

Safety Tips for Fording Streams and Rivers

Fording streams and rivers may be the most dangerous challenge hikers confront. River crossings can be deceptively hazardous. Even a very shallow, swiftly flowing body of water can pack enough force to knock you off your feet. Use caution and common sense. Carry a map and compass and know how to use them. **If a section of the Appalachian Trail is closed or presents a serious safety hazard, hikers may take an alternate route or skip those sections entirely and still be eligible to receive 2,000-miler status.**

Do not attempt to wade or swim across Maine's Kennebec River. Dam releases upstream may cause sudden and rapid changes in water depth and current. One hiker is known to have drowned and others have had near misses fording the river. The official route of the Trail across the Kennebec is the ferry service for A.T. hikers, provided at no charge during peak hiking season. Current information on the ferry schedule may be found here: www.matc.org/Ferry.htm.

Other major rivers in Maine are unbridged and impassable after tropical storms and during spring snowmelt—use extreme caution and patience when rivers are high. Elsewhere on the A.T., even a small creek may become dangerous after exceptionally heavy rains. During or for a few days after storm events, it may be best to wait until water levels drop, or backtrack to a road to get around a flooded area. Bridges may be damaged or destroyed by storms and floods, resulting in unanticipated difficulties for hikers. Seek alternate routes if in doubt.

Some information in this article was adapted from Navigation and Hiking Tips by George G. Spearing [www.danceswithmarmots.com/navtips.html#2]

Before Crossing

- 1. Scout out the best location to cross**—Don't assume that the blazed line of sight to the other bank is the path you should follow. The volume of water flowing downstream is not constant, and the best crossing point can differ depending on weather conditions, temperature, or new hazards that were not present during low water when the blazed crossing point was laid out. Water levels and current are dynamic, so a good crossing point on one day may not be safe on another.
- 2. Avoid “chokepoints”**—Look at the current and how fast it is flowing. Avoid crossing at points where the banks of the stream are narrow. The power of the current will be strongest here and could sweep you off your feet. If there is an island or sandbar in the middle of a stream, the current may be more manageable on either side, making it a good place to cross.
- 3. Cross at a straight section between bends**—Imagine the bends of a river forming the letter “S”—the safest place to cross is generally the straight section in the middle of the “S” between the bends. If you lose your footing, the current is likely to carry you to the bank on the outside of the bend.
- 4. Speed of a floating stick**—Throw a stick into the water and see how rapidly the water carries it away. If you cannot walk as fast as it is moving, then it is not safe to cross.
- 5. Attach your bear rope to your pack**—Tie your bear rope to your pack, with the coil handy. If necessary during the crossing, you can let it go and recover it later. If a group is crossing, the rope can be used for rescue.
- 6. Repack and release your pack**—If possible, repack your load in waterproof plastic bags or stuff sacks to enhance the pack's buoyancy. If necessary, you may be able to use it as an aid for swimming. Before entering a river or stream, release the hip and chest straps on your backpack so you can shed it quickly if you lose your footing and get washed downstream.

When Crossing

The more body mass you have in a strong current, the less control you have—if you begin to cross and the depth of the water is above your thighs, turn around and look for a better location to cross. If the current seems too swift, turn back. If a river is flooded, wait for it to subside. If in doubt as to whether a river is safe to cross, don't cross—find an alternate route.

- 1. Keep your boots on**—Ford with your boots on. Boots provide the traction you need, as well as protection from possible hazards in the water. Crossing barefoot is never recommended because of rocks, submerged logs, fishing tackle, broken glass or rusted metal. Open-toed sandals are not recommended because they do not protect your toes, can fold in a strong current, and increase drag. Remove the boot insoles and your socks, and use gaiters. After fording, dump the water out of your boots, put the insoles back in, put your socks back on, and wring out your gaiters.
- 2. Use a walking stick**—Always use a hiking staff when fording to provide three points of contact with the bottom. If kept on the upstream side, it is forced down into position by the current. If you don't have a staff, search for a stout stick. A trekking pole can suffice for fording, but the narrow tip can get caught between rocks or logs on the river bottom and throw you off balance, so use care. Using one pole and securing the other to your pack will reduce overall drag and complication.
- 3. Don't cross in long pants**—They increase drag and won't keep you dry or warm when soaked. Nylon shorts or underwear are best.
- 4. Cross facing upstream**—In fast-moving water, move at a slight angle downstream but facing upstream. Lean slightly into the current, and shuffle-step sideways, keeping both feet, or one foot and your pole, in contact with the stream or river bottom at all times.
- 5. Cross as a group**—If you are hiking with another person or a group, you may want to cross together, holding on to another person's clothing or a shoulder strap of their pack. The strongest person should be slightly upstream to break the current, making it easier for the downstream person(s) to help stabilize the pair or the group.
- 6. Keep your eyes on the prize**—While you want to be aware of where you place your feet, looking down at the current can be disorienting. Look ahead for the best route and concentrate on your goal, but don't rush. Try the psychological trick of imagining yourself safely reaching the opposite river bank. It works!

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