

## Photographing From Your Canoe

by Photographer Raymond Klass

One of my favorite photo-adventure tools is my trusty canoe. It's been an integral part of my imagery in many places, from the open waters of Northern Minnesota, to the Buffalo National River in Arkansas. Now that I find myself exploring the wilderness of East's greatest forest preserve, the Adirondacks, my canoe has become as important a tool as ever. This feature explores the many opportunities afforded by photographing from a canoe, and some practical advice to help keep you safe, dry, and creative.

Before you head out for an adventure on the water, it's important to think about safety – both for

yourself, and your camera. I would recommend purchasing a large dry bag, big enough to hold your camera bag, and possibly a second, large enough to hold your camera and a lens or two. These rubberized bags can be found at outdoor or camping stores and are relatively inexpensive. When they're properly used, they guard your gear against both splashes of water, and submersion. Though most bags won't hold watertight forever, they should float and give you enough time to bring your gear to shore.

I place my camera bag in the larger bag, and put only what I'll be using to photograph from the





boat in the smaller bag, perhaps with a spare memory card, battery and flash if I'm photographing wildlife. Most of the time I leave the smaller bag undone, and at the ready. When I spot some wildlife, or a nice scene, I pull my camera out of the bag and have it ready to go. With the bag unfolded, my camera is still protected against incidental splashes, and should things get rough, I can always quickly close the bag to fully protect my camera.

As for your safety in the canoe, I would always recommend wearing a life vest, carrying an extra paddle, a good navigation map, a whistle to signal for help, and letting a responsible person know where you'll be paddling. For larger bodies of water, a pair of binoculars can come in handy. I use them both for spotting navigational buoys, and wildlife to photograph. On the big lakes of Minnesota, the pair of binoculars I carried were an invaluable tool that saved me both time and energy.





If you'll be paddling alone, there are some steps you can take to make yourself more stable. If your canoe was not designed as a solo canoe, it is likely that you'll be seated in the back of the boat – this naturally causes the front end to sit up in the water. With the front end up in the water, the front of the canoe can act like a sail, spinning you in circles if there are high winds. To counteract this, I place ballast in the front of the boat, I usually put my heavy camera bag there, and if I need something else I'll borrow a rock from the shoreline. This helps keep the front down, in addition to lowering the center of gravity, so you're less likely to tip.

Now that your camera equipment is safe, and you're equipped for travel on the water, it's time to explore the unique perspective a canoe provides. First off, you'll likely discover that a tripod is worthless on the water, though a monopod can be useful to take the weight of a long lens off your arms. Sitting low in a canoe provides a great angle

to shoot waterfowl from. My favorite subjects in Minnesota were the loons that would swim alongside my canoe.

You can choose to paddle your canoe by traditional methods – a wooden single or double paddle, or many lakes also allow small electric motors. These can be great for coasting alongside wildlife, as they don't require you to put down your camera to paddle – you can simply nudge the motor to steer, or purchase a foot peddle to operate your motor. Both of these methods are virtually silent, and are far better for wildlife photography than a gas engine like most larger boats have. This will enable you to get much closer, and for those of us without a 500mm or 600mm lens, this can make the difference in getting the shot.

Beyond wildlife photography, I also really enjoy using a super-wide lens from the boat. There are great angles available both of the landscape, and of

the canoe itself in the water. Remember to consider using a polarizer if you want your viewer to get a sense of what is below the water. Polarizing filters not only darken skies, but they can be useful for “cutting through” the glare on the water’s surface.

Finally, a canoe can be a great tool to spark some creative adventure photography. Both at Voyageurs National Park, and in Arkansas, I spent a couple weeks canoeing from campsite to campsite. The trips both centered around paddling during the day, and photographing at the beautiful shore locations at sunrise and sunset. I always try to give my viewer a sense of both what I’m seeing, and what the adventure is like. To do this, I often used my canoe as a “prop” in the images to give a sense of scale and adventure.

More than a fun toy, canoes provide a unique platform from which to take a photo adventure, or to photograph wildlife and landscapes from. Used

properly, they’re both safe and versatile – in 20+ years of paddling, I’ve never tipped a canoe over. With sound preparation, you can enable your inner creativity to flourish as you experience the open water in a whole new light.

