

Northern Forest Canoe Trail Through Paddler Cheat-Sheet

“For Through Paddlers by Through Paddlers”

This document addresses many questions, concerns and quick tips that paddlers may encounter as they gear up for a through paddle trip. These are short answers: For more detailed responses, contact a local outfitter and use the maps, guidebooks and online resources offered at NorthernForestCanoetrail.org. There are numerous links throughout and also a “Further Reading/Research” section at the end. **This Cheat-Sheet is not intended to be a sole source of information.**

GEAR

BOATS: What kind of boat should I use? What make? What model? What’s the best boat to use?

- These types of questions have no good answer. There is no ‘best boat’ to paddle the NFCT in. You could do it in any kind of boat—a rowboat would work although no one has tried it yet. In the end it comes down to what you want. Think of canoes like cars: there is no one, right car, but there are better and worse cars depending on what you want to do with them (drag-racing in a mini-van doesn’t make sense just like thru-paddling in a row-boat doesn’t make sense unless you’re making some sort of statement). Things to consider when buying a boat:
 - Whitewater Preference: Much of the NFCT is on rivers, many of them with seasonal fluctuations in water level. Some parts will be rocky. Others will be fast flowing and technical. A maneuverable and durable boat or willingness to portage will help in these sections.
 - Lining/Poling: About 160 miles of the NFCT is upstream when through paddling. A maneuverable and durable boat and willingness to portage will help in these sections.
 - Carries/Portages: The NFCT includes 62 portages for a total of 55 miles (or more!). Consider balancing durability with lightness to facilitate ease of portaging.
 - Tracking: The trail crosses wide stretches of lakes and river with variable winds and weather. All boats should have some sort of tracking capability to take on waves and chop while maintaining stability and direction. Keels are not necessary but can certainly help on open water, though have drawbacks on whitewater.
 - Recommended source for canoes: <http://www.canoeing.com/canoes/wilderness/>
 - Recommended source for kayaks: <http://www.borntopaddle.com/howtochooseakayak.php>
 - Get the best advice for a boat purchase from your local paddle shop or outfitter. They will have significant first-hand knowledge and can help you choose the right boat for you.

PADDLES: What kind of paddle should I use?

- You will have to paddle downstream, upstream, and on lakes, streams and rivers, in shallow water or rapids. Make sure your paddle is durable. It should be able to take a lot of scraping on the ground, hitting rocks, banging on the canoe, and portaging. A shorter, wider paddle will be great for the shallow river sections whereas a longer blade will improve your efficiency on open water. But a good paddle is like a good putter – it’s all in how it feels in your hands. Who makes it and how it’s designed is up to you.
- It is good to travel with a spare paddle as well. You never know when a paddle may break or get lost if you upturn.
- Recommended source for manufactured paddle options for canoes: <http://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/canoe-paddle.html> and kayaks: <http://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/kayak-paddle.html>. (Through paddlers have also favored handmade paddles.)

- Here again your local outfitter is by far your best option for advice (or perhaps your local handmade paddle shop).

PORTAGING: Do I use wheels? What brand? Are all portages wheel-able? What do I need to carry my boat?

- Wheels are a popular front-country technique for portaging. There are several good brands out there, and homemade wheels can work well too. DO NOT use a stern cart—they simply aren't durable enough for a long trip. Instead, use one that sits under the center of the craft and balances the boat. And while it's nice to have them do all the work, you can extend the life of them greatly by taking some of the gear out of your boat and carrying it on your back while wheeling. The wheels will thank you. More on wheels here: <http://www.canoeing.com/gear/canoegear/portagecanoewheels/>
- NOT all portages, unfortunately, are wheel-able. NFCT maps detail which are and aren't, but even the maps are sometimes out-of-date. Use your judgment. If a trail is rocky and rooty, save the wheels and carry your gear. The wheels will last longer and you'll be happier in the long run. Remember, for hundreds of years portage wheels didn't exist. It won't kill you to carry your gear sometimes, even if it takes two or three trips.
- You can do the entire trail without wheels too—many people have! Buy or create a good set of portage pads to cushion your shoulders. You can also use a tumpline, or a leather strap that helps to disperse some of the weight to your back and neck from your shoulders (good for gear packs too). More on that here: <http://reflectionsoutdoors.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/using-a-tumpline-to-portage-a-canoe-especially-a-wood-canvas-canoe-and-revisting-thoughts-on-portages-2/>
- Talk with an outfitter about wheel or portaging options. They will have valuable advice.

STOVES: What kind of stove should I use? Is fuel available along the NFCT? Can I cook with a fire instead? Is that even allowed?

