

On March 5, 2016, the "Slices of Time" photography workshop was hosted by Shared Talents in the Quad Cities. Below is the information, with added notes, included in my presentation "Taking Your Photography Interests Onto the Water." Each presentation was limited to 20 minutes, so I hope this expanded information will provide a more complete overview of photography afloat, and encourage you to consider combining photography and safe paddling. If you have questions, or possibly event info or a photo to share, please email me at the Iowa Water Trails Association (IWTA) iowawta@gmail.com. Best wishes for safe and enjoyable photography afloat,
Gregg Stark

"Taking Your Photography Interests Onto the Water"

OUTLINE:

1. Safely Mixing Photography & Paddling
2. We All Talk Funny; Parallels of Photography & Paddling
3. Meet Your New BFF (Best Floatation Friend); Intro to Paddling
4. The Art of Compromise; Working Within Constraints
5. Special Considerations For Floating Photography
6. All About The Light; Working With Sunshine
7. The Toy Box Afloat; Water Vs. Photo Gear
8. Finding Inspiration
9. Closing Comments
10. Resources

1. Safely Mixing Photography & Paddling

- = Assuming you know something about photography, little about paddling.
- = In spite of some concerns I will stress, I really encourage you to give it a try.
- = Depending on environment, combination increases potential risk & reward.
- = Examples of subjects: People, sunsets, wildlife, scenery, weather, art, humor. . .

Combining paddling and photography can enhance your appreciation of both pursuits. Adding paddling to photography expands your access to new subjects, exposes you to new places and people, and eliminates many of life's ordinary distractions. Adding photography to paddling provides an opportunity to record and share your experiences, think more deeply about what you see and experience, and more fully connect with our natural environment.

2. We All Talk Funny; Parallels of Photography & Paddling

- = Specialized Vocabulary, Time, Toys, & Money
- = Some Photography Terms (p&s, dslr, f stop, focal length, depth of field, fixed, zoom, etc.)
- = Some Paddling Terms (bow, stern, solo, tandem, gunwales, rocker, tumblehome, chine, tracking, etc.)
- = Maximizing Return On Investment
- = Relative Value of Skills Vs. Equipment
- = Training (classes, clubs, special events)

Recreational photography and paddling share many parallels. Each has a vocabulary of specialized terms to describe principles, functions, and gear. Each requires time to learn, master, or simply participate. Each has more than enough options to keep a "gear head" pouring over catalogs and reviews. And, each issues the siren call of financial investment, tempered by spousal objections. Maximize your return on investment by prioritizing training/learning ahead of buying/investing. In either photography or paddling, it is probably best to maximize the results of your skills and creativity before investing in the next level of high tech gear.

3. Meet Your New BFF (Best Floatation Friend); Intro to Paddling

- = PFD (positive floatation device, lifejacket) Do not leave shore without it
- = Boats (solo, tandem, canoes, kayaks, length, width, height, shapes, stability, weight)

- = Paddle (one blade or two, size, weight)
- = Gear (hat, sunscreen, drinking water, dry bags, gloves, lines, tethers, paddle leash)
- = Lakes, Rivers, White Water Parks
- = Float Plan
- = Paddling with Others
- = Safe Paddling First, Photography Second
(PFD, Obstructions, Strainers, Sweepers, Low Head Dams, Alcohol)

Your best friend on the water is your “Positive Floatation Device,” also referred to as a PFD, life jacket, or life vest. If you think it is good enough to simply have a PFD in your boat, and not worn, I challenge you to jump into deep water, then don the PFD. You will likely find it difficult and very time consuming—time better spent staying connected with your paddle and boat, saving your gear, avoiding hazards, and possibly helping others. Be an asset, not a liability.

A variety of kayaks, canoes, even stand up paddleboards are used for photography, and selecting a “best” boat will involve assessing the nature of your photography interests, your paddling group, expected water and weather conditions, and your personal mobility. Wide recreational kayaks or canoes may provide stable platforms in marshes or quiet lakes, but would not have the performance to document an adventure trip. Boats, PFD’s, and other gear have recently been developed for the growing fishing-paddling market, and offer many features friendly to photographers. Borrowing or renting various boats is an excellent option.

