

## What to do When it Rains and Rains and Rains. . . How to handle adverse weather conditions - rain, cold, and wind.

Adverse weather conditions make life difficult, no doubt about it. After a week of rain, simple tasks like cooking soup or choosing a campsite are slow and tedious. Proper preparation makes camping much more comfortable when the weather goes bad. Here are some tips on coping with the most commonly encountered challenges of wilderness camping.

**Rain** The most important item of clothing on a canoe trip is a high-quality rainsuit. A good rain jacket will keep you dry in summer drizzles; add a set of rain pants and you are set for a downpour! Try to get raingear in a heavy coated nylon (Wetskins, for example) or in Goretex if you can afford it. Raincoats should be large enough to allow you to wear a couple of sweaters. PFDs are worn over raincoats in order to remain visible. Rainpants are best if they have a waist-tie and not suspenders; the latter require you to strip off your raincoat before answering the call of nature. If worn with wool or one of the fuzzy synthetics (polypropylene, Capilene, Polartec, etc.) your rainsuit will even work as a wetsuit, doubling your survival time in cold water. Ponchos, \$20 WalMart specials, and garbage bags are not acceptable substitutes, because they are difficult to swim in and might not last for the duration of the trip.

Good quality **tents** are the next element of comfort in the rain. Carry a light tarp to lay inside your tent in case your floors or walls leak. Such a tarp should be slightly larger than the floor of your tent so that the edges will turn up and form a bit of a bathtub. Tents with vestibules are useful to store the waterlogged gear that will inevitably build up during a rainstorm.

A large tarpaulin and some extra rope or parachute cord make life around the campfire much more pleasant. Lightweight nylon tarps are great, but a cheap polyethylene tarp will also do if you are careful not to rip out its grommets and don't mind the extra weight. An easy rigging system involves laying the tarp over a taut highline and then tying each of the four corners off to a stump or tree. The final product here resembles the roof of a house, the sloping sides preventing the accumulation of water on you tarp. Pitch your tarp just beside, or barely covering, your fire so as not to smoke yourself silly.

**Firebuilding** after an extended rain takes time and patience. Birch bark is a tinder that will burn when wet. It is a good idea to carry some in a bag in case you end up camping in a location without birch trees). As always avoid stripping living bark from living trees as this is a sure way to rid canoe country of birches. Put aside a supply of firewood under a tarp if it looks like it's going to rain. Look under the canopy of large trees for dryish wood to burn. If everything is wet you may have to saw wood into short sections and split the sections with a knife or hatchet to find the dry heartwood. A small gas stove will make dealing with rain much easier.

**Cold** In the north, one may encounter snow any month of the year. Trips in the spring or fall should take additional care because the possibility of running into cold weather is

much greater. Planning for cold weather is sensible at any time and is both a safety and comfort issue.

**Jeans** are NOT appropriate canoeing wear: they are cold when wet and dry excruciatingly slowly. You will do much better if you bring one set of quick-drying pants (nylon, thin cotton, etc.) and another set of wool, polypropylene or other synthetic pants. These will keep you warm, even when wet. On a canoe trip your pants are guaranteed to be a little wet at least some of the time. Similarly, cotton T-shirts alone do not a wardrobe make. Bring a few along, but make sure that you have a wool or synthetic sweater as well. On longer trips it is often best to bring 2 sweaters, one lightweight and one heavyweight.

**Feet** are the most difficult item to keep warm. For people who bring nothing but cotton socks, warm feet soon become a distant memory. At least 3 pairs of wool socks are mandatory on most trips. Nylon running shoes dry very quickly if they don't have a lot of padding or leather. If the water is particularly cold, or you will be doing a lot of wading and/or lining, you might want to consider wet suit socks or booties. Both of these items are made of a thin neoprene and will retain incoming water against your skin, allowing it to warm up.

On longer trips, or during those times of year where marginal weather is expected, carrying a lightweight parka may be a good idea. Packed into its own drybag and riding at the bottom of the pack, the parka will be ready to warm you up on a cold evening or after a long swim. Cheap insurance against hypothermia!

**Wind** Many people are unaware that crossing a large, windy lake is often much more dangerous than running evil-looking rapids. The worst canoeing accident in recent history occurred when a group tried to cross Lake Temiskaming, a very large and occasionally very windy lake on the Quebec-Ontario border. A good rule is never to go more than 200 metres from shore if you can possibly avoid it. This distance not only allows you a fighting chance of swimming to shore in case of an upset, but also allows you to quickly go to shore if weather conditions change for the worse. A large lake can go from a glassy calm to a crazed froth in 20 minutes, so all crossings larger than 2 kilometres are to be treated with caution. Crossings of 4 kilometres or more are only for the foolhardy.

Camping in **windy conditions** can be quite interesting: a canoe flying through the air, touching down with a crunch every 10 feet will make for an amusing story, after you get back home. Lifejackets are among the first items to take to the air, so tie, buckle, zip, or weigh them down. Some extra rope or parachute cord is handy to help secure tents: for some tents it is possible to tie directly to their poles, which are very strong attachment points. Firelighting and campfire maintenance are also more difficult with wind: try using the canoes to create a windbreak, but if they get any hotter than lukewarm to the touch you'd better have lots of duct tape around to patch the hole!