

# Safety for Blue Trails



DAVE AND RUTH

## SAFETY

When planning and managing a blue trail, safety is of the utmost importance. Blue trails can be used as a tool to promote safety by educating the community about safe boating techniques, directing users to the least dangerous locations of the river, and telling paddlers what to expect as they travel the blue trail. Because each waterway contains its own hazards and challenges, developing a blue trail with a focus on safety can lead to a more enjoyable recreational experience for everyone.

### Use your blue trail as a resource for safe boating

**Safety communication:** Developing a blue trail offers the perfect opportunity to create materials that provide necessary safety information to users. Guides, maps, signs, and other safety information should be easily

accessible to everyone. Websites providing printable materials make this possible during the planning stage of trips. Access points should provide maps and other safety guides to assist those who are setting out. Signs should be unobstructed and easily viewed from the water. By marking hazards, labeling access points, and detailing a specific route, paddlers unfamiliar with the area will be able to set out on the river better equipped and more prepared.

Keep in mind the “self-selection” value of safety messaging to trail users. By describing the conditions and hazards to users before they start down the river, you can give them the tools they need to self-select trails that are suitable to their skill levels. This is an important component of managing risk and keeping people safe.

**Manage high risk areas:** Each waterway has hazards that pose risks to users. These risks range from rocky areas, strong undertows, and heavy whitewater rapids to dams, pipelines and other infrastructure. Without the full knowledge of these various hazards, paddlers unfamiliar with the area may find themselves in dangerous situations.

Blue trails can allow for better management of these high risk areas and provide direction to users to safer parts of the river. Also, under the management of the blue trail, some unexpected hazards such as downed trees can be cleared much faster. To learn more about habitat-friendly tree removal see [Resources: Debris Removal](#).

**Minimize User Conflict:** The creation of a blue trail can help educate paddlers about their responsibility to share the river with other boaters, thereby reducing the potential for conflicts and increasing the overall enjoyment of recreation paddlers.

Through the development of a blue trail, paddlers are also directed to safer areas of the river that may be less traveled by commercial or motorized boats. In addition, users of the blue trail can be made aware of specific segments of the trail that pass through areas of higher commercial boating traffic.

## Safety information

The following details basic safety information that should be accessible in printed materials and websites. The American Canoe Association has a variety of boating safety information available for use on blue trail signs and in printed materials. Contact the [American Canoe Association](#) for more information.

## Basics:

- Avoid boating alone
- Always wear a [U.S. Coast Guard approved life jacket](#)
- Read safety information and park rules before your trip
- Leave your route and return time with a relative or friend
- Learn to control your boat and be able to stop the boat at any time and land on shore
- Learn to recognize river hazards such as fallen logs, dams, and bridge piers
- When in a group, assign a lead and sweep boat operated by experienced paddlers
- Stay in your boat if it becomes stuck and carefully shift your weight as you push off with your paddle or pole
- Never paddle farther from shore than you are prepared to swim
- Avoid drugs and alcohol as they slow reflexes and impair judgment
- In most emergencies, it is best to stay with your boat. This increases your visibility to rescue personnel

## Planning:

- Review the blue trail map before setting out
- Know where your trip will take you, where to get out, and emergency routes
- Make sure you identify and avoid hazards marked on the map
- Allow enough time to complete your trip within daylight hours
- Check river conditions. A flooded river can be dangerous and should be avoided. A low river may expose logs or rocks and require carrying your boat, which may make your trip slower and more difficult.

### **Gear:**

- Always wear a properly fitted U.S Coast Guard approved life jacket
- Dress for the weather and be prepared to get wet
- Bring a spare paddle or pole.
- Wear shoes with tops and sides for optimal protection. Avoid sandals
- Always carry a noise-making device such as a horn or a whistle. A flashlight, strobe, flare, VHF radio, bright flag, and mirror are other key items to bring. Carry a cell phone, but be aware that it may not work in some areas.
- Other essentials: a first-aid kit, plenty of drinking water, sunscreen, sunglasses, and bug repellent

### **Weather**

- Check weather conditions before your trip.
- Do not go if the weather is beyond the ability of the least experienced person in your group.
- During your trip, stay alert to changing weather conditions
- Get off the water during electrical storms
- Canoe close to shore
- Drink plenty of liquids to stay hydrated

*Special thanks to the American Canoe Association for their contribution to this section*