

Whoa, Boaters! Big Water Ahead

How to have fun without getting spanked by epic flows

By Dan Crandall

The 2006 snow pack is one of the deepest on record, deeper than last year even. This can make for a fantastic and extended paddling season for those who have the skills and experience. It can also set the stage for a lot of nasty carnage, unpleasant out-of boat experiences, or worse for those unaware, unprepared or just a bit unlucky.

How can YOU take advantage of these unique paddling opportunities, and not be the subject of tomorrow's put-in stories?

1. PROFESSIONAL GUIDES AND INSTRUCTION:

Rafters and kayakers with little or no high water experience on a river should go with an outfitter first to get a safe introduction to paddling this year's fast and furious spring and early summer conditions.

A river that typically flows at 2,000 cfs is not the same beast when it's flowing at seven grand. Even those with years of experience can benefit greatly from a professionally guided run to familiarize themselves with the rivers at these flows and take advantage of the experienced input, knowledge and safety net a knowledgeable professional can provide before venturing out on their own.

2. SKILLS, SKILLS, SKILLS!

Solid and well-practiced paddling skills are your best tool for having safe and positive experiences on the water. Take a tune-up skills course BEFORE you head out on high water or new runs. A professional can assess and critique your skills, and offer tips to help you become a better, safer, more confident paddler.

Take a certified Swiftwater Safety/Rescue course to provide an awareness of potential hazards, clues to dangerous group dynamics, and to prepare you and your gear for action in scenarios that might occur.

3. KNOWLEDGE, AWARENESS, PREPAREDNESS:

Know your abilities at HIGH flows! Know the flows, relative level of difficulty and hazards on any run before you go.

- Use online sources such as TheRiverStore.com, Boof.com, Dreamflows.com and California Creeks (www.cacreeks.com) to gather info on flow levels and beta from other paddlers.
- Call the local river paddling shop for local advice on flows, difficulty levels, new hazards and equipment choices.
- Have the proper attire. "Dress to swim" if there's any chance you might. Remember high water, means cold water. Don't be fooled by hot weather.
- Have the proper boat and safety equipment (spare paddles, float bags, throw ropes, rescue and first aid kits, etc.)

4. CHOOSE WISELY!

- Choose paddling partners that know your skills, and vice versa. They may be helping you later, or you may be put in dangerous situations by their lack of skills or preparedness!
- Choose runs that allow you to gradually build confidence and experience in big water.
- Trust your gut! What is down river is not always predictable, but your instincts often let you know when something might not be a good decision.
- Think safe, think smart! There are always other days to paddle. Your ego should not be factor in determining to do a run your uncertain about.

Dan Crandall is the owner of The River Store and Current Adventures Kayak School on the South Fork of the American River.

RIVER BETA, TRAINING AND GEAR SOURCES

- The River Store in Lotus for kayaking/rafting equipment; info on local outfitters, runs, flows, and difficulty levels in the central Sierra. 530-333-9115; www.theriverstore.com
- Current Adventures Kayak School in Lotus for classes for all skill levels, and ACA swift-water training. 888-452-9254; www.currentadventures.com
- California Outdoors, a trade association, has information on selecting rafting and kayaking outfitters for every major river in the state. 530-626-7385; www.caloutdoors.org
- Wolf Creek Wilderness in Grass Valley for info on local runs and kayak equipment needs. 530-477-2722; www.wolfcreekwilderness.com
- California Canoe & Kayak for equipment needs, whitewater classes and trips. Two stores: Jack London Square, Oakland, 510-893-7833, and Sacramento, 916-353-1880; www.calkayak.com
- Reno Mountain Sports for equipment and beta in the Reno/Tahoe area, and the affiliated Different Strokes Kayaking school for whitewater lessons on the Truckee River. 775-825-2855; www.renomountainsports.com
- Clavey River Equipment in Petaluma for whitewater rafts and inflatable kayaks. 800-832-4226; www.clavey.com
- Pacific River Supply in El Sobrante (East Bay) specializes in rafting and inflatable kayaks. 510-223-3675; www.pacificriversupply.com
- Aquan Sports in San Carlos (Peninsula) carries whitewater kayaks, paddles and gear. 650-593-6060; www.aquansports.com

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