



A large dry bag holds your sleeping gear and tent, making for a comfortable and dry experience even in wet weather. Use a small backpacking tent to save space in your pack.

Canoe Camping Basics

by Carl Haensel photos by the author

Sitting beside a campfire along the Susquehanna River as darkness fell behind the mountains, the decision to go canoe camping seemed easy. A good day of paddling and some excellent fishing highlighted our day, and more lay in store for the next day. Two hours later, as a summer thunderstorm rolled through camp, I questioned my decision to camp out for the night. Thankfully, we were prepared with rain gear. Our tent had a ground cloth to keep out water, and our food was in a dry bag. The night ended uneventfully, and we ended up having a great trip. The key to a successful canoe camping trip is to be set up to have a great time, and be prepared for the challenges of Mother Nature.

Choosing a route

Start by planning your camping trip at home. If you've never camped out of a canoe before, try an easy overnight trip as a shakedown cruise. There are plenty of short trips that can be made on Pennsylvania's water trails as well as much longer ones. Once you've got an idea of what works for you, try a longer trip of multiple days. Look over maps and routes and try to choose a couple of camping options each day based on how far you plan to paddle. Make sure to have a back-up plan in case a camping location is already occupied or your route takes longer than planned. Try to reach your campsite by mid-afternoon, so you've got plenty of time to deal with other eventualities.

How big is the kitchen sink?

While many people have car camped before, canoe camping can be a new experience. There are quite a few things that are not a viable option to bring along canoeing. Large camping chairs, giant tents, cots and king-sized air mattresses are all things that I have seen thrown in a canoe going down the river. Toss in a few feather pillows and your boat will be riding so low in the water that it may capsize in the first riffle you reach. Instead, look to gear designed for backpacking. If you wouldn't want to carry it for a full day on your back, don't bring it along in a canoe either. Remember, everything that you bring on board can get wet. Simple fixes like bringing garbage bags to keep things dry are not acceptable. You'll need at least some small dry bags to keep the important things—camera, wallet and cell phone—out of the water and attached to the canoe. Even better are some large dry bags to keep your tent, sleeping equipment and food out of the water. If you don't need to portage around obstructions, bring along a small cooler or a full-size camp stove.

