was whooping and



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# BAD SWIMS AND NEAR DROWNINGS

**WE KNOW THAT WHITEWATER RAFTERS** take a swim from time to time—it's part of the sport. That's why paddlers wear life vests and wetsuits. But although some swims can be easy and even fun, some are truly horrible. You can be thrown against rocks, pulled under by countercurrents, recirculated by holes, or just pummeled by breaking waves that go on and on and on. The risk of flush drowning, a whitewater death that occurs despite the use of a PFD, is real. Many paddlers have experienced swims that took them to the limits of their endurance. Experienced boaters know how to swim in rapids. They roll over on their back and assume a feet-first position. They relax when they are being pummeled, trusting their PFD to pull them to the surface. They are prepared to swim into an eddy at the first opportunity. Novices are often frightened, and this makes even a routine swim seem like a near-death experience.

Here are some reports of bad swims that could have been worse.





View of Great Falls on the Potomac

## BAD SWIM ON THE LOWER YOUGHIOGHENY

THIS ACCOUNT OF A SWIM THAT HAPPENED on Pennsylvania's Lower Youghiogheny (pronounced "yocka-gain-ee") River describes a pretty routine incident; the swimmer was quickly rescued by her own group. This account is included not because the swim was a true near miss but to remind all of us who deal with novices how traumatic a swim can be. Furthermore, since even a simple incident like this can be quite strenuous, it underscores the need for participants to be in good physical condition. The following letter to the editor was submitted by Joan B. and published in the *Pittsburgh Press* on August 15, 1987:

*Several years ago, my husband and I went on a guided raft tour at Ohiopyle. It was Memorial Day and the river was running high due to spring rains.*

*Before the beginning of the trip, we were all given life jackets and told what to do. We were told that if*



# 3

## PINS AND ENTRAPMENTS

**MOST WHITEWATER RESCUES** are low-stress, straightforward events. Pick up a swimmer. Recover loose gear. Wade out and pull a pinned boat free. But when a paddler is caught by a strainer or undercut rock, or pinned inside their boat, the pressure is on! But with the right equipment and skills, some amazing saves have been made.

### DOWD CHUTES STRAINER RESCUE

**TONY BARB, AN INTERMEDIATE KAYAKER**, was running Colorado's Eagle River with an intermediate kayak clinic from Boulder Outdoor Center. This is his description of the near miss resulting from a very quick rescue.

*On June 24, 1994, we were kayaking the section just downstream of Dowd Chutes on the Eagle. I was unable to roll and had to swim. Ken, my instructor, was right behind me as I worked toward the river-right shore. I shoved the kayak toward shore only 10 feet out and braced off a large rock. I dropped my legs to try to*



**Paddlers in Westwater Canyon in Utah**

*find the bottom, and suddenly my right calf slipped into a fork in a tree that was about 4 feet underwater and quite invisible. I was instantly pinned and pushed over, with my head 8 inches below the surface. I fought and twisted, but there was absolutely no give. I was already tired from my swim and had resigned myself to drowning when suddenly my head was lifted up, high enough for a breath. There was another pull from above, and I felt a slight loosening from the log fork. I pulled hard and was free. Ken swam me ashore, where I tried to recover from shock and exhaustion. I am alive today because of Rob and Ken and have only the highest praise for these two professionals.*



Ken Evans and Rob Gaffney, both instructors from the Boulder Outdoor School, had been following Tony closely during his swim. Realizing that he was pinned, they eddied out behind a rock just upstream. This is the same one from which the victim had just pushed off. Ken hopped out of his boat, reached down, and was able to grab hold of Tony's PFD and pull him free. The whole incident took about 30 seconds. Tony said his mistake was attempting to stand in what he thought was an eddy but was actually 4–5 feet of moving water. It's an error he won't make again!

## OCOEE BRIDGE PILING RESCUE

**JOHN NORTON OF ATLANTA**, an experienced paddler who had run the Ocoee River many times, attempted to rescue his friend's canoe above Hell Hole on October 23, 1982. Misjudging his proximity to the bridge abutment as he ferried to his friend's boat, John flipped upstream, and his canoe pinned solidly on the abutment. When he attempted to bail out, one of his feet got entangled in his thigh strap. Though John had a knife, he was unable to use it to cut himself free. The current pushed him underwater, where he struggled for breath.