Basic gear for a day paddle includes a hat, sunscreen, and drinking water. Like photography, there is no end to the possible accessories available for purchase.

Basic paddling safety includes wearing a PFD and filing a float plan (where you are paddling, who you are paddling with, when you expect to return, contact info for other paddlers) with a friend or family member. Learn how to avoid obstructions such as submerged rocks or logs, strainers, and sweepers. Stay well clear of low head dams, both above and below. Leave the alcoholic beverages on shore. Remind yourself that it’s always “Safe paddling first, photography second.” Basic safety training is available through paddling shops, paddling clubs, the Iowa DNR, or even online.

Lakes, rivers, and whitewater parks each require different paddling skills, but all offer photography opportunities from land and from the water. White Water Parks tend to gather paddlers at chutes, eddies, gates, and other “features,” making it easier to photograph your subjects.

4. The Art of Compromise; Working Within Constraints

- = Personal Purpose, Goals
- = Goals of a Group
- = Candid Vs. Posing
- = Limited Mobility & Control of Environment
- = Limitations of Photo Gear; lenses, shutter lag, processing lag
- = Basic Plan, But Alert to Opportunities
- = Embrace the Variety (scenery, people, weather, artistic, humor, etc.)

Learn to anticipate, and work within, the constraints of your goals, competing goals, equipment (paddling & photo), water conditions, weather, and the all-important “light.”

If you are going to work your photos into a presentation to others, will it be a travelogue of sights seen, a how-to documentary of planning & executing a trip, a photography sampler, or something else? The story line or arc will suggest basic photos needed to ensure meeting your goal.

If you are documenting a family or group trip, ensure that everyone is represented. Informal assistance from a crew member with photographic experience can be helpful to gather a mix of candid and posed “people” shots.

Positioning a kayak or canoe on water is usually more difficult than taking a couple of steps on land. A DSLR may produce your best quality photos, while floating in calm backwaters, but may be locked in a Pelican box when opportunity knocks. A waterproof point and shoot can be quickly pulled from a PFD pocket to capture the fun and flying water drops of a momentary water fight.

5. Special Considerations for Photography Afloat

- = Potential Safety Risks
- = Exposed to Elements (sun, wind, waves, current, etc.)
- = Extended Time Before Return
- = Floating Platform—Motion & Stability
- = One Hand Shooting
- = Positioning
- = Distance
- = Dots On the Water
- = Horizon Line
- = Water Spots
- = Your Boat, Your Shadow
- = No Butts
- = Story Arc (connect the dots, narrative)
- = Editing (rotation, cropping, brightness, contrast)
- = Over the Water Practice for On the Water

Again, a reminder that you are on the water, subject to certain risks associated with paddling.

Be aware that you (and your gear) will be exposed to the elements for the duration of the outing, and you will not be able to simply jump back into your vehicle or other nearby shelter.

Your photographic platform, usually a kayak or canoe, is floating, subject to motion induced by wind, waves, current, and your body. Achieving or maintaining proper orientation for a shot may require one hand on the paddle, leaving only one for your camera. Positioning can sometimes be achieved by allowing the wind or current to carry you past your desired point.

Distance can be deceiving on the water, and exacerbated by our “mind’s eye” and the normal wide angle view of many smaller waterproof cameras. You will probably have to shoot paddlers and their boats from much closer than expected to avoid returning with a series of photos showing “dots on the water.”

Avoiding having a disconcerting horizon line running through a person’s head is an issue in all forms of outdoor photography, but further complicated on water by having to deal with a horizon line and water’s edge line, plus the occasional boulder or large piece of driftwood. They can be minimized by manipulating depth of field, or avoided by positioning the camera higher or lower.

Working around water, wind, and paddlers necessitates frequent checks for water drops on your lens. The occasional appearance of your boat’s bow or your shadow may add a personal connection to the shot, but is generally seen as a distraction. Paddling in a group affords numerous opportunities to stop on sandbars for snacks, lunches, or a chance to look for “treasures.” Members of your crew will bend over their boats numerous times to unload or reload food, water, or other items. Avoiding or eliminating such unattractive or embarrassing views from your photo presentations will make you a more popular photographer to invite along on the next adventure.

