

Boat surgery

Don't get stuck up a creek without a solid repair kit

By Karen McCall

For a group of canoeists having a no good, very bad, time on the Big Salmon River, running into Trevor Braun was a trip saver; if not a lifesaver. Braun was on a week-long paddling trip when he came around a bend in the river and saw a boat floating upside down and no one in sight. He collected the boat and, further downstream, three people who jumped ship after their vessel wrapped around a rock. "It was pretty toasted," Braun said about the torn-up fibreglass boat. He said the group had half a roll of duct tape between them and no hope of getting the boat shipshape again. They were in distress.

"They wanted to use my [satellite] phone to call a helicopter," Braun explained. "I was like, 'Well, we can fix your boat.'" Braun, who, incidentally, owns Yukon Canoe and teaches canoeing and river safety for a living, knows a few things about boat repair. He retrieved their boat, mended it, and got them on their way (after also lending them a tent to replace one lost to the river).

In all his years on the water, Braun has never come across a vessel he couldn't fix. With the proper tools and a few tricks, you, too, can be a boat doctor.



Photos (this page): Karen McCall

REPAIR KIT ITEMS

Braun says it's easy to go overboard and pack the kitchen sink. He recommends asking yourself: What kind of trip am I doing and what might go wrong? If possible, pack items that have multiple uses.

- **Zip ties** – These are good for splinting tent poles, stitching canoes, backpack repair, and many other things.
- **Cord** – Bring lots.
- **Adhesive** specific to your boat material.
- **Snare wire** or other material for stitching.
- **Awl** or something for drilling holes.
- **Tape** – Tyvek, duct tape, Gorilla Tape, or vapour barrier tape.

SPARE PARTS AND REPAIR ITEMS SPECIFIC TO YOUR VESSEL

While there's lots of things that can be jury-rigged in nature (e.g., spruce pitch works as waterproofing), some of the following are good to have on hand.

- **Canoes** – Seat bolts (use cord as an alternative), extra nuts, and a saw (useful for making structural canoe parts).
- **Sea kayaks** – Rudder parts.
- **Whitewater kayaks** – Small hand torch. This can be used to weld a plastic kayak back together. (You may need to cut a piece from the cockpit to fill a tear. Weld the inside and outside, mixing the old and new material).
- **Rafts and packrafts** – Spare valves, sewing kit, and patches specific to the material. Most rafts are vinyl, similar to drybag materials. For a packraft, Aquaseal works well, as well as Tenacious Tape, duct tape, or vapour-barrier tape.

COMMON CANOE MALFUNCTIONS

- **Broken seat** – Seats break often. If one side goes, the other will likely follow. Zip ties and cord can be used for a quick fix.
- **Damaged gunnel** – This is the boat frame, which brings rigidity to the whole vessel. If one breaks, it will need to be stabilized with willows, poplars, or spruce poles and secured by cord, wire, or zip ties.
- **Broken thwart or yoke** – This is the strut between the gunnels. If it breaks, you can make something from the bush.
- **Holes and tears** – See page to the right.

REPAIR A TEAR IN A CANOE, RAFT, OR PACKRAFT

Stitch it. Waterproof it.

1. Make a hole at the ends of the tear. It sounds counterintuitive, but this will prevent it from spreading like that darned chip in your windshield. To make a hole, use an awl (often part of a multitool) or, in a pinch, use a nail or tent peg heated in the fire.

2. Stitch up the tear. Yes, just like a surgeon. You'll need to make a series of holes on either side of the tear to do so. Sew with zip ties, snare wire, dental floss, or heavy thread. And don't forget what nature has to offer—spruce roots work if you know what you're doing. For a packraft, a standard sewing kit will do the trick. If there is material missing (that is, your boat has a hole), cover it with a patch or something larger like a dry bag.

3. After the tear is stitched, it needs to be waterproofed (as do the holes you just made). First, clean and dry the area well. For small tears, rubbing alcohol works well. Or, place tape on the surface and remove it. This lifts dirt and debris and creates a sticky base. For waterproofing, use an adhesive specific to the material of your vessel (which you added to your repair kit after reading this article—like vinyl glue for Royalex boats). You can also use a dry bag with tape around it. Braun says he used to take epoxy on trips but doesn't bother anymore because it's messy when it leaks and needs a dry, warm environment to cure.



Photos: Trevor Braun

POST SURGERY

A boat is never going to be as strong after it's been repaired. With that in mind, doctored boats are best relegated to flatwater and day trips where, if your boat sinks, you can walk to the road. Although Braun did a "temporary" repair that lasted more than four years, he recommends against taking your fixed-up boat on a fly-in canoe trip in the Peel watershed.

DRYSUIT REPAIR

A damaged driesuit won't keep you dry and warm. Fortunately, field repairs are possible. A stretchy self-adhesive will repair gasket tears and the suit itself. Braun suggests Tear-Aid or a Gore-Tex (waterproof) patch from your first-aid kit, such as Tegaderm. Clean and dry both sides of the gasket with alcohol before applying. **Y**



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