Onshore, professional guides from High Country Outfitters in Atlanta were setting a throw line for an upcoming trip. Though they saw the accident happen, they did not immediately realize that John was trapped in his boat.

Once they determined John was underwater, they ran to the bridge and lowered a guide, Karen Berry, 20 feet below to the pinned boat. Karen secured her footing atop the pinned boat and tied a line lowered from above to the victim's belt, allowing John's head to be



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## INJURIES, RESUSCITATIONS, AND EVACUATIONS

### DIFFICULT RESCUE ON A REMOTE MEXICAN RIVER

THIS ACCOUNT POINTS OUT THE DIFFICULTY of summoning medical help in remote regions of the world. There was no 911-type number to call in Mexico back then. Were it not for the man's political connections, he could have died on the river or languished in a small rural hospital. As it was, the long wait for competent care had lasting effects. The following information was compiled from an article in the *Houston Chronicle* and several phone calls.

On December 30, 1986, a pioneering trip down a remote Mexican river ended in a disabling injury. Steve Daniel, 36, a noted Texas river explorer with a passion for Class IV–V self-supported expeditions, and his companion, Victor Jones, were ahead of the group on the Río San Pedro Mezquital when Daniel attempted to run a steep, rocky drop. He hit a rock, his kayak broached and pinned, and his body disappeared from view. Victor was able to leap from the shore to the rock and recover the boat, allowing Daniel to float free. Victor



The West Virginia National Guard practices swiftwater rescue techniques on the Cheat River.



## BACK INJURY ON NORTH CAROLINA'S GREEN RIVER GORGE

THE DETAILS OF THIS ACCOUNT were provided by Gordon Grant and Slim Ray.

On July 15, 1991, noted paddlesports writer and rescue instructor Slim suffered a disabling back injury following a bad run of Sunshine Falls, one of the most serious drops on North Carolina's Green River Gorge.

The Green River Gorge is a stretch of Class V+ rapids in a very steep gorge. Because of regular water releases, it has been run frequently by experts. Slim was part of a strong group that included several first-timers and was led by boaters who were very familiar with the river. The group proceeded cautiously, allowing plenty of time for scouting and carrying, and arrived at Sunshine Falls without incident.

Sunshine is a technically difficult rapid generally regarded as one of the more serious drops on a section noted for its seriousness. To run it, one must dive diagonally across the lip of a 15-foot drop into a small eddy, turning immediately to run a rocky 5-foot drop. Failure to make the move results in the boat falling vertically onto a rock shelf.

The group arrived at the rapid around 3 p.m. Four of the boaters made the run without incident; four carried around the drop. Slim indicated that he'd like to make the run. He caught the eddy on river left and began his drive to the right from there. As he went over the drop, the boat lost its angle and went straight down, hitting the rock with terrific force. After pinning momentarily, the boat pitched forward and disappeared into the spray of the falls.

Slim was sucked into the hole upside down, and he intended to wait until he floated free before rolling up. Instead, he was sucked



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## PADDLERS HELPING OTHERS

**PADDLERS ARE OFTEN IN THE RIGHT PLACE** at the right time to rescue members of the non-paddling public. It's especially rewarding to use your whitewater skills to help others.

### RESCUE ON THE DELAWARE'S LAMBERTVILLE RAPID

**LAMBERTVILLE RAPID ON THE DELAWARE RIVER** is a Class II–III rapid on a very large, wide river. There are two wing dams protruding from the side of the river, so the flow is concentrated in the center. It makes for good play boating—and a long swim if you mess up. Mary Koeppel tells this story of a near drowning after an ill-equipped group attempted to run it.

*On Saturday, August 8, 1987, four Wilmington Trail Club paddlers arrived at the wing dam at Lambertville rapid on the Lower Delaware River. This long Class II+ drop is a popular “practice rapid” for Philadelphia-area boaters. Water levels were moderate.*

*After about 4 hours, we decided to call it a day. I noticed a small group of tiny rafts (the kind you use in*



A kayaker approaches to assist a fellow paddler who has capsized.

