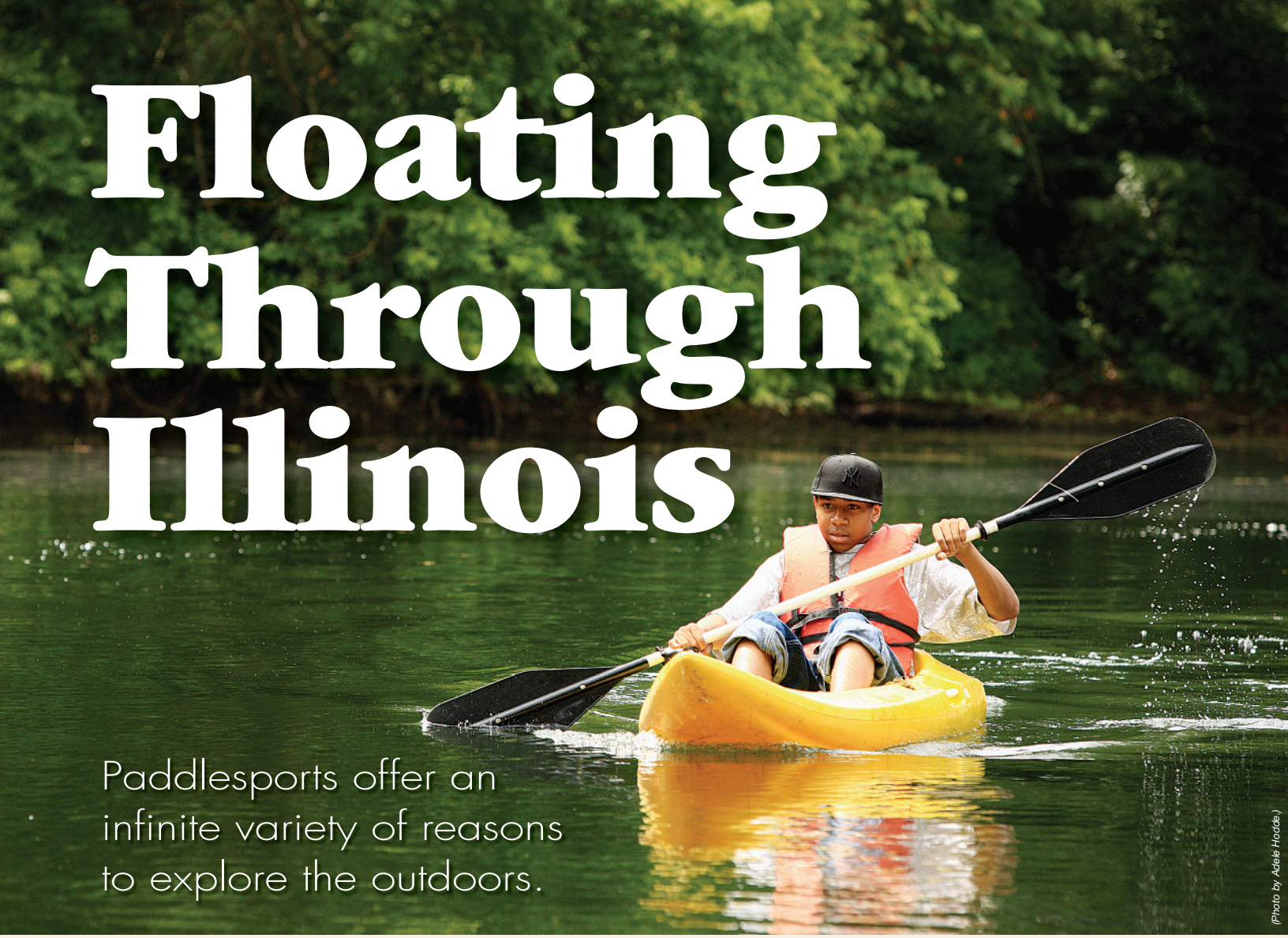
Floating Through Illinois



Paddlesports offer an infinite variety of reasons to explore the outdoors.

