

PADDLE July SPLASHES 2025

Appalachian Mountain Club
New York-North Jersey Chapter
Canoe & Kayak Committee

Rescue
on the
RAMAPO

the
Northern
Forest
Canoe
Trail

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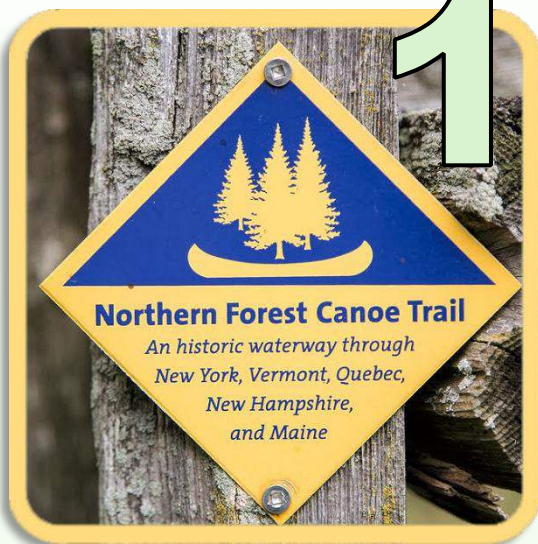
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Cover: The Saranac River near Cadyville, NY, part of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail.
Photo by Marty Plante.



“Who’s having fun?” I call out.

Reaching forward and slicing the water with my paddle, joy percolates through me. It’s 70 degrees Fahrenheit and sunny, the weather is ideal; the water refreshing, and the river swift. Paddling the Ramapo River is precisely how I want to spend Mother’s Day 2025.

Rescue on the RAMAPO

STORY BY LOREN EDELSON

All week, my husband Jeremy and I have been preparing to lead this six-mile Appalachian Mountain Club trip from Tuxedo to Torne Valley, New York, about 30 miles northwest of New York City. The course lays hidden by thick woods as it runs along major thruways. We'd pored over satellite photos of our route, spoken to past trip leaders, and hiked to various spots along the river we hadn't previously paddled to detect any hazards. We shared photos and videos with the six other members of our group, disclosing we hadn't gotten to survey the third section, but that Edward Gertler, in his guidebook *Garden State Canoeing*, had described an old, broken dam at which we needed to make a hard left turn.

Moments before embarking on that portion, there is another dam and, as we're portaging the boats, I chuckle to myself about how some people had questioned if we would run the trip, given all the rain. This is the perfect day to paddle the Ramapo.

Five minutes later we smack into twin logs and capsizes.

"Get upstream of the canoe," I yell to Jeremy, seconds after falling out of our boat. As the leaders, it's not a great look for us. But, together with our 18-year-old son Zev—who joined us in our tandem canoe after capsizing his kayak earlier—we're upright within seconds, thanks to our PFDs—personal flotation devices—and are swimming with our boat.

Like the other seasoned canoeists on this trip, Jeremy and I have capsized before and know the drill. The last thing any



Jeremy and Loren's swamped canoe the day after the trip (above) and several weeks later during a scouting mission. Photos by Jeremy Katz.

