

# Cold Water Canoeing

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Man was not meant to canoe alone. But since I wanted to canoe down the [Ouachita River](#) in the coldest part of February canoe partner volunteers were suddenly scarce. The consensus of opinion was that anyone who wanted to canoe in icy cold February waters was crazy!

Actually it isn't crazy at all. Februarys may be cold most of the time. But if you are right there when the water suddenly turns wonderful it is right then you need to take advantage of the weather.

The canoe partner I finally found was 75 years old to my 63. On closer inspection Ted was a perfect choice. #1, [at the age of 50 he had performed quite well in a mountainous marathon](#), and even today he is capable of a fast sprint for long distances. #2, "[I'm a bird watcher](#). I know so many of the birds by sight that I seldom have to use the bird identification book at all."

**These two qualifications sealed Ted's doom.**

At aged 75 Ted can be excused for having his choice of days off. We picked out a Tuesday when the sun was supposed to shine (and yes, a shining sun is a sight for sore eyes in the friendly mountains known as Ouachita) and we picked out a place to start from and a place to stop. Then I borrowed the canoe, and the paddles from [George Davis](#), and bought the life vests, and the lunch. Ted furnished the six bottles of fresh spring water and two bottles of non-caffeinated pop each. I also brought along some specialized equipment: my professional digital camera valued at \$500, my cell phone, my binoculars valued at \$300, and of course -- my medication for diabetes. I mention these prices merely to substantiate any possible losses.

The run I had picked out was from McGuire Access to Shirley Creek Access, a total of a mere 23 miles down the road. Ted insisted that we take only a leisurely seven mile run. I protested that his run could sometimes be done in less than 30 minutes, if the wind was behind us.

"Well, yes," Ted agreed. "But even if the wind is behind us, we can always pause and LOOK at our surroundings to spot more birds and wildlife."

So we could.

So we did.

About half a mile before reaching the McGuire Access Area I saw a bird that was much bigger than a buzzard rising up on our left. "Look," I said as I pointed it out. "Isn't that an eagle?"

"Oh no, see how his wings are spread? That is a buzzard."

Well, my eyes had been giving me trouble the last few days, so I shrugged at the mistaken identity. But we both kept watching. I knew in my heart that was not the way a buzzard's wings look in flight. Then the bird watching expert beside me exclaimed, "THAT IS AN EAGLE, and the biggest one I've ever seen."

YES. It was an eagle, and a huge one almost as big as the one I've spotted several times just past Muse Oklahoma. This one tried to land in an upper branch of a tall pine tree. The limb swayed until it was pointed almost straight to the ground before the eagle relinquished her grasp and tried for a lower and stouter limb. That one would not hold her up either and the eagle tried a third limb.

It was a perfect shot and I stopped the truck to take it. The eagle eyed me nervously as the camera came out and I got ready to shoot. Suddenly a pickup thashed its gears behind me then blasted its horn. My perfectly posed eagle floated away unharmed.

I pulled off the road and let the impatient driver go on by. "With any luck at all he won't disturb the wood ducks in the pond up here on our right as he whizzes on by. But just think, we have actually seen an eagle already."

Ted exclaimed. "And it was huge! It used to be there were a lot of eagles in this area, back in the days when the chicken farmers just tossed the dead chickens out in a pasture somewhere. Do you remember back that far?"

"Well, not so far back that it was done legally," I admitted.

Both of us recognized the meadowlarks before they took wing. Telling me what they were was like Ted apologizing for the eagle he had not recognized immediately.

The ducks were still there, but on the far side of the pond and not a good shot. Therefore we went on to the McGuire Access Area. This is a beautiful launch spot with an in and an off beach just right for canoes and small boats. There is plenty of parking space too. That day it was populated with a full round of Robins searching desperately for food. Ted thought they were migrating north and had stopped off just to entertain us. Perhaps they were only protesting the sharp wind blasting in our faces, but we scarcely noticed the wind in our excitement to get going.

