

## Safety Activity Checkpoint

### Canoeing

**HIGH-ADVENTURE ACTIVITY: Trip or High-Adventure Approval Form Required**  
**First-Aider and Lifeguard/Trained Water Rescue Required**

**Council Approval:** Required

**Activity Permitted For:** \*D B J C S A

**Not Recommended For:** \*Daisies, except with an experienced adult in each canoe and on flat water

\*Camps with current ACA accreditation are expected to adhere to current ACA standards for canoeing with all Girl Scouts including Daisies.



### About Canoeing

Canoeing is a great team-building exercise and a fun way to enjoy the outdoors. Whether you are playing games on a pond or taking a whitewater trip on a river, there is a canoeing option for everyone. Canoeists sit on a seat or kneel in the canoe, and use a paddle to propel their boat. Most canoes are for two people, but some canoes can hold up to 12. Canoes that are 15 feet or shorter should hold no more than two paddlers with no passengers.

Currents, waves, rapids, and wind affect conditions. Those conditions and type of canoe will determine what is appropriate for your troop. See the [Paddling and Rowing Sports--Master Progression Chart](#) for details. Be sure all participants have the training and experience to participate in the level expected. Class III rapids require prior council approval. Participants may be Cadettes and older who have demonstrated and documented prior experience of progression.

Whitewater canoeing can only be done on water that has been run and rated, and only up to Class III difficulty, as defined by the American version of the [International Scale of River Difficulty](#).

## Learn More:

- [American Canoe Association](#)
- [Paddling magazine](#)
- Interactive maps of places to go: [Paddling.com](#) and [American Whitewater](#)
- Instructional videos about canoeing strokes: [Paddling.com](#)

## Making Activities Accessible

In order to make your activity accessible to girls of all abilities, it's important to communicate with all girl attendees and their caregivers to learn about and accommodate their varied support needs. For resources and information on accessible sport and adventure activities, visit [Move United](#) and [Paralympic.org](#).

## Equity

In addition to physical and social-emotional disabilities, consider the history, culture, and past experiences of the girls in your troop that could affect a girl's ability to equally participate in an activity. Work with girls and families to understand how an activity is perceived. Ensure that all girls and their families feel comfortable that they have access to whatever is needed to fully participate, such as the proper equipment, prior experiences, and skills needed to enjoy the activity.

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**Standard Safety Guidelines.** Refer to the "Standard Safety Guidelines" in the [Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints](#) which apply to all Girl Scout gatherings and activities. When the adult-to-girl ratio, or other safety parameters, are stricter for a specific activity than in the Standard Safety Guidelines, always follow the stricter parameters in the activity chapter.

**COVID-19 Guidelines.** Review the "Coronavirus Safety in Girl Scouts" section in the [Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints](#) under the "Standard Safety Guidelines" section and be certain to consult with [GSNorCal's specific COVID-19 guidance](#). When applicable, always call ahead to the vendor, property or facility involved to check for their COVID-19 safety requirements as you prepare to take girls for this activity.

**Emergency Action Plan (EAP).** Review and document your Emergency Action Plan (EAP) ahead of time before taking girls out for this activity. Think through scenarios of what can go wrong such as an accident, physical injury to a canoer, a canoe capsizing, or sudden illness.

**Ensure participants are able to swim and are comfortable in the water.** Success on the water depends on comfort and ability in the water. Consult with parents/guardians about girls' swim abilities before the event. See the [Swimming Safety Activity Checkpoint](#) for water-abilities testing samples, or ask your instructor for guidelines. Only strong swimmers are approved for whitewater canoeing. See Volunteer Essentials for information about first-aid standards and training. [[SAFETYWISE: First Aid & First Aiders](#)]

**All paddlers must wear a U.S. Coast Guard–approved life jacket.** Type III life jackets are recommended. They should fit according to weight and height specifications. Inspect life jackets to ensure that they are in good condition and contain no tears.

**Practice recovery procedures.** The instructor demonstrates self-recovery and righting techniques. Girls learn and practice these skills. This will help prevent being disoriented or frightened if they end up in the water, and provides important skills.

**Verify instructor knowledge and experience.** The skill level of the adults must be higher than the difficulty of the intended canoeing type. At least one adult instructor or guide should be American Canoe Association (ACA) Canoe Level 1 Instructor or higher, ACA Paddle Sports Safety Facilitator in canoeing, Girl Scouts small craft safety training certification/Certified Canoeing, or ARC Lifeguarding with Waterfront Module, or has the demonstrated equivalent experience of such credentials.

Also- if using lifeguards to oversee canoeing, confirm that they have the proper training, experience, and rescue equipment for the body of water and the specific watercraft involved.