*a swimming pool) approaching the rapids. No one was wearing PFDs. The rafts dropped into the top hole, and almost everyone was thrown out. I watched the people floating downstream and thought I noticed a head disappear. Then I heard a woman screaming and realized that the person had disappeared near a rowboat that had drifted down and become pinned during the last week. I realized that someone was trapped underwater, upstream of the boat. I sent one person to the Pennsylvania side to call for help. My husband and I jumped in our boats to aid the rescue. Both of us are certified in CPR, and I was fearful that we would have to use it.*



*By this time, two kayakers had gotten out of their boats and managed to work their way on top of the row-boat. They had to get in the water upstream of the boat and reach down to locate the submerged person. They began pulling but could not locate the person. Finally, they decided they could not worry about broken bones and pulled until they brought up the body. When we reached the boat, the kayakers had resuscitated the boy, who had not been breathing and was quite blue when they brought him up. We set the boy on the deck of my husband's boat and ferried him to a large, flat rock. He said his name was Drew, that he was 8 years old, and that his stomach hurt. He had bruises there and all over his back. We covered him with shirts and spray skirts to keep him warm. We sent for an open canoe and ferried him to shore, sending the kayakers who made the rescue ahead to fill in the paramedics at the waiting ambulance about his condition. Another kayaker transported the mother to shore.*

*Quick thinking on the part of many people and close teamwork made the difference between life and death here. The river is popular with tubers, and there are numerous near misses each year.*

## **NEAR DROWNING CAUSED BY RAFT ROPE ENTANGLEMENT**

**LOOSE LINES ARE A SERIOUS HAZARD** in whitewater. Several deaths and close calls have been reported because of them. Tie-downs, bowlines, and throw bags should be secured before you get on the water . . . or else!



# 6

## WORKING WITH FIRST RESPONDERS

### RESCUERS ARRESTED: HOW IT HAPPENED AND WHAT WE CAN LEARN

OVER THE YEARS, I'VE FOUND MANY EXAMPLES of strong cooperation between paddlers and first responders. Building this relationship takes time. Outfitters and paddling clubs who have a solid relationship with EMS have usually worked on it *before* an emergency. Some paddlers and guides join rescue squads, and some outfitters schedule joint training to develop a formal or informal relationship with local teams. In places like the Nantahala and New Rivers, rescue squads typically depend on outfitters to manage the in-water portion of the rescue. Once the victim is onshore, the rescue squad takes over. Then the greatest strengths of EMS professionals—advanced medical care and fast transportation—come into play.

Swiftwater rescue training for first responders has come a long way since the mid-1970s, when most of them were untrained in swiftwater rescue. This article I wrote for the May–June 2011 issue



Yellowstone National Park rangers participate in swiftwater rescue training.

of the *American Whitewater Journal* explains some of the issues that get in the way of better cooperation nowadays.

Experienced whitewater paddlers know how to deal with anything from a routine swim to a life-threatening pin. Despite this, very few of them are prepared to work with emergency responders. When police, fire, and rescue personnel arrive, the situation changes. They are, to use a legal phrase, the designated state authority. This



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## ACCIDENTS AT WATERFALLS

**WATERFALL RUNNING IS RELATIVELY NEW.** I remember the first “big ledges” we ran in the early 1970s. Fifteen to 20 feet was considered high, and low flows were mandatory. But the sport has progressed. By the early 21st century, waterfalls of 50–70 feet were being run routinely, and drops of more than 100 feet have been run a number of times. While skilled paddlers make running high drops look easy, the forces released dropping over a big waterfall are really impressive. Although there are recognized techniques for making successful runs, serious injuries result when things go wrong. Here are a few examples.

### BAD LAUNCH CAUSES BROKEN BACK

**KAYAKER CHRISTIAN COOK** describes his close call running the falls of Colorado’s Crystal Gorge.

*I spent most of two months in the summer of 2007 creek-ing in Colorado. It was my first season out there, and I had really gotten into the whole creeking thing. After paddling almost every day for two months, I was feeling pretty good and started running some harder stuff. After*





Kayaker Eric Deguil runs a waterfall in Voss, Norway, for Ekstremsportveko, an extreme sports festival.

## LOW WATER LEVEL KILLS APPROACH, CAUSES BAD LANDING

RUSH STURGES POSTED THIS EXPERIENCE on his *River Roots* blog (no longer online).