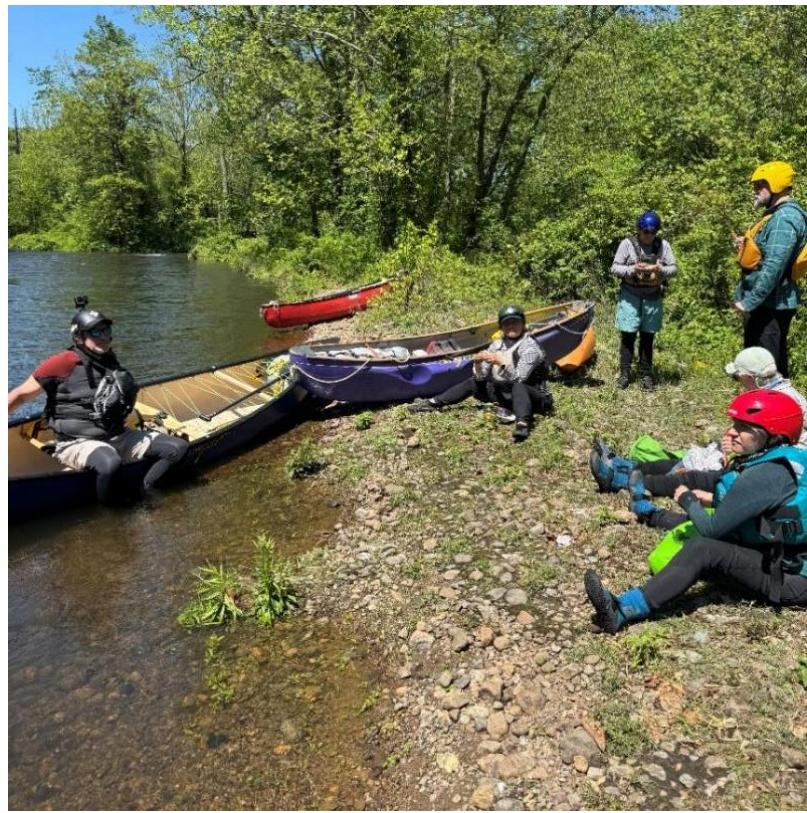


paddler wants is to be trapped between their water-filled boat and a fallen tree, what are called *strainers*: objects in the river that allow water to pass through but can trap and hold boats and people. “Think spaghetti,” an instructor once told me. “That’s what you’ll look like if you go through a strainer.”

For a couple of seconds, Jeremy, Zev and I provide a textbook example of how to maneuver upstream of the boat. The only thing bothering me are my legs. Something, perhaps a rope from one of our throw bags, is twisted around my ankles, and I cannot access my feet. Still, I’m securely holding onto our canoe when Jeremy yells, “I need to let go now.” He takes Zev with him, and ten seconds—or is it thirty seconds or a minute later—the canoe is swept around a bend in the river, and a tree appears five yards in front of me. Thank God I’m behind the boat, because the second I let go, it crashes into the tree, and I crash into the tree next to it. I gasp for air as the rapids pull me downwards.

I don’t think: “I’m going to die.” I think: “I could die if I don’t catapult myself over this thing.”

I muster a breath and try to think clearly. I can do this. I have trained for this moment, never thinking I would actually need to vault a strainer, because I’ve prided myself on avoiding strainers at all costs. The rapids push my legs forward under a gap in the tree. With my arms, I grab the branch—or is it a stump—with all my might. The water pressure works



against me, as I push myself out of the spiraling hole beneath me.

It’s only then that I become aware that my butt is bare: it’s not a rope tied around my ankles, but my black HydroSkin paddling pants. That had been a last-minute decision I’d made at the put-in at Tuxedo. Had I, like Jeremy, worn my one-piece drysuit, such a hazardous wardrobe malfunction would have been prevented. But this is no time to think about modesty. The rapids want to suck me in.

With all my strength, I push down hard on my hands and heave my body up and over the tree, plunging back into the river, face first in the rapids. I turn so that my legs are downstream. My feet are pinned, my butt is bare. I’m floating.

But I don’t get a second to relax. The current pulls me downstream, my pants, pulled way past my boots, leading the way. If this were a lazy river of modern-day water parks, I’d be laughing, but I’m aware the situation is dire: I must get to shore before I hit another strainer.

As part of our training with the National Canoe and Safety Patrol (NCSP), an organization for which Jeremy and I volunteer, we practiced rolling our bodies from the current over the eddy line, transitioning from the rapids into calm water. Do I roll now? I can't remember, but somehow I get out of the current, into an eddy, and onto a patch of dirt on river left. I hug the earth and try to breathe. I've reached land. I'm alive!

But where are Jeremy and Zev?