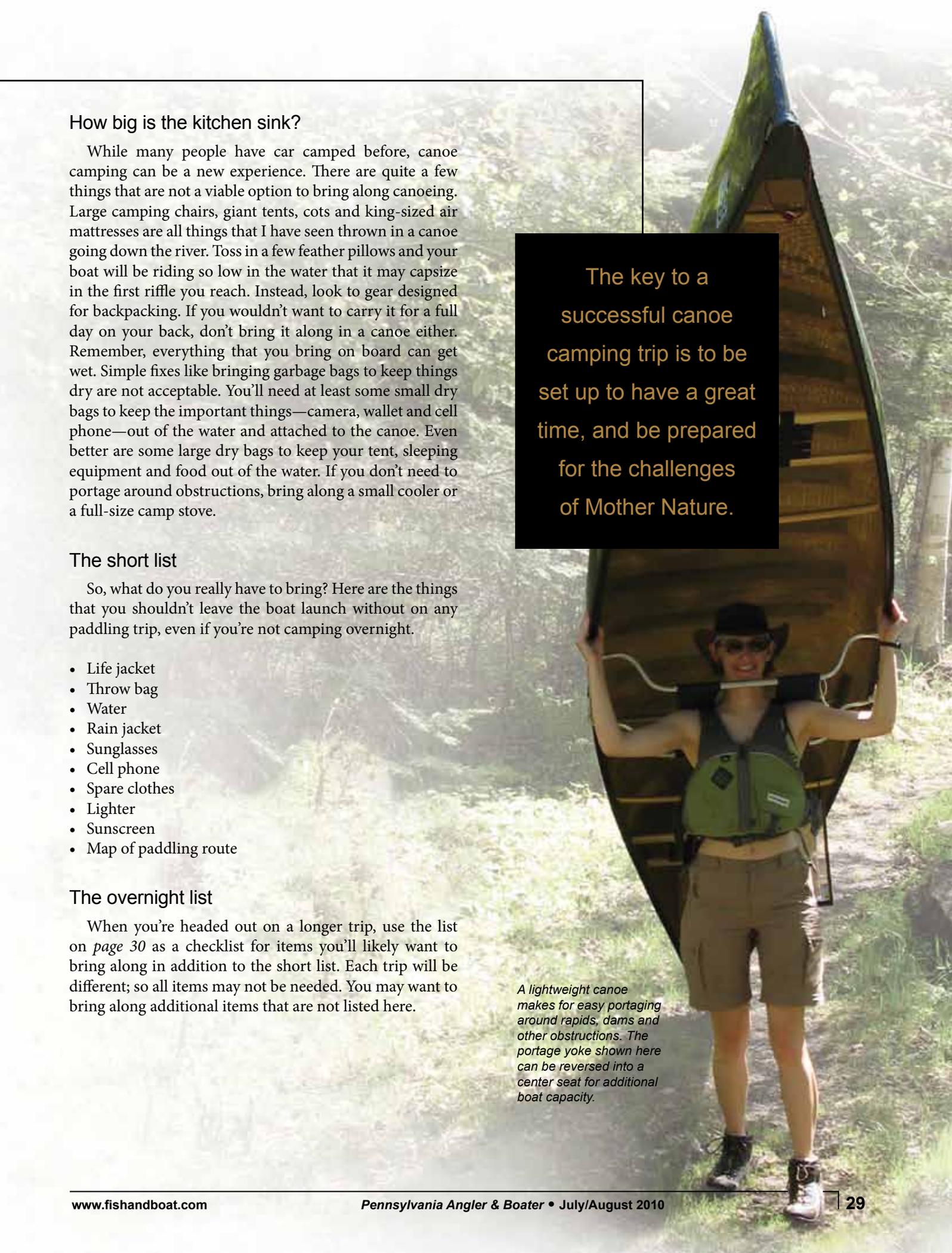
The short list

So, what do you really have to bring? Here are the things that you shouldn't leave the boat launch without on any paddling trip, even if you're not camping overnight.

- Life jacket
- Throw bag
- Water
- Rain jacket
- Sunglasses
- Cell phone
- Spare clothes
- Lighter
- Sunscreen
- Map of paddling route

The overnight list

When you're headed out on a longer trip, use the list on *page 30* as a checklist for items you'll likely want to bring along in addition to the short list. Each trip will be different; so all items may not be needed. You may want to bring along additional items that are not listed here.

A person wearing a dark hat, sunglasses, and a green life vest is carrying a large, dark-colored canoe on their back. The canoe is held up by a white portage yoke. The person is standing on a dirt path in a wooded area. The background shows trees and a bright sky.

The key to a successful canoe camping trip is to be set up to have a great time, and be prepared for the challenges of Mother Nature.

A lightweight canoe makes for easy portaging around rapids, dams and other obstructions. The portage yoke shown here can be reversed into a center seat for additional boat capacity.

Canoe Camping Checklist

Paddling gear

- Extra paddle
- Dry bags or portage packs

Shelter and sleeping gear

- Tent and ground cloth
- Sleeping bag and pad

Cooking and food preparation

- Food pack
- Cooking kit
- Water filter
- Camp stove
- Stove fuel
- Water proof matches and spares
- Biodegradable dish soap
- Bear rope for hanging food

Personal items

- Clothing
- Hat with a visor

- Paddling gloves
- Rain gear
- Footwear for use in the water
- Toilet paper
- Toothbrush and toothpaste
- First aid kit
- Biodegradable soap
- Sunscreen (SPF 15 or higher)
- Lip balm
- Insect repellent

Miscellaneous

- Pocket knife
- Flashlight and spare batteries
- Fishing gear and license
- Compass
- Camera

Safety and preparedness on the water

Safety on the water starts by having a fitted life jacket for every occupant of your canoe. I always pack a throw bag as well. Practice with it before your trip. A small first aid kit of bandages, alcohol pads, gauze and antibiotic ointment will take care of most of your minor spills. Always discuss medical needs with all paddlers, and check to see if there are specific health concerns. Keep your medical kit easily accessible, and make sure it's tethered to your boat.

Cooking, food and critters

Plan to bring a camping stove. You can't always count on dry firewood or a location where a campfire is appropriate for cooking. A stove will yield more consistent results, and you can even practice with some recipes at home before your trip. Once your meal is done, clean up well away from the water. The river or lake that you're paddling is not your kitchen sink. After cleaning up, it's time to think about unwanted visitors. Sometimes it's a raccoon, an opossum or even a bear that strolls into camp in the middle of the



Water, a first aid kit, a throw bag, a hat, a dry bag and a pair of paddling gloves are all vital items to have on your canoe camping trip.

night. Most often, mice and chipmunks will try to help themselves to your food. Avoid these issues by hanging your food in a tree. Use two ropes, and make sure that the food hangs at least 10 feet from the trunk of the tree and 10 feet off the ground. Even this will sometimes not dissuade determined chipmunks, but it will help. In the morning, there's nothing worse than finding a hole chewed in your dry bag. Regardless of how you store your food, make sure not to bring it into your tent with you. This holds true for any toiletries that you choose to bring on your trip. Also, camping on an island does not keep the animals from coming to you. Make sure to practice leave no trace camping ethics. Leave each campsite cleaner than you found it, and pack all of your trash out with you in your canoe. Don't burn trash in any campfire, particularly plastic and metal items.

When going to sleep for the evening or leaving camp, hang your food pack in a tree to avoid having animals get into your food.



Learning more

If you're interested in camping along Pennsylvania's rivers and lakes, there's a lot of great information available. Check out the official water trails on the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's website at www.fishandboat.com for maps. Read *Keystone Canoeing* by Ed Gertler to start exploring some of the routes you may take before heading out on the water. Learn more about leave no trace and camping ethics at www.dcnr.state.pa.us and at www.lnt.org. ☐

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A small, lightweight backpacking stove is optimal for use when canoe camping. This nesting cook set has a carrying case that doubles as a washbasin to save space and allow you to wash dishes away from the water.



When possible, always use a designated location for a campfire. Make sure all fires are dead out before going to sleep for the evening or leaving your campsite.