Editing can range from the very simple to very complex, depending on the philosophy, skills, and software of the photographer. Editing of photos taken on the water frequently benefit from a couple degrees of rotation to achieve the proper balance of water being relatively level, while still indicating perspective. A simple way to check for level in your photo is to slide the horizontal crop line down the photo, to near the shoreline (but do not activate the crop!). Shots of people taken with a wider angle basic waterproof camera can often be made more interesting by cropping down to the real point of interest.

As preparation for trying photography on the water, or for those not quite that adventurous, there are options for shooting “over the water.” Whitewater parks, such as those at Charles City, Manchester, and Elkader, provide opportunities to shoot individual and groups of colorful playboats from overhead bridges, river banks, or at eye level from the limestone hardscaping. Boats and boaters may also be photographed at accesses, from docks, or more comforting platforms like pontoon boats. Powered pontoon or flat boats may also get you to many scenic locations, but their motor noise will diminish your ability to sneak up on wildlife.

6. All About The Light; Working With Sunshine

- = Low-Level Photographic Theory
- = Polarizing Filter, Lens Coating
- = Bright sun Vs. Overcast
- = Reflections
- = Contrast
- = Shadows (Faces, Trees, Bluffs, Bridges)
- = Brimmed Hats
- = Fill Flash
- = Positioning Yourself for Light Direction, Subject, Hazards

A good understanding of basic photographic theory, and the importance of understanding light, will serve you well when performing photography on or around water. Polarizing filters on higher end lenses, or lens coatings on the simplest cameras, can be helpful.

Bright sun helps highlight fluffy clouds, illuminate wide vistas, and make for scenes of happy paddlers in brightly colored boats. Overcast light may help convey stormy conditions, and will provide better portraits, although fill flash may be needed to illuminate faces beneath hats.

Reflections of shorelines, boat hulls, or paddlers can add an element to photos usually not present in photos taken on land.

Bright sun, water reflections, white sand, brimmed hats, trees, bluffs, bridges, etc. conspire to create images with high contrast and strong shadows. Scenery is not easily moved, but paddlers, or paddlers in boats, can sometimes be positioned out of direct sun, hats can be adjusted or removed, etc.

One of your biggest challenges will be to position your boat appropriately for light direction, subject face, background interest, and still be avoiding any potential hazards.

7. The Toy Box Afloat; Water Vs. Photo Gear

- = Tether Gear, But Not Around Your Neck
- = Water vs. Electronics
- = Waterproof vs. Floating
- = Waterproof Cameras (P&S, DSLR, GoPro)
- = Wide Angle and Telephoto
- = Viewfinder Vs. View Screen
- = Battery Life
- = Waterproofing Cameras
- = Waterproof Cases
- = Tripod
- = Insurance

The first safety rule with photographic equipment is, you may need to attach a tether, but do not put a strap around your neck. If you dump your boat, the last thing you need is an attack by your camera. Small carabiners can be used to attach cameras and other gear to your PFD or other attachment points on your boat.

The first rule of waterproof cameras is that most may be waterproof, but they do not necessarily float. It's no surprise that manufacturers sell an accessory for that—a PFD for your camera.

Many manufacturers now offer one or two small waterproof cameras, and new models seem to be introduced each spring. They range from the simple point and shoot, to models with zoom, and include cameras commonly referred to as GoPro. Your local photography shop may not stock the brand of waterproof camera you want, but they can often order it, then provide the service and support we all appreciate.

Non-waterproof cameras can be placed inside waterproof cases or bags which have provision to shoot through a clear lens in the device. Simple bags are relatively inexpensive, custom cases for advanced cameras can be very expensive.

Non-waterproof cameras can be stored inside a waterproof box, often referred to as a Pelican Case, secured to the boat. When desired, you simply remove the camera from the case, shoot your photos, and then return the camera to the case. This works well in situations involving expensive cameras, multiple lenses, relatively calm water, and a stable boat.

Professional photographers working with huge lenses usually secure a maritime insurance rider for their equipment, and this may be a viable option for the rest of us to consider as a homeowner policy rider.