I try not to panic. But I'm panicking. Where the hell are they? Has Zev ended up in that same strainer? Unlike me and his father, he didn't participate in the drills conducted at last year's NCSP spring training. It was there that I experienced bumping up against a strainer—simulated by our instructors using a corrugated plastic pipe strung between rocks in the rapids—and learned how to swim aggressively toward it. “Get over it, not under it,” was the mantra. Does Zev know this? I try to breathe. How could have I done this to him? He has a diagnosis of autism, dammit. I'd asked everyone to pay special attention to him, since he has a habit of paddling ahead of the group, but never did I imagine this scenario.

The foam mat on which Zev had been sitting in our canoe floats by. All I can think about it is how I've made a terrible mistake by allowing him to come on this trip. He was content to join us, but this is

really his Mother's Day gift to me. His sisters, ages 12 and 16, had opted out, preferring to stay home with our puppy and prepare a “surprise” dinner. We had paddled together a lot, when everyone was younger, but that was mainly on lakes, relatively free from hazards. Sure, Zev has paddled whitewater, but primarily on the Delaware, which is a wide river, and when he kayaked part of the upper Ramapo with me and Jeremy last month, the water had been considerably lower and the river-wide strainers had been easier to navigate.

I take another breath and stare across the river, willing Jeremy and Zev to appear. They don't, but on the opposite bank, sitting in his solo canoe, is another paddler from our group.

“Jack,” I scream. He looks up and taps his helmet, and I tap mine, the universal paddling sign that “we're okay.”

“Are Jeremy and Zev okay?” I yell across the river, about 40 feet.

He tells me they are. I'm so relieved, I involuntarily pee.

In the water, my naked butt is hidden, but I want my pants on. Can Jack see me? He's tinkering with his GoPro, so I take my chances and stand, pulling my drenched Smartwool top over my thighs and untangling my pants while bending

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over my bulky PFD—a Class V rescue vest I’d broken in at the previous weekend at this year’s NCSP spring training.

With my pants back on, there’s no need to sit in the river. But the bank isn’t exactly a hospitable spot: every inch is carpeted with multi-flora rose, a terrestrial invasive species. I inch myself upwards, when something stings my thigh, and I slide back into the water. I try again and climb out onto the bank. I don’t have my paddle to whack down the thorns, so I use my boot. A thorn stings my eye. I reach for my sunglasses, which by some miracle are still on my head. There’s no sun but I need eye protection.

Seconds later, Jeremy and Zev appear on the bank across the river. Zev sports the HydroSkin top and bottoms I gave him this morning. Jeremy, noticeable in his mustard drysuit, taps his helmet; I tap mine, choking back tears.

“What can I do?” I yell.

“Wait there,” he screams. Or that’s what I think he says. It’s hard to hear over the rushing river.

I ask if he has his phone. He does, so I ask him to call for help, but he tells me we don’t need help. Of course, he’d say that! Jeremy is quintessentially a DIY kind of guy. He relishes a problem and figuring out how to solve it. That’s what he does as a software engineer in his day job and at our home: he prides himself on fixing things when they break. He’d undoubtedly like for me to have a little bit more of his can-do spirit, and now he’s giving me the opportunity to prove that I

do, as if I haven’t proven myself enough for one day.

“Loren!” I hear Jack calling my name from across the river, and I look up.

“Never mind,” he says, and then our canoe—the eggshell blue Penobscot we bought used last summer—floats by. It probably wouldn’t have been doable for me to catch it, but I feel pathetic for not trying.

I glance at the sun and tell myself we still have a good three hours of daylight left. Then I try to breathe. Like really breathe. My chest hurts. Not like it’s broken, but like it’s been squeezed. The jaw thing is also super weird. Did I lock my teeth on the strainer?

I will myself to take a deep breath and survey my surroundings. I’m on the north bank in a deep ravine. The broken dam that looks like a concrete wall is 100 or so yards downstream of me. Cars on I-87, the New York State Thruway, rush above me. Beneath me, the Ramapo rages. Its swift current, a delight earlier, now looks deadly. I’m not going in there again.