Now as you know, canoeing is a hazardous occupation even in the best of times. It had never happened to me before, but I knew that canoes do overturn easily. That usually happens in swift waters and the instructions are to turn over on your back with your feet stretched forward, away from the stream's flow. "Let your bottom sag low and Tump, Tump, Tump along until you get into slower water before you try to stand up." I distinctly remember that the professional guide who told me that was not a bird watcher; he did not carry a digital camera, or a pair of good binoculars. I was not about to tump, tump, tump anywhere; I was going to save my camera, and my binoculars -- if I ever did get turned out of my canoe, which was highly unlikely, of course.

"How much experience do you have with canoeing?" Ted asked worriedly before we got in.

"Oh," I admitted humbly. "Not much. How about you?"

"Well, I just know enough to keep my bottom in the center of the seat," he admitted. "That's supposed to be enough to keep the canoe from turning over."

Therefore, I took extra care with packing my camera and my binoculars in plastic baggies during the launch. I was going to package the cell phone in the same manner too, but just as I was about to thrust it in, it rang. It was Brad. After a month he still doesn't remember that we now have three cell phones and I kept the first number as my own as it is already given to all the editors on my list and every person I've written a story about in the past four years. When I had finished educating the boy yet again I automatically put the phone into my shirt pocket and buttoned it down for the trip.

Woe, woe is me.

Ted insisted on taking the back seat because of my feet. "I don't want you to get your feet wet," he explained as he held the canoe very professionally while I crawled forward.

\* \* \*

That was fine with me because if he was in the back then I would not have to shoot past his ears for the birds or scenery. Ted shoved us off the bank. Before either of us struck a paddle it was obvious the wind was NOT coming up from behind us. Nor was it a wind. Actually it was more like a gale, and before we could get a good hold on our paddles the canoe was backed up almost to the bridge. "I think we're in for it," said Ted.



The Ouachita River starts out as a mere trickle in the hills of Eagleton. By the time it gets past [Mena Arkansas](#) the Ouachita has become a fairly good stream of water, especially when it rains well. At the McGuire Exit we found the river to be almost four feet deep all the way across, about 50 feet. That's a lot of acre-feet of water.

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The barely visible bird at the top of this picture on the left is a falcon. About 1/4 mile farther on Ted saw an osprey. His identification was positive. The osprey is a rarely spotted bird in this area and I have never seen one up that close before.



Kingfishers laced our journey for over three miles. These birds will wait until we catch up with them, then fly beyond us for about 50 feet and wait for us to catch up with them again. At the end of that one's territory it will suddenly fly overhead and back to where its territory begins, and another Kingfisher will take its place in the dance.

I spotted one of our red giant woodpeckers. There were also numerous tufted titmouse in one patch of cedar trees.



The rock formation showing here is almost as smooth as a slide. There is a home back to the right of this picture and it is obvious that children have played in this spot for ages. Beaver runs are quite frequent along the banks in this area. The only actual tracks that I glimpsed were those of raccoons.

My Dad always said it was best to laugh before you got in the ring with the bull. "You might not feel like laughing after he lets you get out."

Finally realizing that Daddy was pretty smart in some ways, I had come prepared for a cold canoe trip, and the off chance that we got dumped.

Starting at the bottom... I did not have my usual slip on shoes. I didn't even trust Super Velcro to hold my shoes on. The shoes I wore on the canoe trip laced up tight, and had air holes in the side. Back when I was a kid they called these tennis shoes.

My pants were the old style of Levis, still hanging in there after 25 years. If I had known the kind of

wind that we had to paddle against I would have worn my shorts and not sweated near as much. My belt was a nylon job with webs woven through it so that I could stick the pin through anywhere. It is real hard to get a leather belt that holds together more than six or seven of my active months. A short sleeved nylon shirt brings us up to the neck. Why nylon? It sheds water quickly whereas cotton holds it right up against you.

