

Whitewater Rafting

Council Approval: Required – High Risk

Tier 2

Activity Permitted For: B (Class I–II rapids), J (Class I–III rapids), C S A (Class I–IV rapids)

About Whitewater Rafting

Whitewater rafting is a thrilling experience for challenge-seeking Girl Scouts, as well as those who just love the outdoors. Rafts come in a variety of styles and lengths, usually 11 to 20 feet long, seating four to twelve rafters. You'll need to find a reputable outfitter to arrange the trip. Ask your council about places and outfitters in your area. A river guide will come with you and provide instruction, steering, and coaching. They'll know the river well and be able to perform rescues, if needed.

Rafting should only be done on rivers that have been run and rated, and only up to Class IV. It's important to understand the International Scale of River Difficulty or Whitewater Classification System. Be sure all participants have the training and experience to participate in the level expected. Be sure your guide has run the leg of the river before. See the Progression of Rafting Types with Guide Ratios chart for the types of whitewater Girl Scouts may run, by program level.

The Whitewater Classification System:

Class I (Easy): Moving water with small disturbances on the surface and a few small waves; poses little to no danger to swimmers

Class II (Novice/Beginner): Faster-moving water with easily avoided rocks, holes, and waves; danger to swimmers is still slight but care must be taken

Class III (Intermediate): Fast-moving water containing various rocks, holes, currents, and waves that require skillful maneuvering to avoid; swimmers could be at risk and may require help

Class IV (Advanced): Strong rapids, large waves, big holes, unpredictable currents, and dangerous obstructions requiring multiple maneuvers to get through or around; swimmers at risk and will require help to be rescued

Class V (Expert): All of the characteristics of Class IV with the added danger of being longer and containing more continuous features that may not be avoided; serious risk to swimmers, others may be of no help

Class VI (Unrunnable): Only a team of experts who carefully plan every aspect of this expedition would have hope of surviving these rivers and rapids

Learn More:

- Interactive map of places to go and a list of rivers: [American Whitewater](#)

- Tips for a first whitewater rafting trip: [The Clymb](#)
- Whitewater rafting terms: [Pinnacle Travel](#)

Include Girls with Disabilities

Talk to girls with disabilities and their caregivers, and ask about needs and accommodations. Contact the outfitter in advance to ask about accommodating people with disabilities.

[Disabled Sports USA](#) lists programs available nationwide, plus general information about adaptive rafting. And the blog of the [National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability Endless CapABILITIES](#) offers encouragement for paddlers with disabilities.

Safety Activity Checkpoints

Ensure participants are able to swim. Success on the water depends on comfort and ability in the water. Conduct a swimming test in advance. See “Swimming” safety activity checkpoints for samples, or ask your outfitter for guidelines.

All rafters must wear a U.S. Coast Guard–approved life jacket. Type III life jackets are recommended and should fit according to weight and height specifications. Inspect life jackets to ensure that they are in good condition and contain no tears.

Ensure the skill level of the adults is higher than the difficulty of the intended activity.

Verify instructor knowledge and experience. Make sure the instructor or guide has certification from a formal training program, such as the American Canoe Association’s rafting program or the International Rafting Federation. The guide needs to be able to effectively communicate commands and instructions. Also important:

- An instructor can demonstrate self-recovery and righting techniques for the type of trip. (Girls should learn and practice these skills when possible.)
- A guide should review site-specific emergency techniques and help rafters learn how to float through rapids, how to breathe while swimming in rapids, and how to swim to shore.
- The lead instructor or guide has firsthand knowledge of the hazards and conditions of the location and type of boat being used.
- At least one guide has documented training and experience guiding in the type of river being run and has run the river in advance.
- The guide subscribes to the American Whitewater Safety Code.

Select durable rafts. Make sure the outfitter uses rafts that:

- Are of heavy-duty construction
- Have at least four air compartments
- Have an adequate number of large D-rings securely attached to the sides
- Have snug hand lines along the sides
- Aren’t loaded beyond capacity of participants or gear

Select a safe site:

- Don't paddle in unknown areas.
- Only raft on water that has been run and rated and up to Class IV difficulty, as defined by the American version of the [International Scale of River Difficulty](#).
- Be aware of possible changes in water level due to tides or dam releases and how these affect water conditions.
- Avoid hazards such as strainers, sieves, hydraulics, waterfalls, bridges, dams, fences, and low power lines.

Know universal signals. Whistle and visual signals are used to pass messages or call for help. Learn them at [Paddle Education](#).

File a float plan. If participating in a long-distance trip, file a float plan with a reliable person who will notify authorities should your group not return on time.

On the Day of Rafting:

Get a weather and wind report. Check with your outfitter about expected weather and river flow. Be prepared with a backup plan or postpone the activity if weather prevents the outing.

Review what to do in a storm. If thunder is heard, or lightning seen, get everyone off the water immediately. Do not return until at least 30 minutes have passed since the last evidence of the storm.

Transport boats safely. Use car-top racks or trailers specifically designed for the type of craft. Secure boats with two lines across the top (one at each end), and with lines at the bow and the stern. Drivers must have prior experience hauling trailers.

Report accidents. Notify marine law enforcement or your council as appropriate.

Safety Gear

The gear you will need depends on the type of trip, water conditions, and weather expected. Check with your outfitter.

- U.S. Coast Guard–approved life jacket for each person (Type III life jackets recommended and should fit according to weight and height specifications)
- Raft sized appropriately for the participants and suitable for the type of rapids
- Paddles of the style and size required for the activity and person using them
- Emergency sound device, such as a whistle, compressed air horn, or VHF radio on navigable waters
- At least one graspable and throwable personal flotation device (Type IV buoyant cushion or ring buoy or equivalent) immediately available for each group on the water (boats 16 feet or longer)

Rescue and emergency gear appropriate for boat type and conditions, such as:

- A throw bag or throw line
- Raft repair kit
- Spare paddle, first-aid kit, and standard safety equipment, including signaling equipment
- Emergency survival packet: raincoat, waterproof matches, lightweight/space blanket, hat, pocket knife, 10-foot by 10-foot tarp, rope, food, and appropriate liquids (food and water bottles should be secured in the boat)
- A safety helmet for each person with a strong, flexible plastic shell and chin strap, as well as openings for when rafting in waters that are Class II or higher
- Protective clothing (wet suit or drysuit) worn when rafting in water below 70 degrees Fahrenheit (when water is warmer, wear layered, non-cotton clothing; store any extra clothing in a waterproof bag)
- Bailer (a scoop for removing water from a boat) or foot pump, if the boat is not self-bailing
- Secure, closed-toe hiking/sport sandals or water shoes, or other non-slip footwear (old sneakers are fine; no flip flops or loose slip-on water moccasins)
- Eyeglass keepers or goggles for those who need them
- Dry bags and/or waterproof containers to keep gear dry on extended trips; encourage girls to pack wisely (don't overload rafts)
- Compass, waterproof chart, and other essentials for extended trips
- Locking blade knife carried by river guide in their life jacket or other readily accessible place
- Any other items required by the boating jurisdiction in which you'll raft

These checkpoints should be reviewed with the guide, facility, or your council as appropriate.