I claw my way up the steep, prickly hill. For a split second, I consider jumping over the guardrail, which comes to an abrupt end, and walking along the five-foot shoulder. But no. I’ve come this far. I’m not risking death by car. I turn around and walk back to a sunny spot, behind the guardrail, where I plant myself and start waving my hands over my head and mouthing in succession: “Help,” “Police,” and “Call 911.”

Cars, trucks, and buses whiz by me, and I try to catch someone—anyone’s—eye. Several cars with kayaks pass, and I pray those drivers will bestow some extra pity on me—with my bulky blue PFD and bright red helmet— and call for help.

As time passes, my charades become more complex: I motion with my hands “namaste” and mime holding a phone while dialing 911. It doesn’t occur to me at the time that many people driving by have never used a rotary phone.

But I keep waving my hands over my head, hopeful that the police or EMS will arrive. Can’t people see there is a damsel in distress? There are times when I’ve depended on the kindness of strangers, so I’m not giving up.

To my surprise, Geoff—another member of our group—appears, and we walk towards each other. I reach up to hug him standing on my tiptoes, barely reaching his shoulders. At 6’4” he towers over me,

but I feel a sense of comfort with him—and his family. They’ve been to dinner at our home, we’ve practiced bandaging each other up at the AMC Wilderness First Aid Training, and we’ve paddled the Lehigh River together. In the past, I’ve joked he’s the one I want to be rescued by, since his first aid kit embodies perfection.

He shares he got pinned to the same strainer on which we’d capsized. The logs in the river have created a booby trap.

I share my plan to motion for someone to call for help so we can get a lift to the take-out in Torne Valley, where I parked my family’s 2008 Honda Odyssey seven hours ago, in order to shuttle everyone back to the put-in.

He studies me from above and shakes his head. “No one is going to rescue you,” he informs me. “We’re in America. No one calls the police.”

Everyone, with the notable exception of Zev, poses for a picture at the Tuxedo put in. Photo by Jeremy Katz.



Surely he's wrong. Someone will call. I tell Geoff I just rescued myself from a raging river and that I have no shame in asking for help now.

He turns to the Thruway and sticks his thumb out.

I continue doing my thing; he does his and within minutes, a police car, lights flashing, pulls onto the shoulder, a couple yards ahead of us. My heart leaps. We're going to be rescued!

Geoff and I race over and two officers ask us what happened. They take our names and ask for identification. We explain that our IDs, phone, and, you name it, are in our canoes, somewhere in the river.

They pat us down before they permit us to enter their vehicle, and once we're inside, inform us that "so many people" had called to report us.

"Welcome to the United States," I tease Geoff, who hails from Canada. Once we're inside the car, the officers verify we're New Yorkers. Never before have I been so happy to be a New Yorker. But I have to wonder: Would they still give us a ride if we said we were from New Jersey? I decide not to ask. They ask for our addresses and phone numbers, and request a more specific address than "Torne Valley, Ramapo River" when we ask them to drive us to the take-out.

The annual spring Ramapo trips have been eagerly attended for decades. Even The Times agrees that they're *News That's Fit to Print*.

The New York Times

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, MARCH 26, 1950

RAMAPO CANOE TRIP

Annual Two-Day Cruise Starts at Sloatsburg

By JOHN B. EHRHARDT

NEW YORK — Sponsored by the American Canoe Association, the traditional spring run down the Ramapo River for canoeists in the New Jersey-New York area is scheduled for next Saturday and Sunday. An annual affair for more than a generation, the trip has been arranged by the Wanda Canoe Club of Edgewater...

Ordinarily the Ramapo regatta starts at Tuxedo, N. Y., but owing to unfavorable conditions in the upper river, this year's cruise will start at Sloatsburg, N. Y., proceeding downstream to the upper end of Pompton Lakes near Oakland, N. J. From the jumping-off point, the route leads through mile upon mile of fast water. The gorge of the upper Ramapo has a wild beauty in spring. For the most part un-touched by civilization, it is inaccessible except by canoe, and even this craft can negotiate the entire length of the stream only during the few weeks of high water in spring....Saturday night the canoeing party will camp at the Havemeyer farm at Ramsey, N. J., resuming the white-water run the next morning. Below the campsite the river is broader and slower, but there are still some rapids and a few low dams. More adventurous members of the party prefer to shoot these instead of making portages.