(Photo by Adele Hodde)

Story By Sigrid H. Pilgrim

Looking for an environmentally friendly outdoor activity for yourself or your family? One that is often close to home yet could take you to remote locations in Illinois and beyond? Something you can combine with bird watching, fishing, environmental study, river cleanups or competition? Look no further than paddlesports—canoeing and kayaking—on Illinois' many rivers and lakes.

A paddling trip is unlike most other outdoor activities. It takes place in a setting not prescribed by humans, such as a playground with a paved hiking path leading from the parking lot. It can provide access to smaller, shallow-water streams where paddlers may pause to cast a fly rod, a way to explore backwater lakes along Illinois' big rivers or a means of transport to places otherwise inaccessible, such as a week-long trip into the wilderness and camping along the shores of lakes or rivers.

Introducing youngsters to the paddling sports can bring a lifetime of enjoyment in the outdoors.

Many paddling organizations host events where the novice paddler can learn techniques and types of equipment.

The paddlesports offer a variety of craft options.

While on the water you can give a youngster their first taste of outdoor adventure, take part in a river cleanup event or simply enjoy a weekend getaway to watch bald eagles and herons, and listen to the rattle of a kingfisher. Equally important is the camaraderie found when paddling with family and friends who enjoy the sport with equal intensity.

Paddlesports are not just for the able-bodied person, but present an outdoor opportunity for people with disabilities as well. Once in a boat, people with lower limb disabilities can enjoy a new freedom of movement.

Does paddling have any age restrictions? Of course not—it's a lifetime activity, with experienced paddlers taking an infant on the water, three-year-olds learning to pilot a solo kayak and grandparents spending a day with their grandkids.

Consider paddlesports as a catalyst for an integrated approach toward outdoor education, and a means of countering the trend of virtual-reality nature experiences and controlled, aseptic, indoor playgrounds. A paddling trip presents opportunities to overcome natural obstacles, such as a downed tree or boulders. It offers the chance to experience mud, worms and mosquitoes, and watch swallows carry insects to their young. Chances are good you'll see deer, muskrats, herons and beaver dams. Perhaps someone will catch their first fish.

Illinois is fortunate to have many streams and shorelines that can be explored in a canoe or kayak. The equipment necessary is significantly less costly than a motorized boat, and the ease of transporting a canoe or kayak provides flexibility on where and when to paddle.

June is Illinois Rivers Appreciation Month. Celebrate with a day on an Illinois River.

People with lower limb disabilities may explore remote area through the paddling sports.

Technological advances have made it easy to find information about paddlesports and paddlesport safety. Here are a few links to get you started.

For a list of Illinois Paddling Clubs, where to get instruction, boat rental businesses, basic safety tips and more, visit illinoispaddling.org. Many canoe and kayak clubs also offer a social setting that a newcomer to the sport will find most useful in learning the basics necessary to paddle and safely enjoy the sport.

Downloadable brochures on learning to paddle and safety issues, a list of nationwide clubs and more is available at americancanoe.org.

For a list of criteria to consider in purchasing a canoe or kayak, searchable by size, carrying capacity, cost and more, visit paddling.net.

Safety first

Besides a vessel, paddlers need a few other essential pieces of equipment.

Select a **paddle** that has the correct shaft size for your hands and length for your height. Inexpensive paddles tend to be heavy, and you'll feel the experience in your arms.

A **personal flotation device** or PFD should be worn at all times when on the water. Modern PFDs are lightweight and comfortable, and one that fits properly is snug and will not ride up.

A **sounding device**, such as a whistle attached to your PFD, is required by law and serves to alert others in case of need because flowing water or waves can be noisy and voices do not always carry.

Wear **sunscreen**, **sunglasses** (use a **glass guard**) and a **wide-brimmed hat**. Sun rays reflecting off water are intensified, and sun damage may not be noticed for years.

Stay hydrated. Take **water** or a sports drink, and leave the alcohol at home. You'll be burning a lot of energy so pack plenty of snacks and **foods** that will not spoil.

