



DAVE SCADDEN PHOTO

PONTOON BOAT BASICS

The pontoon boat can become your passport to untouched waters.

While not all trips will be as extreme as this, pontoon boats allow anglers to fish water they've only dreamed of fishing, whether it is exotic as a virgin river in the Siberian wilderness or Belize flats, or something closer to home like your favorite trout river or lake. Shallow floating, lightweight, and able to be steered by oars and fins, pontoon boats have the mobility and portability to allow you to fish the best water in solitude.

Pontoon boats have taken the independence float tubes provided for lake fishers to another level. These boats allow you to sit higher out of the water than in a float tube, so you can spot fish better and make longer, more accurate casts. Plus, you can navigate rivers better in them.

A pontoon craft is a floatable craft that uses parallel pontoons as its floatation base. The pontoons can be separate with an adjoining framework or joined at the ends. Many of the new V-shaped float tubes fit into this category.

One person can easily load a fully inflated pontoon boat into the back of a pickup or on a car roof rack. Since most models have a packable aluminum frame, you can take these boats places where you could never haul a boat or carry a canoe. Some frameless pontoon boats can be rolled up, stowed in a conventional backpack, and hiked, biked, or motorcycled into remote waters.

Whether you're sight-fishing for bonefish on a Belize flat (left) or casting to pods of rising trout on a river in Montana (below), pontoon boats are the perfect tool for fishing the best water easily and affordably.

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WITH 85 POUNDS OF GEAR strapped on the cargo decks of our pontoon boats, we watched the Beaver float plane lift off. We were on our own, 50 miles from the nearest human and over 100 miles to the nearest town, at a mountain lake at the head of Alaska's Alagnak River drainage. It was as close to heaven as I had ever been. There were no cell phones, no radio, no Internet, and nobody else but our group in sight. The best news of all was that there were crimson-red sockeye salmon stacked in every run. Before us lay 60 miles of Alaska's Alagnak River, inaccessible to conventional boats—a wilderness of salmon runs and giant egg-eating rainbows.



BARRY & CATHY BECK PHOTO

Oar Basics

THE BEST PLACE to learn fin and oar techniques is on a lake or pond.

Rowing a pontoon boat is just like rowing a regular boat. Place your feet on the footrests, point the back of the boat in the direction you want to go, and start pulling on the oars. Most models come with oarlocks and footrests mounted on the frame. Even the frameless models have strap-on oarlocks.

Pull the right oar to turn the back of the boat to the left; pull on the left oar to turn the back of the boat to the right. If you want to move quickly to the left, leave your left oar stationary in the water and pull your right oar back toward you through the water. If you want to quickly spin in a circle, put both oars in the water and pull with your right oar while pushing with your left oar (or the reverse). This scissors stroke is handy when you need to turn quickly.

I most often use three basic oar techniques.

Reverse oaring. Extend both oar handles in front of your body. This forces the oars to pivot in the oar locks and situates the oar blades behind you. Pulling the oar handles back toward your body propels the boat backward.

Forward oaring. Pull back both oar handles directly in front of your body. This forces the oars to pivot in the oar locks and situates the blades in front of you. Pushing the oar handles away from your body propels the boat forward.

Offset oaring. This technique is more complex. Instead of working your oars in unison, work both oars independently of each other. To row in reverse, refer to the reverse rowing technique, but operate each oar separately. When your right oar completes a stroke, begin a stroke with your left oar. This creates a fluid, low-impact stroke that can be maintained for long distances. To row forward using the offset technique, do just the opposite.

Fin Basics

YOU SHOULD BE COMFORTABLE with the oars before practicing with your fins, which operate like the oars. Kick lightly with your legs facing forward to propel your boat backwards, kick hard with your right fin to move to the left, and kick hard with your left fin to move right.