They spot my van and make a U-turn at Pierson Mapes Flat Rock Park. Chris, our group's most experienced paddler who'd checked on me while I was vacillating whether or not to swim or hike my way out of the ravine, is waiting for us between the river and the road. We exchange hugs, and I readily accept his sweater from his dry bag.

We thank the officers and then, as they're about to leave, I ask to use one of their cell phones so that I can call Jeremy. He answers immediately and tells me that he and Zev are hiking past the Torne Valley Vineyard, minutes from us. Zev, always wanting to know the exact schedule—preferably well in advance of when such activities will occur—is reportedly handling such a deviation from our plans with calm and ease. Although I'd been scolding myself over our decision to bring him, I now congratulate us on raising such a resilient kid.

As I'm hanging up, Jack arrives in his canoe. There's a cut under his eye, but otherwise he looks good. It's only then that I learn he also capsized on a second surprise log and that he and his boat were pulled under. After I hear the details, I ask if he saw my bare butt. He breaks into a smile, and we both crack up.

"I wasn't going to say anything," he says.

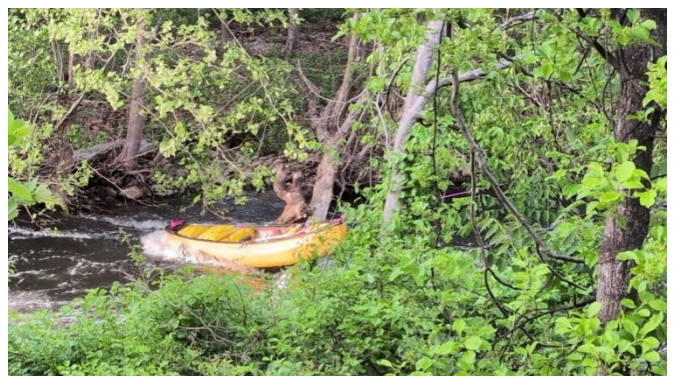
I sit down, pull off my boots, and cradle my head between my hands. The rocks here are smooth, the sun shines, and the river glistens. A couple of teenagers are playing in the water, and I want to scream at them to get out, that the river looks

innocent but it'll drown them if they aren't careful, but instead I say to the air, "Where are their PFDs?"

Chris says, "You're Jewish, so I don't know what you say, but you had your 'Come to Jesus Moment.' All paddlers have them at some point." Later he tells me that 25 years earlier, he was on a trip when a fellow participant died in a strainer. I think back to my college years when a fellow student died on a kayak trip. That too was due to a strainer. I resolve to "*bench gomel*"—a prayer of gratitude that Jews recite after times of distress and danger next Shabbat in synagogue.



Geoff during the trip and his boat a week later, during the recovery.
Photos by Jeremy Katz and Geoff MacDougall.



Eileen and Mary Ann appear upstream in their respective canoes and ferry across the water to our perch on river left. Eileen gently chastises me for staying with my boat after capsizing. “You’re more important than the canoe,” she says, sharing she had a “mini heart attack” while watching me—and others in the group—battle the strainer. I hang my head. I should have gotten myself—and Jeremy and Zev—to shore immediately after capsizing.

“I thought I could swim with the canoe as long as I was upstream,” I say in my poor defense.

“That’s fine on a wide river,” she replies. “Not a narrow one.” I can only agree. Especially not on one that reads like an obstacle course.

Before we spend more time reflecting on what went wrong and how things could have gone so much worse, Jeremy and Zev arrive. I know everything is going to be okay when, after hugging me, Zev asks what’s for dinner.

Jeremy hangs up with someone on the phone and kisses me. He has no clue what I’ve been through, and I have no idea what he and Zev have endured. But, ever practical, he’s been arranging how to get the second set of van keys to us, since the one I’d sealed in a dry bag is secured to the canoe. Fortunately, our home is only 10 minutes away.