- There are many lightweight backpacking stoves on the market and they all work extraordinarily well for paddling trips. Even heavier camp stoves work well. The problem on the NFCT is the availability of fuel. There are long stretches (north of Jackman, ME in particular, but also parts of the other states) where there is uncertain availability of stove canisters or white gas/denatured alcohol by-the-ounce. Do not count on being able to readily find your required type of fuel. Some advance leg work may be required to research which outfitters/hardware stores carry what. So either be prepared to carry larger amounts of fuel (not unreasonable on a canoe/kayak trip) or come up with a plan B. Here's a listing of a number of lighter-weight stoves: <http://canoeing.com/gear/campgear/stoves/>
- A general rule of thumb for most liquid fuels is that you can get 10 minutes of heat per ounce.
- Fires are an alternative, but there are some campsites where fires are not permitted. And finally, it does rain, sometimes for days on end – fires can be tough to build. Always carry a backup supply of dry birch bark!
- A compromise between these two is a twig stove, essentially a small metal box within which one builds a fire. These can be built or purchased. However, they are not a loop-hole in the "No Fires" rule – if fires are not allowed then twig stoves are not allowed. But they don't require outfitters to gas up, and are more efficient than a traditional campfire. A better discussion of manufactured twig stoves is here: <http://canoeing.com/gear/campgear/stoves/twigburning.htm> or a good homemade twig stove design is here: <http://www.imrisk.com/woodgas/coffeestove.htm>

ON THE NORTHERN FOREST CANOE TRAIL

DECISION-MAKING: How do I attack a given piece of trail? If going downstream, do I run those rapids? Line them? Portage them? If going upstream do I line/track? Pole? Portage? The maps don't tell me!

- The answer to all of these questions: There is no right answer. Use your own common sense and judgment. Due to eternally changing river features, water levels, seasons, weather, etc. there is no one right way to attack a section of trail (unless it's a 50' waterfall – in that case, portage!). Many stretches have multiple answers: you could run it, you could pole it, you could line it, you could portage it. Sometimes it's a question of weather (if it's cold and rainy perhaps portage to warm up and stay drier. If it's hot, then line and enjoy getting wet). Sometimes it's a function of time (five miles of continuous lining can take a lot longer than a portage along a parallel road). Sometimes it's a function of how bruised your toes are (lining and tracking can do a number on your pedicure). Sometimes it's the ease of access to roads or portage options that helps make the decision. Or sometimes it's simply a function of mood. As you progress along the trail, you'll get better at deciding how to tackle a set of whitewater. No matter how much advance research you do, there is no substitute for eyes on the trail: ***When in doubt, scout.***
- Use maps and guidebooks for specifics regarding each section of trail, but remember, rivers are constantly changing and the way something is described on a map printed 3 years ago may not reflect the current situation. The same goes for talking with outfitters or reading recent paddler blogs to see how other paddlers tackled a stretch of water. Rivers are constantly changing and a river's characteristics a day ago or a month ago may not be what they are today.
- Pay attention to the weather. Some stretches of river change water height drastically during rain events so pay attention to highly variable areas like the South Branch of the Dead River, the Saranac River upstream of Clayburg or the lower Nulhegan River.
- Be adaptable. If unsure about a decision, be conservative. There is no substitute for safety.

CAMPING: Many stretches of the NFCT have lots of campsites. Great – what do I do for the sections without established campsites? Or stretches where campsites require reservations?

- With proper planning and ideal conditions you can camp at designated sites during the course of your Through Paddle, although to do so you will likely have to make accommodations with your timeframe and travel plans. Plans can go astray and there are many times on an expedition when conditions can be less than ideal. During these times it is especially difficult to find a designated campsite on some of the stretches of the NFCT where there are not as many options (less of a concentration of campsite opportunities or a greater distance between options). If you find yourself in this situation there are several recommendations you should follow:
 - Many public or conserved lands (shaded green on the NFCT maps) allow public use. Typically the requirement is that you camp at least 150 feet from the water in these circumstances and use all Leave No Trace Principles (<https://lnt.org/learn/7-principles>).
 - If possible, ask the landowner for permission by knocking on a door. If you cannot find the landowner and are in a situation where there is no other alternative for camping be respectful. Leave no trace of your presence: dig a cat-hole, decide not to have a fire, carry out trash and sprinkle some leaves or duff over your tent site and impact area.
 - If you are forced to camp at a location that is not a designated campsite, make note of your location. When you fill out your Through Paddler Recognition Application (<http://www.northernforestcanoetrail.org/Paddler-2/Through-&-Section-Paddler-Recognition-46>) let NFCT know the site details (GPS coordinates if you have them and if it would make a good campsite). The Northern Forest Canoe Trail is constantly working to develop more campsites through landowner

agreements and this information can be very helpful. NFCT exists because of landowner agreements and stewardship activities carried out by the Northern Forest Canoe Trail. If paddlers disrespect property it could jeopardize formal agreements that are maintained each year.