### Other Precautions:

1. If you have false teeth, **GLUE THEM IN!**
2. If you must have eye glasses on to see the world through darkly, loop them on.
3. Hearing aids you'd best leave at home even if you can't hear a crow's angry caw from two feet away..
4. Jewelry that might come off, will come off, leave it at home.
5. Put your perishables inside an airtight plastic baggie that is inside another airtight plastic baggie..
6. Put your bill fold in there too.
7. Changes of clothes can be put in a trash bag and **TIED** tightly.
8. **ANYTHING** liable to float should be secured to the canoe by string or rope.
9. Your plastic picnic container should have empty bottles near the top so that it floats with the top side showing.
10. If your canoe is the kind that sinks when it turns over, tie an empty milk jug to the back to mark the depths to which your sunken canoe is sinking.



When we were leaving Ted's house his wife was frantic about the possibility of the wind blowing Ted's Alaska bush hat off. She insisted that he secure the strap beneath his chin. As he was reluctant to be knotted in, she even secured it for him. He put the chin strap back up top at a jauntier angle than ever.

"I won't lose my hat," he said.

"I might Lose my head, maybe.

"My hat, no."

Looking at that loop of string I shuddered to think of his hat going off behind his head and filling up with water, choking him with every struggle he made.

The Ouachita flows EAST in the same way Arkansas roads go EAST. The morning sun may be on your left, or your right, or square behind you -- but you are going east. The Westward gale had an undeviating compass directing it. Consequently, there were times when the wind shoved us backward, times it shoved us shoreward, and sometimes it just tried to shove us under. Because it was winter the trees I had expected to shield us acted more like cold-toed statues; the wind whistled through them and picked up speed along the way.

But there were also tall banks where there was no wind to hit us at all, and shorter banks that kept the wind completely off the water, but still blasted against our faces. Yes, but the beauty of the still waters was enough to make one cry. I was enjoying every minute of the trip.



Birds were not plentiful; visible animals were nonexistent.

We did see an osprey, numerous kinds of woodpeckers, kingfishers, a falcon, a red-winged hawk, several Northern Mockingbirds and more than fifty tufted titmouse along with robins..

The peace, the quiet, the pure air and rare contentment of the trip was worth any price.



The island you see the edge of here was long and lean. The soil on the island was heavy loam and would probably raise anything, provided the rising waters left it alone. On the island we saw tracks of several raccoons, one of which was an old he-coon. About a week before, not far from here I saw a flock of more than thirty turkeys.



We went through five riffles with nothing but a pounding heart to show I was even a little bit scared. Scared is good state for a diabetic to be in as adrenaline and insulin are remarkably similar substances. Ted was doing a lot better at guiding us from his end than I was on mine. That was what let me get all those beautiful shots on the two previous pages. There were also a lot of birds that he was able to point out to me along the way.

After we had gone through the first five riffles without a hitch I was so confident that I left my camera and my binoculars out of the plastic baggies so I could get to them easier as we scooted on down the line.

The constant question before us was: Which is the safest way to go through, or around. But it was a fun challenge to take because we were moving quite rapidly. Two times we made bad decisions and scraped over rocks and even boulders we couldn't see at all until we were right on top of them. It is times like that you want to jab your feet down, lift the boat up out of danger, and hop on down the river to where the deeper waters lie.

One such unseen danger was our first undoing. There was a limb submerged in a restricted access area. It was unseen, and unmoving. It was slanted at such an angle that we were already turning over before I realized the canoe was turning over.

Everything was loose. Everything was leaving. Everything was gone. On top of that, the canoe was sinking. I grabbed for the canoe because if it went down we'd never see it again. As the canoe made its dive it took me under with it. My feet hit bottom and I came back with the canoe still in my hand, but my camera was coming off so I let the canoe go and grabbed for my camera.

The canoe dived for the bottom once more, twisting, sliding like a submarine. I threw the camera inside my shirt and reached to save the canoe. My feet were on treacherous mud. As I slid forward in the rushing waters I glanced back to where Ted was struggling to hold his end of the canoe up. Somehow I found an instant to laugh; not only was his hat still on, it wasn't even damp.

As I shut my mouth my own hat, which had been lying loosely in the bottom of the canoe leaped out into the swirling water. There went my gloves too, and my binoculars. I grabbed for my hat. It vanished beneath the murky waves. Somehow I caught the strap of the binoculars and saved them. Then the insulated ice chest shot out of the canoe and my blood ran cold; it had my insulin in it.