“
Everyone
has a
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why
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”

Leaving Geoff and Eileen to watch the boats and gear, the rest of us pile into the van so that everyone can retrieve their cars back in Tuxedo. Jeremy drives, and I’m happy to sit in the back next to Mary Ann. The discussion turns technical. Everyone has a theory as to why we flipped: we didn’t have enough momentum, we didn’t hit the log on a perpendicular, we froze in fear, we touched the gunnels, we didn’t lean into the rapids. I declare I owe my life to the strainer drills at NCSP and that when I lead any future river trips, I’ll begin with self-rescue mastery skills, because no one is coming to save you on the water when you’re battling a strainer.

From the back seat, Mary Ann and I, two women of a certain age, discuss how we’re recommitting ourselves to upper body strength training—we need to do more pull ups, chin ups, push-ups—so we can catapult ourselves over future strainers.

Chris turns around from the middle seat and scrutinizes our faces. “What we need is more paddling, more time on the water, so you get good enough to avoid the strainers.”

More paddling? For now, a wide lake or river, free of strainers, is about all I can manage.

What's Happenin'

Click a square to find out more

Cardboard Boat Race Hudson River, Schuylerville, NY

Sat,
Aug9,
2025

Pine Barrens Freestyle Symposium

Fri-Sun
Oct 10-12,
2025

Intro to Sea Kayaking AMC's Knubble Bay Camp in Maine

Fri-Sun,
Sept 5-7,
2025

Swiftwater Rescue Training with AMC-NH Errol, NH

Sat-Sun,
Aug 30-31,
2025

WEEK OF ADIRONDACK LAKES & RIVERS AUG 10-16, 2025

ACA Canoe Touring Instructor Certification Bass River, NJ Sep 19-22, 2025

The Holy Grail Of Canoe Trails Turns

Mirroring ancient indigenous travel routes, the fabled North Forest Canoe Trail marks its 25th anniversary.

As wondrous as it is—weaving through 23 rivers and streams and 59 lakes and ponds, from Old Forge to NW Maine, you've still gotta be pretty motivated to complete it all.

Only 300 folks have ever thru-paddled the magical trail, and even fewer as unsupported crafts. While many in the club have journeyed key sections (Gwen Hunter led a fierce Lake Champlain to Saranac trip), only Mary Ann Hoag attempted section paddling the entire 700+ miles. (She's shy just one bit.)

25

The run on the St. John's River by the Friendship Bridge at the Canada-Maine border has some of the most exciting expedition whitewater and wildlife you could ever wish for.

But the buzz is building to launch more AMC section trips along this grand trail.

Loretta crossing Lake Champlain during a 2019 NFCT trip.

For inspiration, we turned to the new owners of our beloved [St. Regis Canoe Outfitters](#), Steve Cerri and Maeghan Farnham, for their expert advice. We learned that in fact Steve is named an NFCT Thru Paddler on the honorary list, commemorating his 2018 self-propelled tandem run in a shocking 23.5 days. (The solo record is 28, but that guy used wheels.)

What motivated such a formidable effort to conquer over 100 portage miles and nine upstream paddles so swiftly?

“We were running out of excuses as to why we'd never attempted it yet,” said Steve.

“But my buddy Pete had a nonrefundable deposit on a training course coming up,” he explained, “so we went all out and just booked it.”

Lucky for us, the triumphant team returned safely, here to offer us not only gear, guides and guiding advice, but now a new feature: whitewater paddling skills clinics.