- Other stretches along the NFCT have no campsites because they are fairly front-country (lower Saranac is one such stretch). If within your budget, motels or campgrounds may be nearby. Use the guidebooks or NFCT website to research these.
- At campsites where reservations are required or encouraged, it can be very tough to know far enough in advance what day you will show up in a given area. Some locations like the Stevens Philips Preserve Campground on Upper Richardson Lake in Maine (NFCT Map 8) have systems where they will put placards on reserved sites. For any site that requires fees or reservations, site managers will always accept payment after the fact.
- It can be stressful not being sure if you're going to find a good spot to camp each night. Every evening can't be perfect. Do the best you can, be adaptable, and remember, this is northern New England, not downtown New York City. Spots to camp are not infrequent.

RESUPPLY: How do I get more food? From where? How frequently are stores along the NFCT? Are there natural food stores in northern New England?

- Food is available at least every couple of days on the NFCT except for the last section from Jackman to Fort Kent in Maine. Natural food stores, however, are few and far between in the North Country – towns like Saranac Lake and Plattsburgh have them but not many others. Few towns have what most people would term a “wide selection”, but most carry all the basics you could want for a canoe trip.
- If you are looking for specific, hard-to-find foods, your best bet is to either carry it with you the whole way or to mail it to yourself (or, if local, have a friend or relative meet you). Post offices are in most towns and they will hold a package for you address to “John and Jane Doe, c/o General Delivery, Any Town, USA 12345” addressed to the town you are sending it to. It helps to call ahead and let them know what you are doing, and also write an expected pick-up date on the package (give yourself an extra day or two). Just make sure you don't arrive in town on Saturday afternoon or a Sunday. Best to call ahead and check hours.

CELL PHONE SERVICE: Is there cell service across the trail?

- No. It is spotty in the Adirondacks, good on Lake Champlain, spotty in Vermont and New Hampshire, better in western Maine, and non-existent in the Allagash region. Do not rely on cell phones for check-ins, safety, etc. Verizon is the most successful of all the carriers. Satellite navigation or phone systems work across the NFCT. Many paddlers have used a SPOT device (<http://www.findmespot.com>) or InReach (<http://www.inreachdelorme.com>) when through or section paddling the trail..

WATER TREATMENT: What do you recommend? Are there places where even water pumps won't work? What do you do then?

- Treat your water. Repeat: treat your water. With giardia and other water-borne parasites abounding, it is essential. There are a wide variety of products available. Whether you use pills, pumps, boiling or UV rays does not matter, just have a method available and do it religiously.
- That being said, there are several rivers on the NFCT that even with these methods the water will not be fit to drink. When on the lower Saranac or the Missisquoi rivers you may need to resort to filling up jugs or purchasing water from local businesses. These are rivers near high agricultural and industrial use with significant loads of fertilizers and other effluents. On rivers that go through agricultural or industrial land, you will want to be

especially cautious in the spring and at times of heavy rain and run-off. Plan accordingly, carry a large water container capable of carrying enough water for between towns (the collapsible plastic ones work very well)

- Plan to drink more water than expected – paddling all day long builds up a huge thirst.

SAFETY: Do I have to worry about bears? Rabid wolves? Giardia? Theft?

- The NFCT has had reports of bear sightings, although there are no reports of bears pillaging food it is a potential in some or the more remote areas of the trail. No encounters with rabid wolves have been reported. It is not a bad idea to hang your food at night, however, if for no other reason than to keep the mice and other varmints away.
- For Giardia, see the section above on water treatment.
- There have been a few isolated incidents of theft on the NFCT. Especially when portaging through towns, be conscious of where you leave gear if you have to take several trips, step into a store to resupply, etc. The NFCT runs through several struggling North Country towns and theft is an unfortunate byproduct of this. A simple bike lock might not be a bad idea if you think you might stash a canoe or gear somewhere while you go into town for supplies, food, etc. If you are leaving gear behind when making multiple trips on a portage, ensure that your gear is well hidden. ALWAYS keep your extreme valuables—money, ID, passport, camera, GPS—on your body.
- When in doubt, err on the side of caution, just like when making a decision about whitewater.

TRAVELING TO AND FROM THE NFCT

TRAVEL TO OLD FORGE, NY: How do I get there?