The instructor or guide must be able to communicate effectively commands and instructions.

**Ensure that the instructor or guide reviews site-specific emergency techniques.** For example, whitewater canoeists are instructed in how to float through rapids, how to breathe while swimming in rapids, and how to swim to shore. The lead instructor or guide must have firsthand knowledge of the hazards and conditions of the location being used.

**Check lifeguard qualifications.** Ensure that lifeguards overseeing canoeing have the proper training, experience, and rescue equipment for the body of water and the specific watercraft involved.

**Be aware of the lifeguard's position.** A stationary lifeguard can only be used when canoeing is taking place on flat water close to shore. For large bodies of water or rivers, the lifeguard must be in a canoe and positioned with the group.

**Arrange for watchers/helpers.** An adult watcher or skilled helper is required for certain size groups. This person should have basic skills in the activity and be able to support the group by reinforcing instructions. They also watch for possible emergencies and help the instructor with rescues if needed. Basic water rescue, small craft safety, or similar training is the preferred preparation. Consult the instructor for specific watcher/helper qualifications.

**Select a safe site.** Do not paddle in unknown areas. Know the locations of all shipping channels. Do not canoe more than one mile from the nearest shore.

Make sure of the following:

**Avoid busy channels when possible.** If you must cross them, do so at a 90-degree angle to the channel traffic. Also, avoid surf zones and areas with standing waves, unless they are part of planned whitewater canoeing.

**On long passages, boats should stay close enough together** that a group decision can be made if wind and water conditions change.

**Be aware of possible changes in water level,** due to tides or dam releases, and how these affect water conditions

**Avoid hazards** such as strainers, sieves, hydraulics, waterfalls, bridges, dams, fences, and low power lines. Rapids must be avoided unless part of a planned whitewater route.

**Research water conditions and select the right boats for participant skill level.** Consider weather and water conditions, weight of passengers, and equipment to be carried. Make sure:

- The craft weight and capacity are not exceeded. Many boats have a plate near the stern (back), showing these maximums.
- Canoes that are 15 feet or shorter hold no more than two people.
- You are aware of the type of canoe needed for the water to be used.
- Canoes are not overloaded with gear, and gear is distributed evenly among paddlers.

**Know universal signals.** Whistle and visual signals are used to pass messages or call for help. Learn them at [Paddling.com](http://Paddling.com)

**File a float plan.** If participating in a long-distance trip, file a float plan with a reliable person who will notify authorities should your group not return on time.

**Get a weather and wind report.** Check [Weather.com](https://www.weather.com) or other reliable weather sources, including the “boat and beach” forecast, which covers wind speed, water temperature, and wave height. Be prepared with a backup plan or postpone the activity if weather prevents the outing.

**Review what to do in a storm.** If thunder is heard or lightning seen, get everyone off the water immediately. Do not return until at least 30 minutes have passed since the last evidence of the storm. If you cannot get to shore, secure all loose gear, keep a sharp lookout for other boats and obstructions, head into the wind at a 45-degree angle, and stay low. If possible, do not touch metal or water, when lightning is possible.

**Use the buddy system.** Instruct girls to keep their boat within sight of at least one other boat. Use the buddy system on the water with boats the same as you would on land.

**Transport boats safely.** Use car-top racks or trailers specifically designed for canoes. Secure boats with two lines across the top (one at each end), and with lines at the bow and the stern. Drivers must have prior experience hauling trailers.

**Report accidents.** Notify marine law enforcement and GSNorCal as appropriate. [GSNorCal Accident-Injury Report](#)

## Privately-owned Canoes

Ensure that the owner/operator:

- Is a knowledgeable adult with the understanding and ability to take the responsibility of Girl Scouts’ safety and well being.
- Maintains the vessel in accordance with the Safety Activity Checkpoints.
- Has the required safety gear as required in their jurisdiction or listed in Canoeing Safety Activity. Checkpoints and coordinates with the activity leader to confirm the proper safety gear is present and being used.
- Meets Coast Guard and/or local jurisdiction requirements.
- Maintains insurance and registration as required by law in their jurisdiction.

