

Bowron Lake Provincial Park

Padding and Camping Skills for the Bowron Lake Canoe Circuit

What to Expect: Bowron Lake Park's ten-lake Canoe Circuit is a wilderness journey suitable for intermediate and advanced paddlers in good physical shape. If you come well prepared, it is a marvelous experience: enjoy the serenity, beautiful mountain views and abundant wildlife.

The Circuit requires over 100 kilometres of paddling – mostly on large lakes with some on fast flowing rivers (class 1, high volume when in flood). There are also 11 kilometres of portage trails, over which you must carry all your gear as well as the canoe. Winds and cold, rainy weather are frequent throughout the summer, and storms may blow up at short notice, so be prepared to spend some days on shore waiting for conditions to improve. Paddle close to shore, as the lakes are very cold and capsizing far from shore could have severe consequences. Wear a PFD (personal flotation device) at all times.

As an alternative to the full Circuit, paddling only the West Side is easier, with no fast moving water, and it takes just 2 to 4 days. The West Side Trip may be more suited to less experienced paddlers, the elderly, and families with small children.

Canoe or Kayak? Most people paddle the Circuit in 16- to 18-foot tandem (two-seater) canoes, as these are the most efficient in terms of carrying people and gear where frequent portages interrupt paddling. Canoes constructed of fiberglass, Kevlar, aluminum, or plastic composites such as Royalex are the best choices. For your safety, you must ensure that you can load all your equipment and people in the canoe and still have **at least 15 cm (6") of freeboard** when the canoe is in the water. (Freeboard is the vertical distance between the water and the lowest point on the rim of the canoe.) Try this on a lake close to home before you leave. If there is less than 15 cm of freeboard, you either have too much gear or too small a canoe.

Sea kayaks have gained in popularity over the last few years, since they are easier to learn to paddle, handle better in wind and, if solo, give a sense of independence. The disadvantages of kayaks on the Bowron Circuit are their relative weight (two 50 lb. kayaks versus one 60 lb. canoe); they cannot be portaged over the shoulders like a canoe; and difficulty in packing and repacking into a tight hold every time you portage. If you have an odd number of people in your party, using a sea kayak may be a better option for the "odd one out" than attempting to load a tandem canoe with three adults and camping gear. White water kayaks are not suitable for the Canoe Circuit - they do not track well and have too little stowage for camping gear.

Both canoes and sea kayaks are available for rent from the commercial lodges near the park entrance.

Canoeing Skills: Practice paddling with the people you plan to do the Circuit with, so that you can learn to work together. All members of your party should be able to launch the canoe from shore, paddle it consistently in a straight line, turn it in both directions and steer/sideslip to avoid obstacles such as sweepers and deadheads in moving water. You should know how to do a low brace to prevent capsize, and do a canoe over canoe rescue if other group members capsize. If you plan to kayak, you should learn the equivalent maneuvers, and be sure to practice "wet exits" - local pools may offer practice sessions.



You must know how to trim (balance) a canoe for the best paddling efficiency. The load must be balanced from side to side and end to end. It is almost impossible to steer if the bow (front end) is heavier, plowing through the water. On the contrary, if the bow is too light it will catch wind and can flounder out of control.

All these skills are taught at local canoe clubs across North America. We strongly recommend that you take lessons and practice your skills before arriving to paddle the Bowron Lake Circuit.

Canoe Carts: On portages, you can avoid having to carry your canoe or kayak by renting a canoe cart, available from the commercial outfitters near the park entrance. Even with a cart, it is worthwhile learning how to lift and carry the canoe correctly. In order to reduce damage to the trails caused by over-width and overweight canoe carts, the following restrictions apply and will be enforced.

- Maximum axle width of canoe carts is 75 cm (30 inches)
- If you use a cart, you are only allowed to carry up to 28 kg (60 lbs) inside the canoe/kayak while it is being trolleyed over the portage. All gear exceeding that weight must be carried by party members.

Backcountry Camping Skills: The key to comfort and safety is knowing how to stay warm and dry, even in a continuous downpour. There are facilities at Bowron Lake Park that will help – four picnic shelters and six rustic cabins. These are for everyone's use. You should plan to sleep in your own tent, using the cabins and shelters for cooking and drying out wet clothes, and sharing the space with others. Not all campsites have a shelter nearby.

Ensure your tent and raingear are watertight before you leave – they may need to be seam-sealed. Pack all your food and clothing in watertight containers. Specially designed portage packs and dry bags are ideal, though garbage bags used as liners for nylon stuff sacks work well, too.

If you arrive in camp during a rainstorm, your first priority must be shelter. String up a large tarp, and get your tent set up. Then change into dry clothing, and cook up some warm food such as soup on your portable stove. Finally, work on starting a fire. Look out for group members who are shivering, or just much quieter than usual – they may have the early stages of hypothermia. Dry, warm clothing is a priority for them.

Remember to leave your campsite as clean as or cleaner than you found it. "Leave No Trace".

Food: It is wise to plan each meal ahead of time: measure out the food, then double-bag it to keep it dry. Pre-packaged, dehydrated dinners are recommended; canned food is heavy to portage, and fresh food may not keep for the duration of the circuit. Crackers, cheese, peanut butter, nuts, cookies, dried fruit and drink mixes make a good lunch. Breakfast is a matter of taste, but please don't skip it. Remember that you will probably be burning a lot more calories than you would at home, so ensure the food is high-energy, delicious, and nutritious. Bring enough extra food to last at least a couple of days in case you become storm-bound (or you decide to take it easy – you're having such a good time.)

Possession of commercially packaged beverages and all glassware is prohibited on the Canoe Circuit. This includes beer and pop cans, bottles, jam jars and juice boxes. Use reusable plastic water bottles, plastic containers with tight sealing lids and platypus type drinking pouches.

Equipment: For a complete equipment list as well as information about reservations and regulations, please download the Bowron Lake Canoe Circuit Pre-trip Information Booklet which can be found at the B.C. Provincial Parks website - <http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/explore/parkpgs/bowron.html>