As I reflected on my loss and my doom I noticed the paddle was wobbling on the waves a good sixty feet ahead of me. I let go of the canoe and headed for the paddle just as if it were life or death struggle to catch it. It was.

[Look at this site before planning your next vacation.](#) It can save you time and trouble, and make your trip much more fun.

"Let's get this canoe out of the water!" Ted yelled. "Then let's get the water out of the canoe and go get the paddle. It won't have gone far."

I didn't believe it, but I let it go and we wrestled the canoe to a tiny island. The last few feet so treacherous that we fell many times. Twice the canoe got away from us. Twice we brought it back, slipping, sliding, banging our precious skin on rocks, stones and boulders. It wasn't until then that I noticed the water was warm, or at least the water was not freezingly cold.

At last we got both ends of the canoe on the island at the same time, but our feet kept shooting out from under us even then. Struggling to keep our balance and our footing we managed to raise one side of the canoe up enough to get some of the water out, then more, and then all of it.

Only then did we slump forward on our hands and knees to catch our breath. Ted began to apologize, saying it was his fault for not seeing that limb soon enough to avoid our rough handling, but how could he claim the right to be at fault when I was sitting right there on top of the limb and hadn't seen it at all? I turned around and glared at him. "I don't know about you, but this is the most real fun I've had in four long years!"

Ted busted out laughing. "Me too."

So there we were in the first week of February, drenched to the bone, and laughing at all the fun we were having.

I laughed until there was no more breath left in me to laugh. Then we turned the canoe back over and prepared to launch. The only problem there was the current was swift. Ted insisted that I get in first. Like a pro he held the canoe straight while I wobbled to the front. Just as he shifted his weight in preparation of shoving off the current caught the canoe and flipped it over again. Getting back up on the bank was just as hard the second time, and just as dangerous.

Again we turned the canoe over and let it drain. I was huffing more than Puff the Magic Dragon when Ted sank back on his haunches and poked my arm. "I don't know about you but **this is more fun than I've had in FIVE years.**"

After the laughter stopped we hauled the canoe on down the shore line and launched it again. Then we skimmed the waters in search of the paddle and other assorted invaluable items. We must have gone half a mile before Ted sang out, "There's your ice box."

And so it was, bobbing against the bank as if it were chuckling at some obscene joke. I grabbed it in with us and Ted pointed again. "There's your dry clothes." So we hauled after that bag too.

The dry clothes were now soiled and dripping wet. "We'll call this the prelude to a vigorous scrubbing," I told Ted. It was meant to be a joke, but neither of us were smiling very much. What little smile was left on our faces disappeared altogether when I opened the ice chest to get our savored lunch. The fried chicken, baked potatoes and morsel of bread was left unsavored. With Ted looking solemnly on I emptied the food into the hungry Ouachita River and put the wrappings back into the ice box. Then I glanced at the baggie the insulin was sealed inside of and I almost cried. It was full of murky water. As I emptied the water out of the baggie I wondered if I dared use the

needles or the insulin after it had been drenched like this.

Then I remembered the one time I had been quenching the edge off my thirst with sewer water from the Buckeye Canal and raised my head just in time to see a bowel of intestines pass just below my opened mouth. That hadn't been near as funny but it did bolster my belief that my guardian angel would be looking out for me again. "Let's find that paddle."

Five hundred feet slithered by with no sign of the paddle. Ted protested vigorously when I began leaning over the side and pulling at the water with my hand. "Don't do that. I can handle the canoe enough for both of us."

"I can't do that," I told him. "I have got to help or this end of the canoe is going to sink."

Ted was puzzled. "How is your not having a paddle going to make your end of the canoe sink?"

I turned around so he could read my face. "The further down this river we go without my being able to do my share of the paddling, the heavier and heavier my conscience grows. I have got to have a paddle."

Ah, there was a stick stuck in the mud. It was coming right up against the side of the canoe. All I had to do was reach out and grab it and it would snap in two like a well synchronized bull dogging.