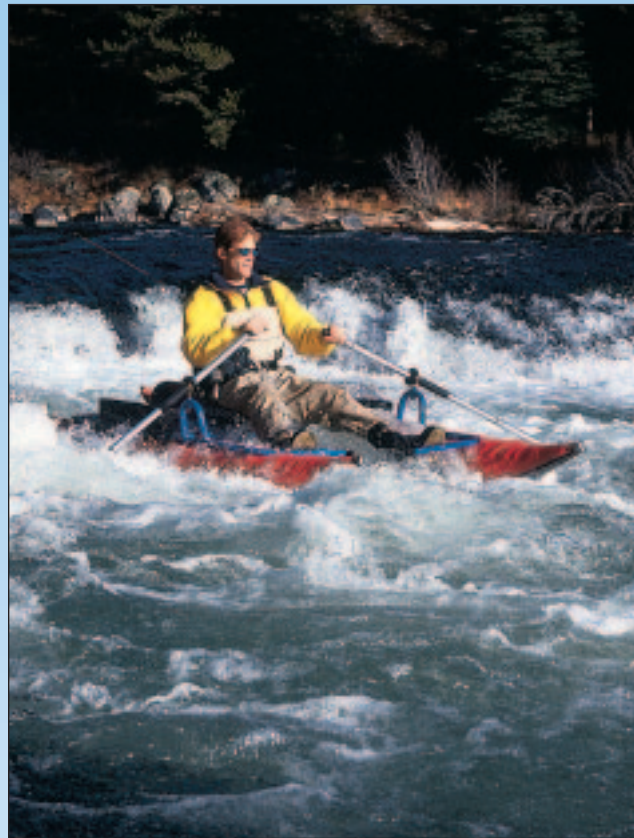
Scissors kick with your fins by pulling your right fin back underneath the boat while putting your left fin out in front of you. In one swift motion, pull your right fin forward and your left fin back; this will cause your boat to spin. You can spin in the opposite direction by moving your left fin back and your right fin forward, then bringing them swiftly together.

Once you spin the boat in the direction you want to



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Before purchasing your pontoon boat consider all of your options. You can pack and ship many pontoon boats on the market (top). Some are rated for whitewater (below) and some are not. Many come with accessories that make your fishing trip comfortable, such as a platform for a cooler (right), rod holders, and bags for holding gear.



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go, begin kicking with both fins in a straight line toward your destination. With a little practice, you'll do this automatically to adjust the direction of the boat under various conditions.

You can also move the boat to one side by turning slightly sideways on your seat and kicking out to the other side of the boat. This becomes a valuable stroke on a river but should be practiced on a lake first.

PICKING YOUR BOAT

FIRST YOU NEED to pick the right boat for your type of fishing. If you are going to take it on lakes and rivers, you need a boat designed for both environments. Fortunately, most pontoon boats are right at home on any type of water.

Portability is also an issue. Models range from fully inflatable frameless models (some look like kayaks), designed especially for packing in to inaccessible places, to models with frames that you can disassemble.

You should also consider the weight-to-capacity ratio. It is important to honestly assess the amount of weight you will be carrying. You might not need the pontoon boat with the capacity to carry 500 pounds and that weighs 40 pounds more than a pontoon boat with less carrying capacity.

You should also sit in the boat you are interested in buying to make sure that it fits you. Newer models have adjustable seats and footrests, but you want to be sure you fit comfortably in the craft.



BARRY & CATHY BECK PHOTO

MANUFACTURERS OF PONTOON BOATS

Abel
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www.abelreels.com/home.htm

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www.stillwaterfishing.com

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(209) 951-8662
www.waterskeeter.com

Kicking both fins out to the left moves you back to the right while kicking both to the right moves you to the left. This is one of the main moves you'll use on a river to position yourself to cast to the bank.

Finning a boat is excellent exercise but you should stretch beforehand to help prevent leg cramps. People prone to leg cramps should check with their physician.

I normally use two types of fin strokes when traveling in a straight line. For the **deep stroke**, pull your fins back under you as far as you can, point the tip of your foot down, then push one leg and fin forward in a full stroke out in front of you. As you bring that leg back, push out with the other leg, alternating with each fin. This will cause you to travel in a straight line.

For the **shallow stroke**, extend your fins in front of you just below the water's surface and kick back and forth in a two-foot sweep. This stroke is not powerful, but it moves you through the water efficiently and reduces leg fatigue over distances.

The **forward stroke** can be useful on a lake to inch your way closer to a target in front of you instead of spinning your boat around, kicking backward, and then spinning back to make the cast. Put a foot directly out in front of you and then pull it back underneath you.

The downward stroke of your fin pulling back moves you ahead, but you must lift your fin carefully for the next stroke so you don't lose forward momentum. You won't go very fast because you don't have much power with this stroke, but this maneuver allows you to pick up 10 feet while keeping your eye on the intended target.

The **rotational stroke** produces an effect similar to a scissors kick, but it is done with only one fin and is most effective when you want to spin your boat in a certain direction. I use the rotational stroke on rivers when I want to change the position of my boat quickly with little effort.