8. Finding Inspiration

- = Iowa Outdoors Magazine, <http://www.iowadnr.gov/Things-to-Do/Iowa-Outdoors-Magazine>
- = Iowa Outdoors on IPTV, <http://site.iptv.org/iowaoutdoors>
- = Big River Magazine, <http://www.bigrivermagazine.com/>
- = Outdoor Calendars
- = Outdoor Photographer Websites and Blogs
- = Photo Clubs
- = Workshops, Conferences, Special Events

9. Additional Resources

Rapidly Approaching Events with Outdoor Photography Learning Components

- = March 11-13; 2016, Canoecopia in Madison, WI, numerous photo presentations.
<http://www.canoecopia.com/canoecopia/page.asp?pgid=1001>
- = April 2, 2016; Outdoor Adventure Fest in Waterloo, photo presentations by Bill Schoon, Kip Ladage.
<http://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Black-Hawk/Park/Hartman-Reserve-Nature-Center/Events/7813/Outdoor-Adventure-Fest.aspx>
- April 23, 2016; Nikon Ambassador Moose Peterson, LAPC Workshop, Cedar Rapids.
<http://linnareaphotoclub.org/moose>

Support for Photography and Paddling

- = IOWA website, events calendar, links to resources, free monthly email newsletter,
<http://iowawatertrails.org/>
- = Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Iowa Rivers Program, Water Trail development and Dam mitigation, water trails maps, brochures, canoe and kayak schools, safety training, event outreach,
<http://www.iowadnr.gov/Things-to-Do/Canoeing-Kayaking/Paddler-Resources>
- = Paddle Shops with experienced staff, full service.
- = Liveries with rentals and shuttles.
- = CrawDaddy Outdoors in Waverly, paddling gear, lessons, guided trips, test paddle events,
<http://crawdaddyoutdoors.com/>
- = CanoeSport Outdoors in Indianola, paddling gear, lessons, guided trips, test paddle events,
<http://www.canoesportoutfitters.com/>
- = Local photography shops for advice, gear, classes.
- = Local photography clubs for advice, inspiration, possible kindred spirits.
- = Waterproof camera reviews via web search.

= Ugly Hedgehog photography forum, <http://www.uglyhedgehog.com/>

Paddler Groups & Events

- = Saukenuk Paddlers, <http://www.meetup.com/Saukenuk-Paddlers-Canoe-Kayak-Club/>
- = Central Iowa Paddlers, <http://centraliowapaddlers.org/>
- = Cedar Valley Paddlers, <http://cedarvalleypaddlers.webs.com/>
- = Sticks In the Water on Iowa Paddler Forum, <http://iowapaddling.prophpbb.com/forum11.html>
- = Iowa Paddling Forum, source for Q&A, <http://iowapaddling.prophpbb.com/>
- = Great River Rumble, annual weeklong paddle, <http://www.riverrumble.org/>
- = Floatzilla, annual attempt to amass record number of boats on water in Quad Cities, <http://www.floatzilla.org/>
- = More events, links, updates will be published on the IWTA website or in the free monthly email IWTA Newsletter, <http://iowawatertrails.org/>

10. Closing Comments

- = PFD
- = First Priority Must Always Be Safety
- = Rent or Try Before You Buy
- = Go With The Flow--Accidental Photography
- = Anticipate
- = Get Out There--Encourage You To Try Photography Afloat
 - *Wear a PFD whenever you are on the water—am I making my point?*
 - *Always consider your safety before you compose your photograph.*
 - *Rent, try, or borrow paddling equipment before you buy.*
 - *Go with the flow, be open to unexpected shots offered by Mother Nature.*
 - *Anticipate--the arc of your story, where your subject is going to be, where you are going to be, the direction of light, the backgrounds, the possible hazards. Focus on all of that, and you will exclude any of those pesky “work worries.”*
 - *Get out there and give on-water photography a try. Even if your first photos don't turn out the way you hoped, you will probably have enjoyed a great day on the water.*

Thank you for attending my “Taking Your Photography Interest Onto the Water” presentation during the “Slices of Time” photography workshop, presented March 5, 2016 in the Quad Cities by Shared Talents. I hope you find these notes helpful. If you have questions, or possibly event info or a photo to share, please email me at iowawta@gmail.com.

*Best wishes for safe and enjoyable photography afloat,
Gregg Stark*