- Driving is your best bet. Get a friend or relative to drop you off with your boat and gear. Long-term car parking may be available as well in town. Call a town's visitor center or local outfitter. The Old Forge (Town of Webb) Visitor Center has parking spots reserved for long term parking. You will need to contact them and secure a placard to be placed on your dashboard (<http://www.oldforogeny.com/>).
- Utica, NY is the nearest larger city. You can fly or bus into there and rent a car to head 50 miles north to Old Forge. You could also take an expensive taxi. What about shuttle services?
- There may be 'Trail Angels' out there as well – individuals willing to help out of the goodness of their hearts. You could try some local outfitters and see if they have ideas, or post to NFCT's Paddlers Forum: <http://forum.northernforestcanoetrail.org/~northez1/forums/forum.php>.

TRAVEL FROM FORT KENT, ME: How do I get out of there?

- An even tougher question. Again, driving is your best bet. Get a buddy or relative to pick you up.
- We know of Through Paddlers who were able to take a taxi to Caribou, ME (45 miles away) where they were able to access bus service.
- For major airports, Quebec City, QC and Bangor, ME are nearly equidistant in terms of time and mileage about 180 miles and 3 ½ hours away each. Presque Isle is smaller but nearer at 60 miles or 1 ¼ hours away. There are currently no buses, trains or rental car companies in Fort Kent. If you want a car your best bet is to get an outfitter or taxi to drive you to the nearest rental car place (Presque Isle, ME) and go from there. You may need to carry pads and straps or purchase new ones to aid in transport.
- There is a U-Haul rental store in Fort Kent. You could rent a U-Haul and transport your boat that way, perhaps to Presque Isle, Bangor, or Quebec.
- A final option is to sell your boat to ease travel. Try local outfitters or Craigslist.

FURTHER READING/RESEARCH

YOUR LOCAL OUTFITTER:

- Your local paddle sport dealer is your best option for advice on all things paddling and camping related. We've tried to provide general outlines for conditions specific to the NFCT above but for specific gear advice, they are the experts. Be informed about conditions on the trail when you talk with them and they will help you find solutions.

PADDLER NARRATIVES:

- Diaries and journals written by previous thru paddlers are like gold. Read about their experiences and learn from their mistakes. (Some of them are active on NFCT's Paddler Forum too!)
- Paddler Blogs: <http://www.northernforestcanoetrail.org/Paddler-2/Paddler-Blogs-73>
- Paddling the Northern Forest Canoe Trail: A Journey Through New England History by Sam Brakeley ('09 Thru-paddler):
https://netforum.avectra.com/eweb/shopping/shopping.aspx?pager=0&site=nfct&shopsearch=&shopsearchcat=merchandise&productcat=books&prd_key=1ab7bea4-2827-479c-9ce0-61b050b8075a

GUIDEBOOKS & MAPS:

- The Northern Forest Canoe Trail Guidebook:
https://netforum.avectra.com/eweb/shopping/shopping.aspx?pager=0&site=nfct&shopsearch=&shopsearchcat=merchandise&productcat=books&prd_key=e9822162-5e07-4f28-b679-e74ede3f87ed
- The Northern Forest Canoe Trail Through-Paddler's Companion by Katina Daanen:
https://netforum.avectra.com/eweb/shopping/shopping.aspx?pager=0&site=nfct&shopsearch=&shopsearchcat=merchandise&productcat=books&prd_key=b43cf6a0-b385-4565-9a64-ed85338d0e2
- Northern forest Canoe Trail 13-Map Series:
<https://netforum.avectra.com/eweb/shopping/shopping.aspx?pager=0&site=nfct&cart=0&shopsearch=&shopsearchCat=Merchandise&productCat=Maps>

MAP UPDATES:

Always check the Trail Updates section of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail's website before you leave for your expedition. Every summer campsites get added, portages refined, and hazards reported. You can print out info sheets and take them with you or use a permanent marker to make the update right on your map.

<http://www.northernforestcanoetrail.org/PlanaTrip-2/Trail-Updates-77>

NFCT FORUM (active discussion of prospective thru-paddlers and veterans on many of these issues):

<http://forum.northernforestcanoetrail.org/~norhez1/forums/forum.php>

GENERAL PADDLING INFORMATION (on gear, techniques, resources, etc.):

<http://www.northernforestcanoetrail.org/Paddler-2/Paddler-Resource-Links-94>

CONNECT WITH OUR NONPROFIT:

The Northern Forest Canoe Trail is constantly working to improve the corridor with support from [membership fees](#) and [Trail Fund](#) dollars. Becoming a member is the best way to support our work. You can also receive our emails and like on Facebook to stay in touch with what we do and upcoming events.

You can also contact the NFCT directly. The office is located in Waitsfield, VT. NFCT's Trail Director is an excellent resource for information and can get you in touch with Through Paddler Alumni. The NFCT website has a location where Through Paddler Blogs can be posted. It is helpful for NFCT staff to know what the usage of the Trail is in order to properly manage impact. Letting them know you are planning a Through Paddle is very helpful:

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