

Cold Weather Paddling Hazards



Winter paddling can be a great deal of fun. The rivers are certainly not crowded, and the scenery is gorgeous. A good practice is taking the level of whitewater class you are comfortable with and don't exceed one level below that level. In other words, I'm very comfortable paddling Class IV so I shouldn't paddle anything harder than Class III in the Winter.

This article plans to cover some of the major hazard's paddlers need to be aware of paddling in cold weather. A few examples are:

- Hypothermia & Exposure
- Less Daylight
- Ice Ledges forming floating or stationary undercuts
- Surfer's Ear

Hypothermia

Hypothermia is a major hazard in Winter paddling. We mitigate via:

- Proper Trip Planning
- Thermal Protection
- Sound Judgment, play it safe
- Plenty of food & water

The [TRR Safety Page](#) has a whole section on Hypothermia articles that cover many of these topics.

The Risk Management section has two articles covering trip planning:

- [TRR Trip Leader Guide](#)
- [Whitewater Float Plan Template](#)

If someone takes a swim:

- Rescue quickly
- Assist them with emptying their boat, they will be exhausted
- Get the sugar (or honey) and fluids
- If you bring warm beverage, share it
- Hot Hands are incredibly inexpensive and worth their weight in gold

I strongly recommend dry suits, thermal cap, and pogies for Winter paddling, dry is warm. Any neat trick is wearing properly fitted dishwashing gloves under your pogies. These are thin and very durable and will provide a great deal of extra warmth.



Daylight is much shorter

I typically start Winter trips much earlier in the day than other times of the year. We often meet early in the morning when it is dark, so we arrive at the shuttle point at first daylight. Try to leave at least two (2) hours of daylight at the end of the paddle just in case you encounter any issues. I'm not a big fan of long lunch breaks on Winter paddles either, these can be a time sink you can't afford as well as many get chilly from exposure. Here is an excellent article from Paddler Magazine of a real incident that took place when shorter daytimes weren't considered: [Alone Article](#).

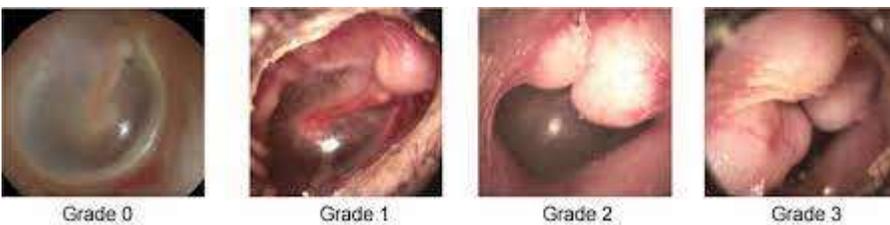
Ice Ledges

We all know about the hazards of undercut ledges. Winter paddling often means slower or still water will build ice ledges. To make matter worse, these sometimes break off making floating undercuts. Rescuing someone trapped under an ice ledge is at best difficult and in many cases impossible. The first picture clearly shows an undercut ice ledge. Picture the paddler in the second picture taking a swim by accident and having the current sweep them under an ice ledge



Surfer's Ear

Repeated exposure to very cold water leads to bone spur development in the ear canal. This can be very painful and lead to hearing loss and other issues like frequent ear infections. The medical term for this is exostosis commonly called [Surfer's Ear](#). Once the bone growth blocks the ear canal significantly (see pictures below), surgery is required to remove that growth. Fortunately, we can prevent surfer's ear by wearing a combination of ear plugs with a decent thermal hood or skull cap under your helmet. One brand I've had a great deal of success with is [Doctor Pro Earplugs](#).



I highly recommend watching this excellent video on [Surfer's Ear](#).

Conclusion

Many of my favorite paddling trips have been in the Winter. I strongly prefer small streams in the winter as they are often in deep gorges providing a great deal of wind protection, not to mention much faster rescues should that be necessary. I also like shorter runs due to much

more limited daylight. These types of creek paddling opportunities are much more prevalent in the Winter due to snow melt on a warm day and more precipitation runoff due to trees hibernating during the Winter.

Proper gear, sound judgment and trip planning can open new opportunities during the Winter months to catch small streams that typically don't run other times of the year. Have fun and be safe.