

# Packrafting Activity Standards

## Application

This standard applies to Mountaineers branch or committee sponsored trips that use packrafts. The standard addresses the use of packrafts in these contexts:

- Packrafts are a tool for wilderness travel and can be incorporated into many Mountaineers trips.
- Packrafts are watercraft that require specific skills and expose their users to specific boating risks.
- Packrafts can be used on white water rivers, which requires skills and introduces risks unlike those on any other trips the Mountaineers lead.

On all Mountaineers packrafting trips, emphasis will be placed on participant safety and practicing good stewardship on encountered waterways.

## Definitions

We divide trips into three types:

1. **Flatwater Trips** where a packraft is used as a means to cross sections of flatwater, typically either a slow moving river (class I), estuaries, tidelands, or small lakes. Flatwater Trips are incorporated as an additional component to another primary activity type, such as Day Hiking or Alpine Scrambling.
2. **Whitewater Trips** where a packraft is used to descend whitewater rivers (class II and above).
3. **Expedition Trips** where travel by packraft is a major mode of travel along the route and the difficulties are diverse and exceed the limits of both Flatwater and Whitewater Trips. The difficulties may include any combination of whitewater, open water crossings, strong wind and waves, ocean currents, or ocean surf. These include both single day and Multi-day or extended duration (long day) trips.

**Flatwater Trips** are limited to:

- Class I rivers defined as:
  - “Fast moving water with riffles and small waves. Few obstructions, all obvious and easily avoided with little training. Risk to swimmers is slight; self-rescue is easy.” (See International Scale of River Difficulty resource)
- Lakes and similar bodies of water where there is little or no current and:
  - Sustained winds are less than 15mph (24 kph)
  - Crossings or coastal passages with no landings are ¼ mile or less

These conditions allow participants with some paddling skills to use packrafts with a modest amount of training. To keep boaters with limited training relatively safe, Flatwater Trip leaders must be able to recognize when conditions exceed these limits and have a plan to stay within the limits.

**Whitewater Trips** are river trips of class II and greater. These will have more hazards which may not be easily avoided. Participants need more developed river reading skills to identify

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hazards and safe routes and need commensurate boat handling skills to put their boat where needed. These trips may include hiking, with equipment, on trail and off trail, to access the river.

**Expedition Trips** are the collection of trips that use packrafts as a major mode of travel and may involve a myriad of difficulties that are not typically encountered on Flatwater or Whitewater day trips. *Examples: An arctic river trip where hazards such as floating ice blocks and Grizzly bear encounters are possible, or coastal trips where the packraft is needed to cross an ocean inlet or wide river delta where wind and changing tides are present, or a biking trip where the stability of the packraft is greatly compromised.*

## Sponsoring Trips

Flatwater Trips may be sponsored by any activity that chooses to allow trips to include the use of packrafts on Flatwater, provided they follow the Flatwater standards. *Example: the Canyoning Committee allows the use of packrafts on the Monmouth Canyon trip to cross the Squamish River.*

Whitewater Trips may only be sponsored by a packrafting activity committee that is specifically formed for the purpose of whitewater trips. *Example: the Seattle Branch Packrafting Committee sponsors a Middle Fork Snoqualmie River day trip.*

Expedition Trips may only be sponsored by a packrafting activity committee that is specifically formed for the purpose of whitewater trips. *Example: Global Adventure sponsors a multi-day river trip in Patagonia.*

Whitewater Trips that include Class IV whitewater may be offered by the Mountaineers at the discretion of the leader to determine if safe passage is possible, such as the option to portage, or obstacles becoming washed out due to water levels. Expedition Trips involving long distance, open water crossings may be offered by leaders who have the necessary skills including, but not limited to, the Basic Whitewater Badge to the intended route.

## Leaders

Leaders for Flatwater trips must hold the Flatwater Packrafting Badge or have equivalent experience, in addition to being vetted trip leaders for the primary activity type (ex: Day Hiking, Canyoning). Leaders for Whitewater and Expedition trips must be approved by a packrafting committee. The sponsoring committee must be satisfied that leaders of Whitewater and Expedition Trips have these qualifications as further outlined in the Packrafting Leader Policy:

- Understand the full breadth of potential risks on a given day on a given route.
- Understand the capabilities and limitations of the trip members.
- Have a decision making process needed to provide a safe and fun experience for all participants.
- Be current in boat handling skills necessary for each trip lead.
- Be current in rescue skills appropriate for the trip environment.

# Participants

Participants in Flatwater Trips must hold the Flatwater Packrafting Badge or have equivalent experience.

Participants in Whitewater Trips and Expedition Trips must hold the Basic Whitewater Packrafting Badge

# Boats

These standards address use of single-person packrafts. Packrafts are:

- Inflatable boats.
- Designed to be light enough to carry--generally under 10lbs (4kg).
- Designed to be small enough (generally no larger than a 3L soda bottle) to carry long distances.
- May be open or have a spray deck and skirt.
- May be self-bailing.
- May carry gear on the deck or may carry gear inside the tubes.

Other types of boats such as tandem packrafts, hard shell river kayaks, inflatable kayaks, SUP boards, canoes, and river rafts are outside the scope of these standards.

# Badges

## Flatwater Packrafting Badge

The Flatwater Packrafting badge will be granted to Mountaineers who graduate from a course with the following skills, are granted equivalency by demonstrating they have achieved the skills with previous experience and training, or have received equivalent training from a recognized organization.