I could see my acquisition of a primitive paddle so clearly. And that's way it went down. I grabbed the paddle in just the right place to snap it apart and I gave it a hefty wrench. And down we went, with my conscience plunging headfirst into the stream.

After we got the canoe up on dry land and drained it again Ted glanced at me and said, "While you're busy laughing about this I'll just search along the bank here for a branch we can create a paddle you can use."

How much funnier things are when you have someone to divide them up with you.

Since I didn't feel much like laughing alone I went along in the search for a paddle. Ted found one he said would do me, but I rejected it. Not big enough. He found another long stick he thought would do and since there was nothing to beat it we took it.

It was amazing what Ted could do with a sharp rock. He shaped the stick. He planed it. Then he pounded on it some more. By the time he was done he had a paddle that could

actually exert a fair amount of pressure on the water. "My conscience feels a lot lighter," I told him.

Until I was full grown and had three kids half raised you could not have convinced me that my sense of direction would ever fail me. Drop me anywhere in the state of Arizona and I could find my way home, on foot, with no food or water, and no tools of any kind on me.

Then we pulled into a drive in restaurant right as dark was descending. We weren't there long, maybe 40 minutes. But when we left I started to turn right and everyone shouted for me to go left. I knew they were wrong. I turned right and the further I went, the looser I got. I have never had a sense of direction since then.

It was the same way with Tip uh the canoe. Once I learned that it was possible that I could tip one over, I was destined to keep on doing it and to do it better every time.

As usual I did not suspect a thing. In fact I was oblivious to the possibility. "Do you remember in the Scriptures where it says, And thus we see that by small means the Lord can bring about great things?" Ted nodded, trying to see past my head. "Well, it is the same thing here. This pole is bigger, thicker, and longer than the paddle I lost, but it isn't doing half as much good and it is wearing me out besides."

At that exact moment I felt the stick try to wrench its way out of my hands. I had thrust the stick into a tangle of roots. Either I had to let go of the stick, or exert my strength and push us back upstream so there would be enough slack for me to wrench my stick out. As a younger man it was nothing for me break three shovel handles a month if I got to digging too fast. I was going to keep my stick.

I flexed my shoulders once for strength and pried us backward.

Don't ever try to go back up a riffle when you face downstream.

Ted yelled for my attention because I was forcing his end of the canoe down into the water. Then the current caught his end of the canoe and his end was swinging around to get ahead of my end. The thing for me to do before disaster struck was to use what little slack I still had left to withdraw my stick and shove my end back in front of his end. I got the stick out, and I gave us a great shove -- and down we went again.

When my eyes broke water they were rewarded with the most amazing thing I have ever seen... Ted's hat still wasn't wet! I would have mentioned it to him, but I was afraid his sense

of humor might stretch beyond the breaking point if I did. Besides that I had already gone under again. All that saved me was that the canoe went down slower than I did. I bounced back up, caught my footing again, and together we dragged the canoe to the north bank.

"You empty the canoe and I'll find you another stick," said Ted.

Perhaps he just wanted to be alone.

Ted came back with a paddle crafted even better than the one he had given me before. I hefted it and admired it. Then with my eyes gleaming in anticipation of being able to carefully keep my own end afloat we each savored a soda pop for energy.

"Gee Whillikers," I said. "Let's get this canoe launched so we can have some more fun.

Ted pointed. "There's a large island up ahead. Let's beach the canoe so that we can get out and walk around some, get the kinks out before we go on."

The island was quite large, big enough for us to get out of sight of each other and perform our separate duties. It was covered with trees and thickets.

An Indigo Bunting flashed through the trees and in following its flight I noticed silt and trash suspended on trees in the eastern shore of the river. The island was a good four feet above the river level; the silt and trash was lodged another six feet above that. It was obvious that occasionally there were some savage floods whirl through this area. On the other hand, there were numerous scars of four wheelers left undisturbed on the island's sandy surface. That suggested there is quite a fluctuation in water levels throughout the year.

We launched again and now the current slowed and the distance between the two shores widened. I began studying the trees and the occasional stand of bamboo as we glided through the solemn landscape.

"I'm really disappointed in the number of birds and animals out here today," said Ted.