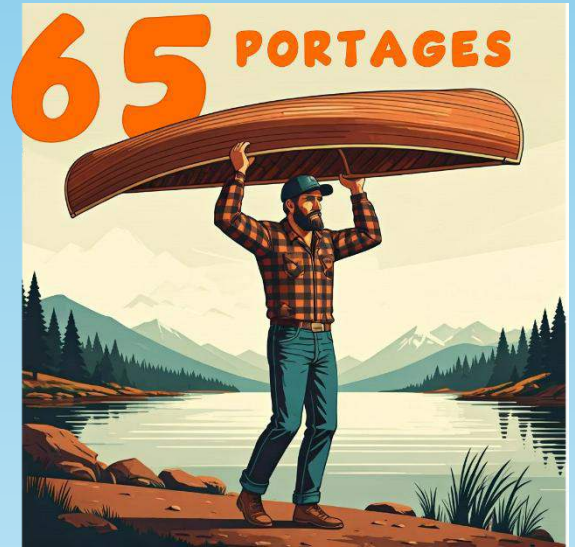
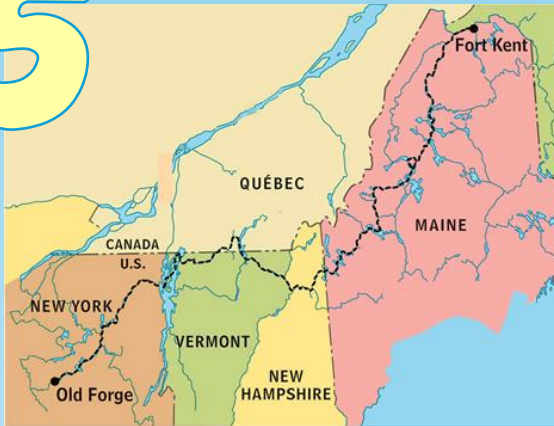
Steve and Pete's Tips and Takeaways

- We paddled 31 average miles per day.
- Our proudest moment was not missing the left hand turn on Spencer Stream. If you know, you know.
- Our greatest challenge was not being able to stop for a desperately needed pizza in every town we went through because it would take too much time.
- We packed not a single luxury item because we didn't want a single ounce of unnecessary weight.
- The most striking thing we saw was a dead mountain lion that a farmer had pushed into the river in Maine.
- Something we'd do differently is bring chemical water treatment to treat water on the Missisquoi River rather than relying solely on a water filter.



THE NFCT BY THE NUMBERS

States & Provinces
5



Youngest Whitewater Students Ever

Without this, we die.

Or fade away, lame and irrelevant.

Boating clubs with a strong pipeline of new, enthusiastic paddlers from instructionals thrive.

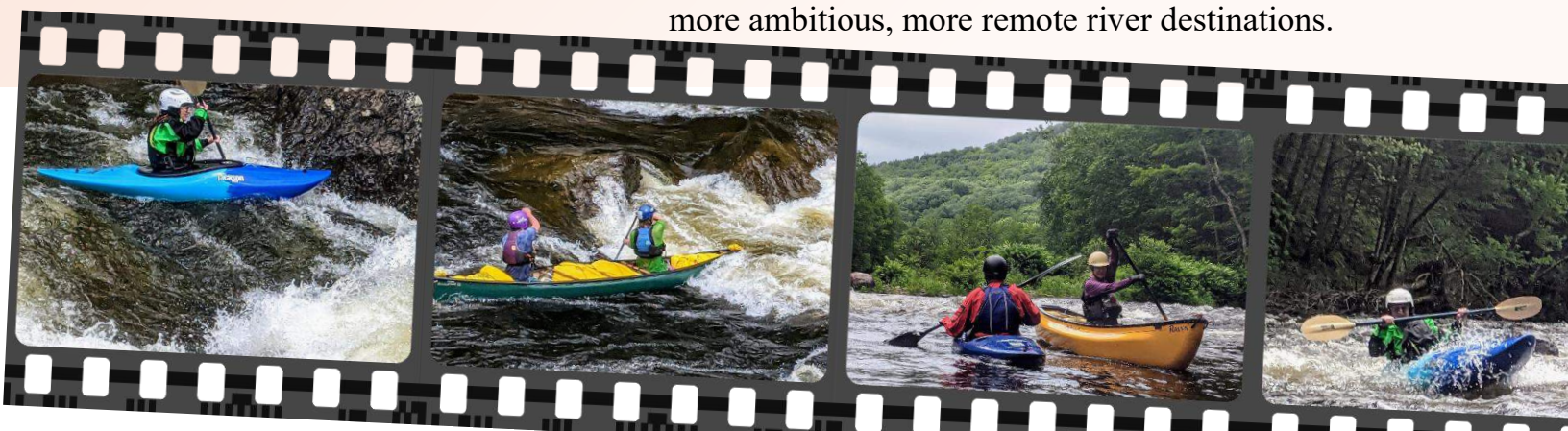
And ours are still pumping—thanks to a team of talented volunteers who birth our next generation of club paddlers and leaders.