Secure your valuables (**wallet, car keys, cell phone**) in a waterproof pouch or container —not a zippered sandwich bag—and test it beforehand to make sure it really is waterproof.

Be prepared for a range of weather and water conditions by wearing proper **clothing**. Jeans, T-shirts and sweatshirts may be appropriate for summer paddling, but polypropylene, fleece or wool are preferred alternatives when air temperatures may quickly drop, even in summer months. Temperatures below 50 degrees Fahrenheit require specialized cold-water clothing.

It is a good idea to bring a waterproof bag or **dump bag** with an extra set of clothes. Nothing feels better than being warm and dry after having been cold and wet.

Know the law

Illinois Water Law is complicated. For a detailed discussion of the law and a list of public waters, including the extensive system of water trails in northeast Illinois, visit illinoispaddling.org/access_project.

Canoes/kayaks are required to be registered and titled in Illinois. For additional information, visit dnr.state.il.us/admin/boats.htm or call 1-800-382-1696.

Knowledge is power

Regardless of your reason for spending time on the water, be safe. Always wear a personal floatation device. Learn to recognize hazards such as rocks and ledges, downed trees and man-made dams. Know that all bodies of water change considerably with shifts in the weather. A stretch of river can be tranquil or roaring, warm or cold, shallow or deep, gently flowing or tremendously pushy, all within a few hours. A lake can go from mirror smooth to 3-foot waves in minutes.

With the appropriate equipment, paddlesports enthusiasts can explore everything from a local pond or stream to a flat-water or whitewater river or the open ocean.

Clubs offer opportunities for paddling lessons, organized outings and the camaraderie of other enthusiastic paddlers.

Paddling novices should consider joining a club or taking a class to learn how to control their paddle craft, making their experience on the water more enjoyable. An instructor can teach you the basic strokes—forward, backward, sideways and turning—in a short amount of time.

Regardless of the destination, level of experience or type of vessel used, paddlesports help one develop an appreciation for the beauty of the natural environment.

Sigrid Pilgrim is a director with the Illinois Paddling Council (illinoispaddling.org).

Few other sports offer as many variations as paddlesports: paddle craft options, places to paddle, activities to undertake and educational opportunities. Too often a canoe or kayak is purchased on an impulse, without an understanding how that style of vessel will handle on the water.

Better-designed canoes and kayaks are available from specialty paddling shops. Major retailers tend to sell inexpensive, heavy, flat-bottomed canoes that, while good for fishing, are not well-suited for swift-moving water or large, open lakes. Most kayaks available through large chain stores are best for flat water, small lakes and slowly moving rivers.

Before you make an investment in a paddle craft, decide how you will use the vessel and research your options.

Canoes

- The most versatile type of canoe is a **touring or tripping** canoe. These sturdy vessels usually are constructed of tough, durable materials and designed for rugged situations. They also are a favorite with many families. Touring canoes can carry a heavy load and even be paddled in mild rapids.
- Paddling larger rapids requires specialized training and specifically designed **whitewater** canoes, which have rounded hulls and floatation air bags so they can turn quickly and cannot fill with water.
- For whitewater use, canoes require floatation to displace water in case of a tipover. These canoes also are more rockered for making the quick and sharp turns required to avoid boulders or other obstructions. Before venturing on a whitewater river, be sure you have the necessary paddling skills and knowledge of potential river hazards.
- Many anglers opt for a **square-sterned** canoe, which allows for the addition of an outboard motor.
- The long, narrow **racing** canoe is designed with reduced drag for increased speed but is more unstable than other types. In these canoes, the paddler kneels on one knee and paddles on one side of the craft.

Kayaks

- The large **sea or touring** kayak tracks well in wind, making it ideal for open bodies of water, such as the ocean or Lake Michigan.
- A **whitewater** kayak is designed to pivot on a dime for the quick maneuvers necessary in rapids.
- The challenging **downriver racing or flat-water sprint** kayak is built for speed and increasing your sense of balance.