I turned to look back, then ahead. That explained why everything was so solemn.

"From that point on we determined to enjoy the scenery. Each of us had scoured the countryside on the north of the river, and Ted had also scoured the countryside on the south of the river. Therefore it amazed me that neither of us knew where we were while down in the river. "That must be the Nelson's place ahead." No. "Well, it must be the next one then." No. "Hmm. Oh, there it is. When we were looking down from their back porch I thought it was a lot closer to the water."

The mood of our float changed from pleasure to an anxiety to reach the Cherry Hill Access Area. "How can seven miles take so long to traverse when the current is moving this fast?"

Another hour passed before I saw the building that marked the Cherry Hill Access. "There it is." And so it was.

We beached the canoe just past the overpass and began exploring to see how you get from the river's edge up to the bank of the road. It seemed like a mass of briars and brambles anywhere you looked on the east side. So we walked back to the west side. There was a well-beaten road there, but even after we had followed it for a long space it seemed determined to keep heading west.

Therefore we came back where we had beached the canoe and sought a way through the briars and the brambles and found two fence rows we would have to traverse before reaching the road. My spirits sagged when Ted decided this must be the right way out as it was the only way out. "Gee. They call this an access area? I'd describe it as an infiltration course."

With Ted leading, thank goodness, we plunged up the slope and through the woods, manhandling the canoe every inch of the way. I was plumb tuckered when we finally secured the canoe in Ted's van. Nonetheless I reached for my trusty Arkansas Atlas & Gazetteer put out by DeLorme. As I traced out the river's course it amazed me how quickly we had arrived. "I think we have come about 24 miles to get here."

With a powerful V-8 motor propelling us it took only a few minutes to get back to my truck.

A few days later I met [George Davis](#) and he asked how the trip had gone. "It was the most wonderful canoe trip I've ever taken," I told him.

His penetrating gaze focused sharply on my face and he sadly shook his head. "You're a bigger liar than Ted is."

We laughed uproariously and George told me about an overnight father and son outing that he had taken Rick and George on when they were little down that same section of the Ouachita River.....

"Of course, I was smart enough to take us in a flat bottom boat."

The plan was to fish for supper and have bacon and eggs cooked in a skillet over an open fire for breakfast.

Unfortunately, they caught no fish. Consequently they ate the bacon and eggs for supper, and subsequently they had nothing for breakfast.

"Okay," says, George. "We'll fish as we go, and stop when we caught enough for breakfast."

Well, they did experience a few nibbles but, again, they caught no fish. In fact, the tighter their stomachs grew, the fewer fish they almost caught. By the time the sun got sky high they imagined themselves to be in a serious predicament.

Just then Ricky spotted a trot line, and it was jerking around. They pulled up and sure enough there were three big cat fish on the line.

"Breakfast!" George shouted. He removed all three cat fish and off down the river they hurried to find a place they could comfortably pull off and cook the cat fish. But the farther they went, the slower George paddled.

"Gee," he thought. "What am I teaching my kids by showing them this example?" The drag on his conscience was almost enough to sink his end of the boat.

George stopped paddling altogether and he called Ricky and George to attention. "Boys, this is stealing. We have got to go back up there and put these fish back on their hooks or we'll be ashamed of this day for as long as we live."

The boys could see that. Therefore they turned the boat around and paddled back to put the fish back on the trot line.

"You know," said George. "It is twice as hard to put fish back on a hook than it is to take one off. But we felt so good that when we got to Cherry Hill Access we walked down to the store and bought some Hostess Twinkies to celebrate."

And you know what? To this very day the Davis family never has a fish fry without bringing

along a big package of Twinkies.

the end.

Lin Stone is an author, writer and photographer living in [Mena Arkansas](#) among the gentle mountains (and river) known as Ouachita. He writes about adventures and he writes about the peaceable things of this world for [Share Your State](#). In his spare time Lin writes encouraging copy for [American Insurance Depot](#). You can have immediate, and free, reading of many more pieces when you send your little surfer scooting to Lin's home page at <http://www.talewins.com/StoneSoup.htm> where he keeps stirring up more good things for the soul.

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