## Safety Gear

- Canoes suitable for the type of water, with proper flotation, and air bag, if used, checked before use
- Paddles appropriate size and style for the canoeist and the type of canoeing
- Emergency sound device, such as a whistle, compressed air horn, or VHF radio on navigable waters
- U.S. Coast Guard–approved life jacket for each paddler. Type III life jackets are recommended. They should fit according to weight and height specifications.
- Rescue gear appropriate for boat type and conditions (ask your instructor), such as:
  - Throw bag or throw line
  - Waist-mounted tow system (lightweight rope which attaches to towing person and to towed boat)
  - Rescue sling to get participants back into a boat
  - Designated rescue craft, such as a paddleboard or chase boat
  - Any other items required by the boating jurisdiction in which you’ll paddle
- Emergency gear appropriate for the canoeing type and distance from shore, such as:
  - Emergency repair kit: duct tape or electrical tape, screwdriver, pliers
  - Spare paddle, waterproof first-aid kit, repair kit, and standard safety equipment, including signaling equipment
- Emergency survival packet: raincoat, waterproof matches, lightweight/space blanket, hat, pocketknife, 10-foot-by-10-foot tarp, rope, food, and appropriate liquids. Food and water bottles should be secured in the boat
- A safety helmet with a strong, flexible plastic shell and chin strap, as well as openings for drainage, worn when paddling in waters that are Class II or III
- Bailer (a scoop for removing water from a boat)

- A waterproof flashlight
- A painter (a strong line at the bow, used for securing the canoe that's at least half the length of the boat)
- At least one graspable and throw-able Coast-Guard approved personal flotation device (Type IV buoyant cushion or ring buoy or equivalent) immediately available for each group on the water
- Compass, waterproof chart, VHF marine radio, and other essentials for extended trips
- Locking blade knife carried by instructor/guide/qualified adult in their life jacket or other readily accessible place, and a line for towing or rescue

Note that canoeing at night may require additional gear; consult your instructor.

## Girl Scouts of Northern California's Approval Process for Canoeing

Canoeing is considered a high-adventure activity and must be pre-approved by the council.

- **Trip or High-Adventure Approval Form:** Submit the online [Trip or High-Adventure Approval Form](#) to council at least 4-6 weeks prior to your activity. Gather the following information to complete this form:
  - Confirmation that your chaperones are registered members of Girl Scouts of Northern California, have a current background check, completed the troop chaperone course and troop driver course (if transporting girls), and completed the [California State Mandated Reporter Training](#). Troop Leaders can find this information in their [Volunteer Toolkit](#).
  - Name of First Aider and a copy of their current CPR/First Aid certification card. Certification needs to be renewed every two years. If you are hiking or backpacking farther than 30 minutes from a medical facility, please have the information of the member, who is certified in Wilderness First Aid, accompanying your troop.
  - Confirm that the necessary online and in-person courses have been completed for this trip. You can find more information or register for these courses in your [MyGS Account - GSLearn](#) in the section called Trip & Outdoor Advisor.
    - The **Trip & Outdoor Advisor Course** is required for all overnight and [high-adventure activities](#).
    - The **Camp Out course** is required for all camping trips that involve advanced outdoor cooking or camping trip with girls to a campground or other non-GSNorCal outdoor facility for longer than 1 night without indoor plumbing and electricity. Girls should have already had practice sleeping and cooking outdoors.
    - The **Extended Trips course** is required for troops traveling three (3) nights or more.
    - The **Girl Scout Small Craft Safety Training** is required before you take girls on a small craft water adventure.
- **High-Adventure Approved Vendor List:** GSNorCal troops/groups must select a high-adventure vendor from the [High-Adventure Approved Vendor List](#), which consists of organizations that meet Girl Scouts safety and insurance requirements for the activity. For the safety of our members, before a troop uses a high-adventure site/vendor for a troop or service unit event, the council must approve the high-adventure site/vendor. This process is designed to ensure a safe experience and protect the council's and volunteer's legal interests.

## Paddling and Rowing Sports- Master Progression Chart

Canoeing			
Flat, near shore, no current	D, B, J, C, S, A  <i>Daisies permitted only with an adult in their canoe, unless with an ACA accredited camp in compliance with ACA standards</i>	6:1, or 12:1 with qualified assistant <i>(ACA accredited camps adhere to all ACA standards for Daisies in canoes)</i>	American Canoe Association (ACA) Canoe Level 1 Instructor or higher or ACA Paddle Sports Safety Facilitator in canoeing; Girl Scouts small craft safety training certification or ARC Lifeguarding with Waterfront Module or an instructor with the demonstrated equivalent experience in line with these credentials.
Class I	J, C, S, A	6:1, or 12:1 with qualified assistant	ACA River Canoeing Level 2 Instructor or higher; or equivalent
Class II	C, S, A	6:1, or 12:1 with qualified assistant	ACA River Canoeing Level 3 Instructor or higher; or equivalent
Class III	C, S, A	6:1, or 12:1 with qualified assistant	ACA Whitewater Canoeing Instructor, Level 4 or higher; or equivalent
Trips on Class II–III	C, S, A	Varies; ask outfitter	Licensed professional guide or instructor who is provided by an outfitter