

Drift Boat Basics

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How to Run a Drift Boat

It is certain that there are very few boats as specialized or unique as a river drift boat. Drift boats are riverboats, specifically designed to run rivers, and although they are not unsinkable, they are amazingly maneuverable and seaworth, especially in the hands of an expert oarsman. Although their popularity began in the Pacific Northwest, they are now used in many rivers across the United States, Canada and Alaska. Although drift boats can be used for general river running, most white water enthusiasts prefer rubber rafts. Without question, fishermen and hunters who seek unlimited access to river prefer the easy launching, handling, anchoring, and comfortable dryness of the solid floored drift boat. This information is to not only help you become familiar with drift boats, but also with drift boat handling, the basic how to's of running a drift boat, the do's and don't of drift boating. Drift boat selection, making sure to choose the right drift boat to suit your needs, and some straight talk about river courtesy. Which in itself can be intimidating to novice drift boaters. As a fisherman, I can not help but point out that drift boats not only provide access to the bank bout angler, but open up a whole new world of fishing techniques, many of which can not be employed from shore.

If you study a drift boat's basic design for very long, it becomes obvious why the boat is built the way it is. Its bottom is flat from side to side, there is not keel. This wide bottom area means that the boat draws very little water, thus able to float through shallow riffles. The bottom is dished from the bow to the stern, which allows for quick turns and

maneuverability so the oarsman can pull the boat away from obstructions. The point bow is the high end which faces down stream, and in white water situations allows the boat to cut the wave and lift the boat through it. The blunt angles stern piece is just high enough to keep following waves from spilling over the side, wide enough to mount an anchor bracket, but not so wide as to spoil the turning maneuverability.

People who have had experience with conventional boats have a hard time adjusting themselves as to how to maneuver a river drift boat in swift water. The reason for this is that a drift boat is a little backwards. Even though the bow is the high end and point down stream, it does not control the direction you wish to go, but rather the stern end, and which way it is point, determines your destination. The key thing to remember when starting out, if you are sitting in the row seat, which is located on the stern end of the boat, is to pull on the oars and slow the boat down as you proceed downstream. If the boat is drifting towards an obstacle and you wish to avoid it you turn the stern to the direction that you wish to go and pull on the oars, thus pulling yourself away from the object before straightening the boat out to proceed downstream. Most peoples' inclination is to push on the oars, which only insures that you will hit the obstacle before you can maneuver away from it.

When maneuvering a drift boat downstream through somewhat quiet water, you may wish to push on the oars to move downstream faster, or if you are in an extreme white water situation with large waves, you may push on the oars to carry your boat through those large waves, but 95% of your boat maneuvering you will be pulling on the oars turning the boat at a 45° angle to the stream flow and pulling away from obstacles then straightening the boat out to proceed downstream. Most classic rivers are made of a

series of pools or holes and riffles or chutes. Often times you will set-up to run a chute or rapids and unless you are familiar with the river, you should start in the middle of the river looking downstream trying to read the water and pull your boat away from the obstacles. If the river tries to push you into a corner, tree or any obstacle, the key thing to remember is to point your bow into the obstacle and the stern 45° to the flow and pull your way away from it.

Do's and Don't of Drift Boating

Never anchor in deep swift water. Never cut your oars too deep when rowing, especially in boily water. Never let go of your oars, while free floating, unless you are paying close attention. Often times the river can grab your oar blade and result in a broken oar or a bent oarlock. Never allow your passengers to stand-up while maneuvering white water. Make sure that they are seated unless you are in an anchored position or perhaps in calm water. Always carry life jackets for everyone on board and wear them if you are in any white water situation. Always carry a spare oar and oarlock.

It is worth noting that even though drift boats are built for running rivers, and can maneuver in white water situations, they are not unsinkable, especially in the hands of an inexperienced oarsman in rough water. Thoroughly checkout the section of river you are running, making sure that there are not waterfalls or heavy rapids, which exceed your capability. There are may rivers or sections of rivers which can be handled easily by the novice, at the same time there are sections of streams which are either unrunable, or runable only by the very experienced oarsman. Also, just because you ran a section of river successfully last year. For example, a tree may have fallen across the stream or

heavy winter flows may have narrowed the channel or changed the river course. Talk to your fellow fishermen, stop in and ask at the sport shop or maybe even maintain a local map with recommendations as to which section or sections of a stream would best meet your qualifications. If you are really unsure on how to run the river or whether or not you wish to invest in a drift boat, either go with a friend who has one or consider booking a trip with a local river guide. Booking a trip with an experienced river guide can not only help you get the feel for running the river, but you can learn the better fishing spots, and even which lures or techniques are producing. Most sporting goods shops can recommend the better local guides. Get several names if possible, call them and base your choice on which one you like the best.

River Courtesy

Although owning a drift boat does able an angles to get away from the crowd and reach, otherwise, inaccessible areas, you will run across occasional bank fishermen, or sometimes float by crowded fishing areas in an effort to reach inaccessible places. Bank fisherman or other boat fishermen might resent you rowing over the area they are fishing, or they might resent you anchoring right where they are casting. Also, anchoring in a sport perhaps boats have been taking turns fishing.. Most of the time a little common sense and a friendly hello are all that is required.

Here are a few things that you might keep in mind, as you maneuver downstream keep an eye out for other boats and bank fisherman. If you see a bank angler, try and watch where he is casting, if he is casting short then you may wish to run the river on the opposite side, the same would be true if the river bank was considerably congested, then

you would be safe to run the river on the opposite the populated shore. If an angler is casing all the way across the river, fishing the obvious pocket on the far side, then you may wish to maneuver close to him, avoiding running your boat over the top of the area he is trying to fish. If there is a boat rowing in the current, running plugs (backtrolling), the worst thing that you could do is to drop downstream just below him and begin casting. Usually when drift boats setup to backtroll plugs, through a drift, they fully intend on fishing all the way through that hole and either rowing back up to the top and running again or proceeding downstream. If there is a boat pulling plugs in the river, you could either setup to pull the plugs beginning upstream from him or if you intend on casting you may wish to wait until after he has covered the water once. Likewise, if there is a boat anchored casting, it would be rude for you to pull plugs through the water that angler has been working. It is no different than anything else in life – try your best to treat people as you would like to be treated and keep in mind that part of being a sportsman is learning to share and although probably not everyone would agree. It is my personal feeling that boats do not scare fish, except in critically low clear water conditions.