Alpena Area Convention & Visitors Bureau
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Welcome Center & Tourism Offices: 420 N. Second Ave, Alpena

Paddle Safety

in the Sanctuary of the Great Lakes

Let's have fun!

Canoe, kayak, stand up paddleboard. Are you using the right vessel?

We want to make sure you enjoy your adventures safely. With the great variety of activities in the Alpena area, there is plenty to keep you busy. When paddling through the Sanctuary of the Great Lakes, whether it be on a river, inland lake or the big lake, make sure you are using the right vessel to ensure the safest possible experience. In this guide we provide an overview of the most common types of paddle-powered personal boats and safety tips to consider before heading out for your next adventure.

Type of Personal Paddle Craft	Most ideal use for paddling in:		
	River	Inland Lake	Lake Huron (Great Lakes)
Sea kayak	X	X	X
Sit-on-Top Kayak	X	X	X
Stand Up Paddleboard	X	X	X
Recreational Kayak	X	X	
Canoe	X	X	

Sea Kayaks

Ideal for: Great Lakes, Ocean, large bodies of water
Activities: Viewing shallow shipwrecks in Lake Huron, paddling long distances

Standard sea kayaks are typically long and narrow with the top being mostly enclosed except for a small cockpit. They are built to take on big open water (oceans, Great Lakes, etc). The key feature of a sea kayak is that the paddler is sealed into the boat by a sprayskirt to prevent water from splashing into the cockpit. Sea kayaks have bulkheads, or interior "walls" that separate the bow and stern sections from the cockpit, and create watertight "floatation" chambers. These chambers keep the kayak from sinking even if they're packed with gear. Sea kayaks can fairly easily be rolled or tipped back upright if capsized (with practice). Even if a paddler cannot get back in the kayak after dumping, the boat can be used as a floatation support device.

A sea kayak is a safe way to view Lake Huron shipwrecks. Make your trip enjoyable and safe. Lake Huron kayak, photo courtesy Gary Irving.

Sit-on-Top Kayak

Ideal for: Great Lakes, slow moving rivers, inland lakes
Activities: Warm weather water fun, viewing shipwrecks in Lake Huron, Thunder Bay River

Sit-on-top kayaks are tough, almost unsinkable, and inexpensive. The maneuverability of an ordinary SOT kayak is slow, hard work and the open design doesn't keep you warm or dry, but the great thing is if you dump - you can easily scramble back on or use the SOT as a floatation support device. One major drawback of the SOT is that the paddler could be chilled by the wind if significant wave action splashes them.

Sit-on-top kayaks are versatile and can serve as a floatation support device if the paddler flips. PORTLAND shipwreck in Bell Bay, photo courtesy Sue Peterman.

Recreational kayaks (general purpose kayaks)

Ideal for: Inland lakes, slower moving rivers
Activities: flatwater kayaking, slow moving river touring, calm inland lake paddling

Recreational kayaks are generally lighter, wider and shorter than sea kayaks, have a large and easily-accessible cockpit, and DO NOT have bulkheads or sufficient floatation to keep the boat afloat when full of water. Some sprayskirts can be attached to a recreational kayak, which would keep splashes off your lap, but won't keep the lake out if you dump, or the boat afloat if you take on water. These kayaks are very stable in slow moving water and are great for relaxing outings and touring inland lakes and river systems. On the Great Lakes these kayaks are a liability unless the water is flat. If this type of kayak takes on water, there is a high chance it will sink, leaving the kayaker stranded.

Recreational kayaks are fun and safe for calm water. Thunder Bay River kayaking, photo courtesy Judy Hart.

Canoe

Ideal for: Flat water, Inland lakes, slower moving rivers
Activities: Fishing rivers and inland lakes, river paddling, quiet inland lake paddling

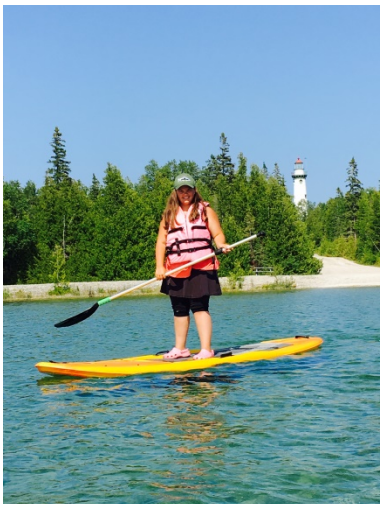
A canoe is heavier and wider than a kayak, open on top with high side walls, seldom less than 33.5 inches wide, and capable of carrying a heavy load. Their high sides allow more room for gear and people than a kayak, but the sidewall height makes them hard to control in windy conditions on open water. If awash with water, a canoe will also sink. A capsized canoe can be flipped upright with practice but is not an easy task. A canoe is a great vehicle for a small family or for carrying fishing gear or camping supplies.

A canoe is a great workhorse paddle vessel and; used for centuries as a way of transporting people and supplies. Thunder Bay River canoe paddle.