If you think we're over-hyping it, consider our post-covid outcomes.

- 8 active Leaders-in-Training
- 4 newly promoted active leaders
- 1 instructor of a new Expedition Paddling Series
- 2 instructors offering a new SUP experience
- 4 paddling instructors-in training

That's along with dozens of new canoeists and whitewater kayakers, including cohorts from Massachusetts and Canada.

The *Intro to Whitewater Kayaking* workshop sells out first, no doubt stoked by connections with the Brooklyn Boating Club and winter pool sessions for rolling practice organized by KCCNY. The canoe students, on the other hand, trend towards expeditioners seeking to upgrade their skills for more ambitious, more remote river destinations.





This year, we're expanding to embrace families better. Parents who loved the canoe instructional are returning this year with their two teens to learn whitewater kayaking. A father-son pair and a mother and her two teens are hoping to step up the skill level of their family outings by learning to river canoe.

We're only volunteers, and always learning, but students keep repeating our courses, too. They say it's to step up, not because we totally confused them.

"I love how AMC chapters professionally and thoroughly approach the course," said repeating student Marianna Hard.

"I feel safer, and it makes me more relaxed to have more fun," she added.

And we certainly learn from students.

"I had a eureka moment," said repeating student Geoff MacDougall about paddling.

"I realized it combines elements of highway driving and martial arts," he explained. "In the latter, slipping past a punch by an inch or a

foot is the same thing," he realized, so now he saves energy brushing past rocks with more grace and positional advantage.

No wonder he steps up so swiftly.

Thankfully, this year Jordan Yaruss, Rob Holbrook, and Mark Tiernan return to instruct the intro to whitewater course at Lehigh, ably assisted by former student phenom, Elisia Langdon.

The same weekend, May 31-June 2, longtime ACA trainer-of-trainers Chris Raab joins the canoe instructional team of Chris Viani and Loretta Brady to launch solo and tandem river canoe lessons, ably assisted by Jack Kline, Geoff MacDougall and Stephen Ferder.

Students crushed the second weekend of practice and feedback at Deerfield, June 21-22. Novice tandem and solo canoes and kayaks road unusually high flows with grace.

And after the fortuitous session of swiftwater safety practice, there was an epic save the next day.



Dude, Where's my Boat?

We'll be clearing out the Barn of surplus canoes and kayaks. If you've been storing a private boat there and haven't made arrangements to do so, please contact the Canoe/Kayak Treasurer at

canoekayak.treasurer@amc-ny.org



Keep in Touch!

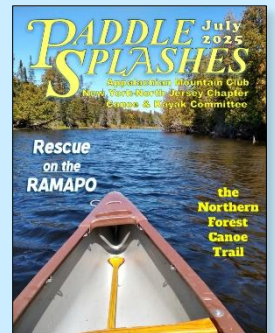


PADDLE SPLASHES

Loretta Brady, Editor

Marty Plante, Printer's Devil

PaddleSplashes is published by the Canoe and Kayak Committee of the Appalachian Mountain Club, New York-North Jersey Chapter whenever the spirit moves us.



Guidelines for Submissions

Photos are preferred as high-resolution color jpeg files attached to email. Please do not crop, compress, resize or otherwise interfere with them. Contact the editor if you need assistance sending large files. Current and prior issues of PaddleSplashes are available on the Chapter's website at <https://www.amc-ny.org/canoe-kayak/paddle-splashes>

Send all submissions to:

canoekayak.newsletter@amc-ny.org

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PARTING SHOT