1. Donning and burping drysuit
2. Swim with paddle 100 feet (30m)
3. Ferry swim in Class I current holding station
4. Beach launch from and exit onto steep rocky shoreline
5. Basic paddle stroke in straight line sinking full blade 100 feet (30m)
6. Deep water self rescue
7. Deep water partner rescue
8. Draw stroke sideways 10 feet (3m)
9. Paddle a figure 8 obstacle course in flat water within 50 feet (15m)
10. Scull stroke for 10 feet (3m)
11. Low brace
12. Paddling with two paddles
13. Boat bump rogue boat to shore
14. Understands the risk of hypothermia from cold water immersion and strategies to protect oneself

## Basic Whitewater Packrafting Badge

The Basic Whitewater Packrafting Badge will be granted to Mountaineers who graduate from a course with the following skills or are granted equivalency by demonstrating they have achieved the skills with previous experience and training. All of these skills shall be performed in Class II rapids.

### Swiftwater Safety Skills

1. Flat jump into aggressive swim
2. Execute barrel roll into eddy
3. Swim across current at ferry angle
4. Transition from safety position to aggressive swim and back
5. Throw bag 50 (15m) feet to within 6 feet (2m) of victim twice in 90 seconds
6. Catch throw bag and hold on correct side of head
7. Throw bag to swimmer in current with dynamic body belay
8. Back up a static throw-bagger
9. Approach and exit from moving water to rocky shoreline
10. Participate in team wedge formation to cross Class II rapid
11. Ferry ride across diagonal tension line
12. Understands drowning response and hypothermia / cold water hazards
13. Demonstrates ability to safely swim through a rapid

### Packraft Skills

1. Launch from rocky shoreline into Class II current
2. Self rescue in current in 90 seconds
3. Swimmer rescue from boat in deep water
4. Swimmer rescue from boat using throw bag
5. Identify strainers and demonstrate safe distancing
6. Paddle through a boulder garden
7. Paddle through a hole
8. Break through a well defined eddy line near shore and at a mid-stream boulder
9. Paddle through a wave train
10. Paddle with two paddles 50 feet
11. Boat bump in rapid run out
12. Throw bag from boat to swimmer
13. Name and describe the “ 5 Key Roles” and the function of each in a group rescue: 1) swimmer retrieval, 2) paddle retrieval, 3) boat retrieval, 4) downstream containment, and 5) upstream watch
14. Participate in a mock group rescue in one of the 5 key roles
15. Demonstrate the ability to manage boat speed and spacing through choosing slower water, catching eddies, or backpaddling
16. Demonstrate an understanding of lower risk vs. higher risk hydraulics and the ability to distinguish them from boat
17. River navigation techniques
18. Demonstrate knowledge of basic repairs including patching the packraft

# Minimum and Recommended Trip Gear

## Flatwater Trip

### Minimum equipment for each participant

To reduce pack weight, minimum requirements are:

1. Packraft
2. Paddle
3. PFD Class III or better
4. Boat repair kit

Equipment may be shared, provided that everyone has required equipment when they are on the water.

### Recommended Equipment

Where weight limits permit and as more time is spent on the water, parties may consider bringing:

1. Knife attached to PFD
2. Drysuit or wetsuit
3. Neoprene socks or thick wool socks
4. Oversize, closed-toe, sticky soled, river shoes or boots
5. Neoprene gloves
6. Throw bag with floating safety color rope
7. Spare paddle

## Whitewater Trip

### Minimum Equipment for each participant

1. Packraft with grab lines on bow and stern
2. PFD Class III or better
3. Helmet
4. Immersion wear appropriate for the environment.
5. Spare clothing
6. Boat repair kit
7. Whistle

### Minimum Equipment for the party

1. Rescue rope and throw bag, one or more, as needed for the trip
2. Spare paddle, one or more

## Expedition Trip

If the trip includes whitewater, then the Whitewater Trip Equipment list applies.

## Trip Difficulty Ratings

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For trips that are primarily packrafting, the trip Difficulty should indicate the technical difficulty of the water travel using the international scale of river difficulty, including +/- designators:

Class 0 Still Water  
Class I River  
Class II- River  
Class II River  
Class II+ River  
Class III- River  
Class III River  
Class III+ River  
Class IV- River  
Class IV River  
Class IV+ River  
Class V- River  
Class V River

## **FLATWATER TRIP**

The Difficulty rating of the water portion of flatwater trips is either “Class 0 Still Water” or “Class I River”, to match the limited participant training and experience.

## **WHITEWATER TRIP**

Leaders will rate the Difficulty of Whitewater Trips using the International Scale of River Difficulty, adjusted as appropriate for the expected river conditions and intention of the leader for how aggressive of a trip they intend to lead.

## **EXPEDITION TRIP**

If the trip includes whitewater, the whitewater difficulty rating should indicate the most difficult rapid expected.

## **ALL TRIPS Further Description**

Other difficulties and skill requirements should be in the trip description. Examples include long distances over varied terrain, exposure to extreme low temperatures at night, high risk of water exposure, wildlife encounters, and other difficulties that may be significant yet not reflected in the trip rating.

## **RESOURCES**

[International Scale of River Difficulty](#)

Packrafting Leader Policy (Forthcoming)

[Swiftwater Safety Institute](#)

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