Stand Up Paddleboard

Ideal for: Great Lakes, Oceans, inland lakes, rivers
Activities: Great Lake and ocean exploration, shipwreck viewing, surfing, rivers, inland lakes

SUP (stand up paddleboarding) uses a surf style board and a long paddle. While originally made popular by surfer Laird Hamilton as he used the paddle to help him catch the waves found in Hawaii, SUP is not only for surfing, but a variety of activities. Stand up paddling can be on flat water lakes, rivers, on the Great Lakes or in the ocean. Being able to stand fully erect on a SUP allows the paddler to have a better vantage point for viewing what is beneath the surface. Fun fact: shark sightings skyrocketed along the ocean coastlines when stand up paddleboarding became popular. A person standing on a SUP has a better view of what lies below the surface than someone sitting in a kayak or other small boat. A SUP is easy to maneuver and also doubles as a floatation device. This makes a SUP an ideal craft to take out to view shallow shipwrecks in Lake Huron. When paddling on Lake Huron, always use a leash to attach to the board. When paddling on a river, a leash that drags in the water is not recommended because it could easily become entangled in logs or weeds and pull the paddler under.



Explore the water and history. Stand Up Paddleboard adventure to the New Presque Isle Lighthouse, photo courtesy Jenny Speaks.

Other Types & Styles of Kayaks, Canoes, Stand Up Paddle Boards

Racing, inflatable, whitewater, surfing, fishing, children's

When in doubt, ask a professional. There are a variety of resources online with more information about which type of paddle vessel is best for certain adventure situations. Some of the sources used for this compilation include:

https://thekayakers.com/real-sea-kayaks/#.WyPa_YgvzIU
http://www.kayarchy.com/html/01equipment/010otherkayaks.htm
https://www.thoughtco.com/introduction-to-sup-2555699
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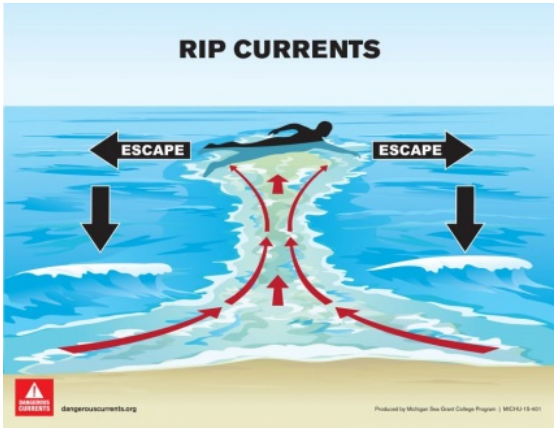
Big Lake Safety

Tips for Paddling in the Great Lakes

- Check the weather before heading out on Lake Huron. Anything over 8-10 MPH winds can create significant waves that can easily overtake a kayak.
- Pull the kayak or SUP into knee-deep water and get in quickly. Approach the incoming breakers head-on with a strong forward stroke. Taking the waves sideways will cause the vessel and/or the paddler to flip.
- Always **wear a life jacket (PFD).** There are many different styles (vest, belt pack, Co2 charged, etc.)
- It is a good idea to wear something brightly colored (that contrasts with the water color) in the event someone needs to search for you.
- If using a SUP on the Great Lakes, use a leash. A leash attaches the SUP to the paddler so if the paddler dumps, the SUP will not float away. (NOTE: do NOT use a leash that drags in the water when SUP paddling on a river, as it could get tangled in weeds or logs and pull the paddler under)
- Stay within a swimmable distance of shore and out of high wind and waves until you've mastered the skills necessary to handle rougher water.
- 100Rule. Consider air and water temperatures when heading out. If the air temperature plus the water temperature equals 100 or greater, your risk of hypothermia is lowered (as long as you are within 30 minutes of dry land/safety). Wear a wet or dry suit if hypothermia is a risk, in the event of falling in. The US Coast Guard warns that water temps below 60F can induce cold water shock.
- If you dump in cold water that is over your head, blow your emergency whistle and consider floating/huddling to conserve energy. Only attempt to swim toward shore if you are confident you can make it or the water is not terribly deep. Keep in mind that the Great Lakes act more like an ocean than an inland lake; and cold water can cause you to gasp for air, increase blood pressure and heart rate, leading to exhaustion and heart failure.
- Learn how to identify Rip Currents.
- Have a fall-out plan. A fear of many beginning paddlers is falling into the water. It's important to remember that a spill can and may occur ANY TIME you are out on the water. Learn how to wet exit and how to re-enter your paddle vessel. The more you practice in calm water, the more you'll be able to keep your head in a real-life situation.
- Paddle with a buddy, carry a whistle, an extra paddle and an extra life preserver for the group. You never know when a paddle may break, or a series of unfortunate events may leave you floating.
- Alert someone on land as to your location plans and expected time of return. In the event that you do not return by a specified late cut-off time, your land contact person will be tasked with searching for you and/or alerting emergency services.
- Onshore vs. Offshore breeze. Onshore breeze is any wind that blows from a large body of water toward or onto land. Offshore wind refers to any wind blowing from land out over open water. An onshore breeze may make it a little harder to paddle out, but will make paddling toward shore easier. An Offshore breeze will make paddling out very easy, and will make it more difficult to get back to shore.

Some simple safety tips can help you have a successful adventure. Check the weather, use a sea kayak, wear a life preserver, carry an extra paddle, and paddle with a buddy. Albany shipwreck, photo courtesy Bob Grochowski.



While not as significant as ocean rip currents, the Great Lakes still do experience this dangerous current. If you are trying to swim or walk toward shore but keep getting farther away, you may be stuck in a rip current. Top photo: Great Lakes rip current, courtesy U.S. Coast Guard. Bottom Graphic: how to swim (or paddle) out of a rip current, courtesy Dangerouscurrents.org & Michigan Sea Grant.

Sources:
https://thekayakers.com/real-sea-kayaks/#.WyPa_YgvzIU
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