*Our group arrived at Bonito Falls in Argentina for the second time on December 14, 2009. On a previous visit, Ian Garcia and Tyler Bradt had paddled to the lip but determined that the water was too low and did not run. Three weeks later, we returned to identical water levels. With only five more days in the country, I was anxious to bag this drop. Our crew was Steve Fisher, Evan Garcia, Ian Garcia, Anton Imler, and myself. We made the decision to run it.*

*From a distance, this drop looks good to go, but when you get to the lip, you realize how difficult the entrance is: a diagonal lateral feeding to the right, then current moving back to the left, before finally falling around 60 feet to the pool at the bottom. You don't want to be on the river-left side of the drop, as there is a big flake that could send you flat. We decided Ian and I would go first while the rest of the crew filmed and photographed from the bluffs. We were both nervous and excited to get it over with.*

*Honestly, one of the sketchiest parts of this drop is scouting it. To get to the lip, we tied a rope off to a rock and then waded through the fast-moving current. One slip into the rushing river could send you over the falls. I hate this kind of thing and took my time getting to the scouting*



# 8

## STAYING OUT OF TROUBLE IN WHITEWATER

READING ALL THESE NEAR-MISS REPORTS can be pretty scary! But whitewater paddling is remarkably safe when you take the right precautions. Here are some things to think about:

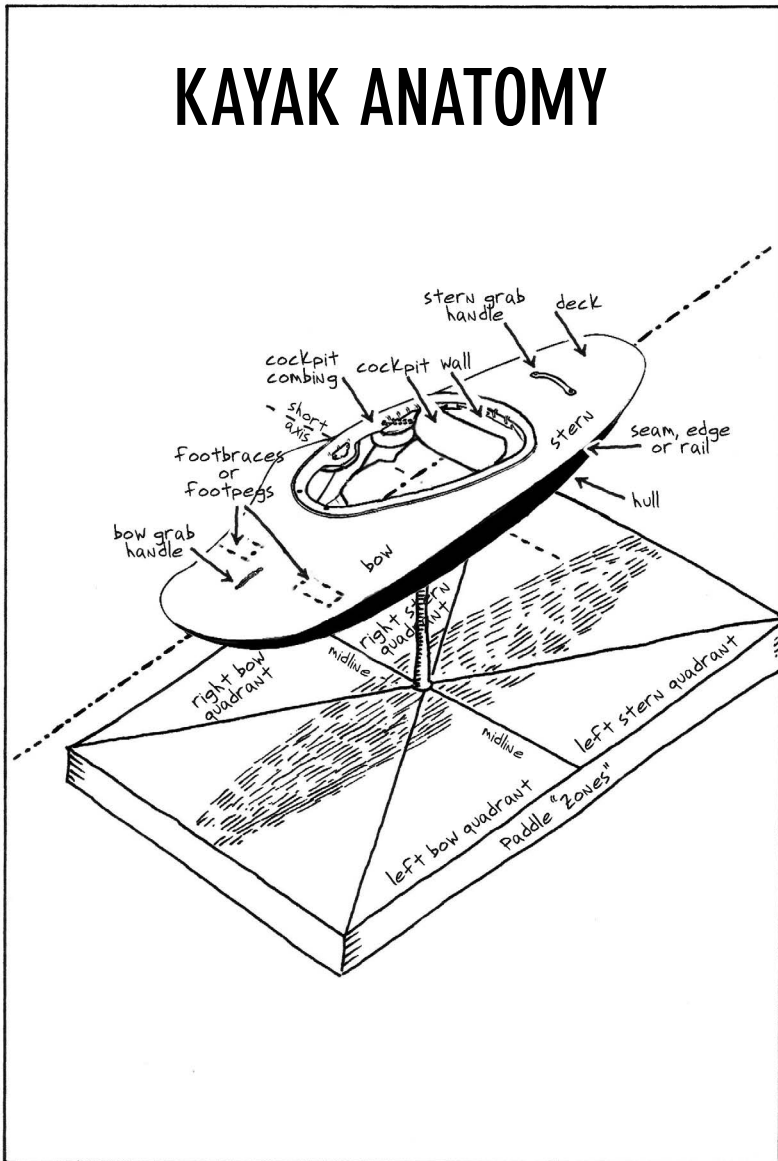
- **Wear a life vest.** A PFD would have prevented at least 25% of all moving-water deaths reported to American Whitewater in the last 20 years.
- **Avoid alcohol and drugs** while on the river, and moderate your consumption the night before so that you are well rested and at your best on the day of your trip.
- **Don't paddle alone and avoid one-boat trips.** You will need help from time to time in whitewater. Make sure there are at least two boats in your party (three is better). If a single boat carrying two or more people flips, you have no backup and are at the mercy of the current.
- **Be prepared for the challenges of high, cold water.** Cold water requires wetsuits or drysuits to avoid hypothermia; high water requires expert paddling skills



A guided trip with a professional outfitter is a wise choice for first-timers.

because there is little margin for error. (See Appendix A, page 301, for more gear suggestions.)

