

Think sprayskirt entrapment can't happen to you?

Gear is only as good as your ability to use it. Complacency can be deadly. Practice!

By Paula Hubbard

One of the most frightening things for a kayak instructor or trip leader is to have a student capsize and become trapped in his or her boat. Recently that happened to me. The paddler was not a beginner, was using her own equipment, had done wet exits previously. There were no indicators to suggest that we might have a problem. We were getting ready to practice assisted rescues and Denise, one of the assistants in the class, was working with her. I saw the capsize and things didn't look right, no swimmer, no set up for a roll, some banging and bouncing.

I quickly paddled to them. Denise had already assessed the situation and was starting to do a Hand of God rescue. For this maneuver, the rescuer rolls the capsized boat up with the paddler still in the cockpit. Denise got the paddler up enough so that she could get some air but couldn't completely roll the kayak upright. I went to the other side of the paddler's boat and had her grab my bow. Fortunately, she was able to hear and follow instructions. At that point we were stable, with everyone breathing air.

According to Denise, this is what happened:

"I was positioned at the bow of a student's boat preparing to demonstrate a bow rescue. The student mentioned that she wanted to attempt a skill that she was unable to adequately describe and did not know what it was called.

Suddenly, the student was upside down. I attempted to right her boat, but was unable to do so from my position at the bow. As I maneuvered alongside her boat, I grabbed deck-lines to pull her up a bit and help her get some air. I asked if student knew how to wet exit, and she replied "yes," but that she could not pull her skirt.

I was still in front of the cockpit and it was difficult to maintain my hold from this angle. My concern was that I needed to get her up for air.

I quickly moved into position to perform a Hand of God rescue. At the cockpit, I pushed down on her boat and grabbed the combing in an attempt to pull her upright. The student's position in her boat and the fact that she was trying to keep her head above water



Practicing wet exit instruction at Trip Leader Training.

prevented me from completing the HOG. I was able to hold her boat on enough of an angle to allow her to continue breathing. Then Paula pulled into position with her bow."

After a moment to relax, Denise and I got her boat upright. Our paddler settled in her seat; everything was OK. The entire incident probably took less than a minute but felt like forever.

What happened? Unplanned capsizes can happen for many different reasons - rough conditions, trying new skills, simply not paying attention.

We should always be ready to deal with a capsize, whether as a paddler or as a potential rescuer.

What causes spray skirt entrapment? In this case the spray skirt was very tight, the paddler was out of position and twisted, so she couldn't get into the tuck position, and she couldn't release the skirt. Other causes might be loose equipment in the cockpit or an inaccessible grab loop.

As trip leaders, we need to be aware of the problems associated with wearing spray skirts. We sometimes take for granted that people who wear a skirt are comfortable with wet exits and have practiced them. I would never make someone who was uncomfortable with wet exits wear the skirt. Many of the places where we paddle are on calm water and spray skirts are not necessarily needed. I would rather deal with water splashing into the cockpit that entrapment and a panicking paddler.

We should all have a plan for how to deal with an entrapment. The trip leader may not be the closest to the incident; quick action is essential. The Hand of God rescue can be difficult for some because of boat design and weight differences. The general principle is that you are rolling the kayak up. When you are next to the upside down boat, push down on the side of the boat that is closest to you, reach across to grab the coaming that is farthest away from you, and roll the boat up. If the paddler can relax, it is helpful. When the trapped paddler lifts their head and struggles, it is harder for the rescuer to right the boat. If you can't get the boat upright, try to remove the skirt. Use members of the group to assist with a bow rescue or help

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Upcoming Events. For the most up-to-date listings, visit the [CPA Meetup Calendar](#)

Date	Event	Summary
Th 11/8-Su 11/11	Chickahominy Camper	12:00 pm 11/8 - 4:00 pm 11/11, car camper, paddles on area rivers, reserve campsites now, potluck Sat dinner
Sun, Nov 11	Non-CPA event: Bohemia River SP Open House	10:00-2:00, Open House, 3864 Augustine Herman Hwy, Chesapeake City
Sat, Dec 8	Holiday Party	7:00-11:00, barbecue provided, potluck of salads, main dishes, and desserts; White Elephant gift exchange w kayak theme
Tue, Dec. 25	Truxton Park paddle	10:00 a.m. launch. Dry suits required; Santa hats optional but recommended!

Sprayskirt Entrapment

get the skirt off. A knife to cut the skirt would be a last resort; you can cause serious injury to the paddler if you cut through a skirt and into their legs.

Prevention of entrapment should always be a high priority. Paddlers don't seem to like to practice wet exits; for many it's an uncomfortable experience. However, it is a critical skill. When someone is uncomfortable with the wet exit, I will stand in the water with them until they are confident that they can remove the skirt and get out of the boat. Remember, doing something once isn't mastering the skill. Any time you get new equipment, go practice: new boat, practice wet exits; new skirt, practice; beginning of the season, practice. During rescue practices, do a real wet exit; don't just jump out of your boat. ♣



A new CPA Steering Committee was elected at the Nov. 4 annual meeting. Left to right: Treasurer, Rich Stevens, Coordinator, Bill Smith, Steering Committee members, Katherine Neale and Paula Hubbard, Secretary, Sue Stevens, and Steering Committee members, Chip Walsh, Shelley Weichelt, and Ralph Heimlich. Not pictured, Steering Committee member Linda Delaney.

Loons

had seen some great-looking sand beaches back on Middle Saranac. So, we headed back up river, through the lock and out onto Middle Saranac, where we caught the full force of the stiffening wind. We paddled through the wind, with a determination that only the



Rain gear is mighty fine.

thought of food can muster. We landed and pulled the boats up—and for me, that meant only one thing: time for a swim. I swam out far enough to see around a jut of land at the far end of “our” beach—allowing me to see what was clearly a storm bearing down on us. I skedaddled (a nautical term) back to shore, to find most of our group with the faces in their electronic devices, announcing that a storm apparently was coming, and might be in here in 10 minutes. I told them—ah, yeah, look in the sky and you'll see it, and by the way, it's here. Kind of funny. A lesson in different approaches to modern seamanship—either look and be aware, or use your electronics. I find the former more consistently accurate and rewarding. With that, everyone pulled their raingear, as well as their lunches, out of their hatches, and we hunkered down for what was actually a kind of fun lunch.

The storm moved through while we ate and attended to other needs, and in the aftermath, the wind died down considerably. What remained for us was a gorgeous paddle across Middle Saranac and finding the little inlet to the put-in creek. As Rich likes to say, we cheated death once again. Actually, a great outing on an accessible but not heavily used lake. Oh—and that swim? It feels like you've been in a spa when you emerge from an Adirondack lake. ♣