

READY • YOUR • ROWING FOR • SPRING

by Art Michaels
photos by the author

This winter is a good time to reconsider your rowing skills and equipment. If you fish in a small boat, you may think that rowing is a skill you needn't count on seriously—something to do only in those rare cases when the motor dies. But toting oars is a measure of preparedness even on lakes where motors are allowed. And in Pennsylvania, many lakes don't allow motors of any kind, so rowing on these waterways is the only way to get to the fishing in a boat.

This kind of rowing isn't what you find in the racing sport featuring long, thin sculls. I'm talking about rowing a 12- or 14-foot aluminum fishing boat with old-fashioned wooden oars. Still, if you use the right rowing equipment and sharpen your rowing skills, the quiet approach of rowing to hotspots and maneuvering silently into places can help you increase your catches. The best part of rowing is that you can reach shoreline stretches inaccessible from shore or those that are only lightly fished from shore.

Shop this winter for new and replacement equipment and ready your rowing for spring. Consider these six ways to get the most from rowing to and from great fishing.

1. Think about redistributing your gear evenly to balance your boat better. Trying to row against the wind in a boat loaded with equipment is tough enough without needing to compensate for poorly distributed weight. When you're out there, be sure to position passengers in the middle of the seats. Furthermore,

include a fishing partner in your rowing trips. Beyond safety considerations, let your partner navigate so that you don't have to stop rowing and turn around every so often.

2. Even if you'd row only in an emergency, ensure that your oars are the best ones for you and your boat. Oars vary in their length, width and intended uses. For one thing, I preferred rowing so that the oar handles did not cross over when I pulled and recovered from each stroke. I found an overlapping grip awkward, especially when I'd maneuver into casting position. Other rowing anglers don't mind an overlapping grip, so be sure

The best part of rowing is that you can reach shoreline stretches inaccessible from shore or those that are only lightly fished from shore.

your oars are the right length for your boat and for your rowing convenience.

There are no set rules for oar length. However, if you're thinking more traditionally, there is a formula that can help you determine the correct oar length for your boat: Determine the distance in inches between your boat's oarlocks, divide by 2 and then add 2 inches. Divide this number by 7 and then multiply by 25. Divide this final number by 12 to determine the oar length in feet.

My 12-foot boat's oarlocks were 47 inches apart. Dividing by 2 and adding 2 inches gives 25.5. Dividing this number by 7 and multiplying by 25 equals 91.07. Dividing this number by 12 tells me that according to this traditional formula, my oars should be about 7.5 feet long.

This calculation does not take into account, among other factors, your boat's seat height and a setup with which you're just plain comfortable. My oars were actually 5.5 feet long. Shorter oars required my hands to be higher for rowing than they would be if I used longer oars. But shorter oars were my preference. Come spring, borrowing oars you can test is the best option if you're re-evaluating what suits you.

Formulas aside, I used short oars mainly because they let me maneuver my small boat through vegetation of all kinds easier than if I were using longer oars. Longer oars picked up and got stuck in more vegetation than shorter oars. That caused boat noise and commotion, which fully alerted the big ones to my presence. I also opted for shorter oars because most of my rowing was



geared toward maneuvering into casting position in tight fishing spots, not toward long-distance rowing in open water.

3. I used clamp-on oar locks, not pin-type or round oar locks. I've always been uncomfortable drilling holes through my oars and trying to line them up properly to go through the exact center of the oar. I used clamp-on locks also because they are much quieter than pin-type locks. You can easily readjust their placement, too.

I wrapped a cut-out piece of old jeans around the inside of each clamp-on so that my clamp-on locks gripped the oars securely. When I tightened the lock, it gripped the oar firmly but didn't bite into the wood. My oar locks remained firmly in place on my oars this way with no slipping.

4. If you're buying new oars this winter, be sure they're straight. Sand them thoroughly and varnish them, but don't paint the oar handles. When you row, painted oar handles tend to cause blis-

ters faster than oar handles that are left unpainted. However, painting or varnishing the rest of the oar delays wear. You may also want to place caps on the ends of your oars, but I never bothered with them. When I bought my oars new some 25 years ago, I initially sanded and varnished them three times, letting them dry thoroughly between treatments. I repeated the process only once, about 12 winters ago. My oars remained in great shape.

For this kind of rowing, spruce is the best oar material because it's light and strong. You might also find ash oars, but they are heavier than spruce oars. Oars are available mainly in lengths of 5.5 feet to about 8 feet.

If you're thinking of installing new oar locks on your small boat, you'll most often find edge-mount, side-mount and top-mount oarlock sockets. For small aluminum boats, edge-mount or side-mount sockets are best. Top-mount sockets require a wider gunwale than you'll find on most small aluminum rowboats.

5. Silence the oar locks and sockets. Nothing spooks fish more than squeaky, creaking oars splitting the quiet at a hotspot. Clean the oarlocks and sockets first with a water-displacing product, wipe away the dirt with a rag, and then liberally coat them with lithium-based white grease. I cleaned my equipment this way once before the season and again during the season, and my oars remained quiet, even after jaunts in rain showers.





Another reason I kept my oars and sockets clean and quiet was because when I arrived at a spot, perhaps even silently dropping an anchor, I removed the oars from the locks. Then I placed the oar lock clamp-ons on the seat and wedged the blades in the stern. The oars remained still and quiet this way, and they were out of my way when I fished.

This winter, think about how you arrange your oars to get them out of your way at a fishing spot. If you're banging your oars around your boat just before you cast, you're definitely alerting fish to your presence.

6. If you don't often row, you may want to keep a pair of inexpensive all-cotton gloves in your tackle box just in case you need to, or want to, row a lot. Some years ago my small, portable 4.5hp outboard died about 1.5 miles from the dock, and I had to row back to the ramp. Aside from the aggravation, I endured several days of painful, tender blisters. Gloves would have helped me avoid, or at least minimize, the difficulty.

Finally, understand that rowing is exercise. You get quite a workout from rowing, so don't overdo it, progress gradually to rowing longer distances, and get your doctor's OK before engaging in this activity.

Remember that rowing has advantages over motoring in some fishing situations. It's a skill you should use in circumstances other than just those of emergencies. Take care of your rowing skills and equipment this winter, and let them lead you this spring to better fishing. ☐

Nothing spooks fish more than squeaky, creaking oars. Silence the locks and stems by cleaning them with a water-displacing product, wiping away the dirt, and then coating them with lithium-based white grease.

Where to Row for Great Fishing

This winter is the perfect time to consider where you'll row to the fishing, and Pennsylvania is loaded with small lakes where you can tempt everything from bass and panfish to trout, walleyes and other gamefish. There's also plenty of flowing water in Pennsylvania where you can use your rowing skills to guide your drift silently. In fact, out of more than 750 accesses statewide, more than 70 are on waterways with restrictions of 20hp and less. More than 175 accesses are on waterways that allow only electric motors, and more than 80 launch sites provide access to waterways that allow only unpowered boats. Of course, you can row to the fishing on any waterway where boating is allowed, and that includes choosing from more than 370 accesses on waterways that allow unlimited horsepower. Ironically, there are fewer than 20 accesses statewide on waterways where no boating is allowed.

All this means that the opportunities are plentiful in Pennsylvania for rowing to the fishing. You'll find a complete county-by-county list of accesses on the Commission's web site, www.fish.state.pa.us. On the left side of the main page under "Regional Info," click on "County Guide." Then click on a county. Click on the county again to enlarge the map. Click on an access number. On the left side of the screen click on the access link. That access's amenities and waterway details will appear, including horsepower allowances.—AM.