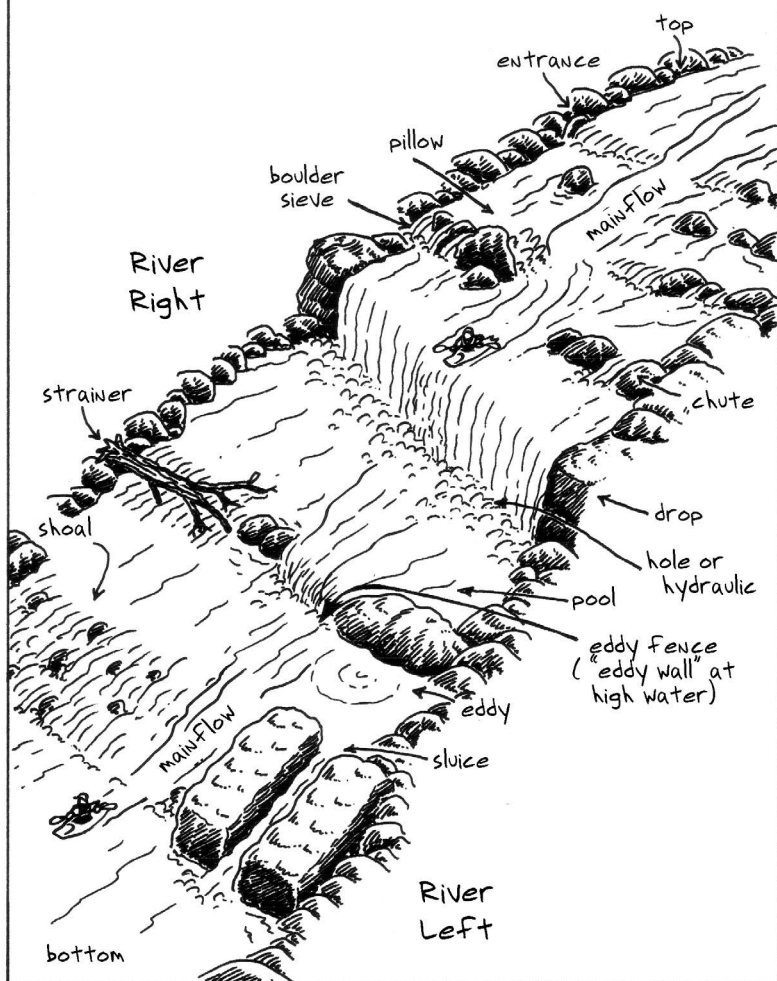
- **Know before you go.** Find out how difficult the rapids are before your trip. Avoid known danger spots like strainers and low-head dams.



William Nealy, from *Kayak: The New Frontier* (Menasha Ridge Press, 2007)



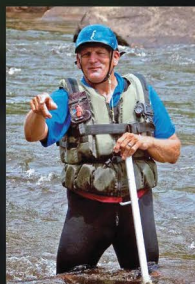
# RAPID ANATOMY



William Nealy, from *Kayak: The New Frontier* (Menasha Ridge Press, 2007)

# INCREDIBLE SURVIVAL STORIES FROM THE PEOPLE WHO LIVED THEM

**RISK IS A PART OF LIFE**, but it takes a special person to grab a paddle and navigate over whitewater. Sometimes, inexperienced paddlers make terrible mistakes. Other times, experts get caught in dangerous conditions. These life-or-death moments can end in tragedy, or they can become the setting for heroic rescues.



Author Charlie Walbridge, a former river guide, maintains the American Whitewater Accident Database and produces biannual reports of US whitewater fatalities. The lessons learned from this information have saved countless lives. In *White-water Rescues*, he shares more than 80 of the most thrilling true stories of survival, bravery, and quick thinking ever submitted to the database. You're sure

to be inspired by the edge-of-your-seat accounts that portray the courage and ingenuity of whitewater paddlers.

Charlie's goal is to help paddlers stay safe by sharing what has worked for others. There is much to learn from and admire in each of these accounts.



Biography/Survival

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