

Safety Activity Checkpoint

Kayaking

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

Council Approval: Required

Activity Permitted For: B J C S A

Not Allowed For: Daisies



About Kayaking

Virtually any body of water is suitable for some kind of kayaking. Start with flat water with little or no current, and progress to more advanced conditions. Kayaks come in a variety of shapes and sizes, designed for different types of water and paddler skill levels. “Sit on top” kayaks are simple, stable boats that are great for beginners. “Decked” or “sit inside” kayaks are covered by a deck and spray skirt; the paddler sits inside with legs extended. All involve moving a kayak across water using a double-bladed paddle, and combine exercise, transportation, and fun!

Your troop can kayak on bays, rivers, lakes, and oceans. Currents, waves, rapids, and wind affect conditions. Those conditions and type of boat will determine what is appropriate for your troop. Be sure all participants have the training and experience to participate in the level expected.

Learn More:

- Interactive maps of places to go: [Paddling.com](https://www.paddling.com) and [American Whitewater](https://www.americanwhitewater.org)
- [International Scale of River Difficulty](https://www.paddling.com)
- Basic interpretation of rapids and river difficulty: [Water Sports Whiz](https://www.water-sports-whiz.com)
- About canoeing, kayaking, and standup paddle boarding: [American Canoe Association](https://www.americancanoe.org)
- Info on gear selection and how-to's: [Paddling.com](https://www.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](#).

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.

Safety Activity Checkpoints

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 girl, missing girl, or sudden illness.

Ensure participants are able to swim. 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](#)]

Ensure all paddlers 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 should demonstrate self-recovery and righting techniques, and girls should learn and practice these skills. This will help prevent their becoming disoriented or frightened if they end up in the water.

Paddlers must be trained on how to perform wet exits and must be able to execute one successfully before being allowed to use a decked kayak. If spray skirts are used, wet exits must be performed before the outing can begin.

Practice appropriate self-rescue and reentry techniques. If kayaking in cold water, paddlers should learn cold water survival techniques and treatment for hypothermia.

Verify instructor knowledge and experience. The skill level of the adults must be higher than the difficulty of the intended kayaking type.

Ensure the instructor/guide will review site-specific emergency techniques for the type of craft used. For example, whitewater kayakers are instructed in how to float through rapids, how to breathe while swimming in rapids, and how to swim to shore.

Ensure the lead instructor/guide has firsthand knowledge of the hazards and conditions of the location and type of boat being used.

You'll want to verify that at least one adult instructor/guide is certified by the American Canoe Association, the American Red Cross, or other sponsoring organization. Certifications must be appropriate for the activity.

Verify lifeguard qualifications and experience. Ensure lifeguards have current certification in American Red Cross (ARC) Lifeguarding with Waterfront Module, or its equivalent.

Arrange for watchers/helpers. An adult watcher or skilled helper is required for certain size groups. This person should have basic kayaking skills. They 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 and/or the [Swimming Safety Activity Checkpoint](#).

Keep weight evenly distributed. Keeping gear and fellow paddlers evenly distributed makes the boat safer and easier to paddle.

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

Avoid busy channels when possible. If you must cross them, do so at a 90-degree angle to the channel traffic.

Avoid surf zones and areas with standing waves unless they are part of planned whitewater kayaking.

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

Only perform this activity on water that has been run and rated and up to Class III difficulty, as defined by the American version of the [International Scale of River Difficulty](#).

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 kayaks for participant skill level. Consider weather and water conditions, weight of passengers, and equipment to be carried.

Watch that kayak **weight and capacity are not exceeded**. Many kayaks have a plate near the stern (back), showing these maximums.

Use the type of kayak needed for the water conditions present, and ensure the kayak is sized for the person(s) using it.

Ensure kayaks are not overloaded with gear. Gear should be distributed evenly with paddlers.

Know universal signals. Whistle and visual signals are used to pass messages or call for help. Learn them at [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.

On the Day of Paddling or Kayaking:

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.

Review self-rescue techniques. See above.

Use the buddy system. Instruct girls to keep their kayak within sight of at least one other kayak at all times.

Transport kayaks safely. Use car-top racks or trailers specifically designed for kayaks. Secure kayaks 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. Fill out the [GSNorCal Accident-Injury Report](#).

Safety Gear

Some gear will depend on the type of kayaking, or on water conditions. Check with your instructor.

- U.S. Coast Guard–approved life jacket (Type III life jackets recommended and should fit according to weight and height specifications)
- Kayak sized appropriately for the participants and suitable for the type of water
- Kayaks with proper flotation and any air bags checked before use (if float bags are used, make sure they’re secured to kayak)
- Double-bladed paddle in the appropriate size and style for the activity and person using them (ask instructor about proper fit)
- Emergency sound device, such as a whistle, compressed air horn, or VHF radio
- Rescue gear appropriate for kayak type and conditions (ask your instructor), such as:
 - At least one graspable and throw-able Coast-Guard approved personal flotation device, throw bag, or throw line
 - Waist-mounted tow system (lightweight rope that attaches to towing person and to towed boat). Should be one tow system for every three to four kayaks
- Emergency gear appropriate for the kayaking type and distance from shore, such as:
 - Emergency repair kit: duct tape or electrical tape, screwdriver, pliers, spare plugs
 - Spare paddle, first-aid kit, repair kit, and standard safety equipment, like signaling equipment
 - Emergency survival packet: raincoat, waterproof matches, lightweight/space blanket, hat, pocket knife, 10-foot by 10-foot tarp, rope, food and appropriate liquids (food and water bottles should be secured on the kayak)
- A safety helmet with strong, flexible plastic shell and chin strap, as well as openings for drainage should be worn when:
 - Paddling in waters that are Class II or III
 - Paddling in or near sea caves
- Bailer (a scoop for removing water from a kayak) secured to the kayak

Girl Scouts of Northern California’s Approval Process for Kayaking

Kayaking 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 [Volunteer Learning Portal](#) 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.