For this stroke, I generally use my strongest leg. Point your fin straight down below you and rotate your leg in a tight circle to the right or left to move the back of the boat. When floating rivers, I'll drop my fin down, rotate in one direction or the other, to change the boat angle to the right or the left, and then kick with both fins to move in that direction. When I get in tight, rocky sections of a river, this stroke is valuable for turning the boat quickly.

After you learn the basic kicking strokes, work on combining them. When floating a river, you need to use your fins to constantly adjust for current speed and to avoid hazards downstream. It's necessary to keep one eye on your fly and the other downstream to adjust your course as you float. As you learn how to use your fins to maneuver on a river, this will become second nature.

When floating a river, the rule that drift-boat guides adhere to also holds true for pontoon boats: To avoid an obstacle, point the nose of your boat directly at it and row away. On a pontoon boat, you need to do two things to set up for this maneuver. First, scissors kick

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with your primary leg. Point the fin directly below you and give it a left or a right rotation. Use this kick as you approach the obstacle to move the back of the boat away from the obstacle.

Using a side kick can accomplish the same thing. Stick both fins out to one side of the boat and kick to the left to move the back of your boat to the right and vice versa. Use this kick to change the direction of the back of your boat so you can fin away from the obstacle.

Fishing Techniques

Lake techniques. In the past few years, several companies have manufactured portable fish finders that open up a new world to pontoon boat users. With a portable fish finder strapped on your pontoon boat frame, you can locate the fish, determine the type of underwater structure, and know the water temperature and depth.

With the side-finder feature found on some models, you can track fish out to 120 feet, following them as they move across the screen. This allows you to cast in front of cruising fish and get your fly to the proper depth at the proper time. Slowly spinning your pontoon boat with a scissors kick as the fish finder searches for your quarry is a good way to improve your success.

Another less exacting but effective technique is trolling your fly. Cast your sinking line, then start kicking slowly. As you move through the water, let line out until your fly trails far behind you. I often use a double-fly rig with a large, flashy fly, followed 18 to 24 inches by a more imitative one. Once I catch fish in an area, I'll carefully work the area by fan casting. To fan cast, I make one cast, then another cast 10 feet to the right, working around in a circle and pivoting my boat with scissors kicks as I cover the water.

The trolling technique works well on windy days when you can let the wind push you along without having to use your fins. Keep at a right angle to the wind so it hits the side of your boat, providing more push. You can slow your drift, if necessary, with your fins.

River techniques. I often drag my fins on the bottom as I float down the river to maintain my position and control my boat speed so that I can get long, drag-free drifts with my fly. As I float downstream, I try to line up the fly with the fish's feeding lane, which is often the seam between the slower and faster currents. Most of the time, I line up my pontoon boat on the seam and float down, working this lane. The downstream drift is probably the most deadly technique on a pontoon boat after you have the skills to keep your

boat in position.

These long downstream drifts also work for nymph presentations, but I generally get out of my boat to fish nymphs. I lay out a few casts as I float through a good-looking run. If nothing moves for the fly, float to shore just below the run and slip off the boat. I stand in the water, holding the boat with my legs while I cast back upstream to the water I just passed through. I wedge my legs out against the pontoon to hold the boat so it doesn't float away, or I anchor the boat.

It is also possible to slip out of your pontoon boat in the river, letting the current hold it against your legs while you work a productive run or cover the slack water behind a submerged rock. If you position your boat in a back eddy, you can work the foam lines for sipping fish without getting out of the boat or anchoring. Some fly fishers use a pontoon boat to reach their favorite holes, then beach the boat, slip off their fins, and wade-fish.

Begin with an easygoing river to practice controlling your boat, and always remember that the river comes first. You must pay attention downstream to give yourself plenty of time for course adjustments. As long as your fins are moving, your boat is going to respond to you rather than the current. Using a scissors kick, a side kick, or just a straight-line kick to move against the current will always keep you in position and in control.

I discuss more advanced river fishing techniques, including whitewater techniques, in my book, *Fishing Untouched Waters*, but the beginner should become comfortable with pontoon boat basics on slow and moderate rivers before attempting these maneuvers.

Accessories

FINS LET THE PONTOON boat achieve its intended purpose—letting you move through the water with your hands free to fish. If you decide to leave your oars at home and use only your fins, bring along a spare. A fin tether, such as "Fin Savers," will keep your fin attached to your ankle.

When walking on shore with your fins, you need to lift your feet high and walk carefully. It's simpler and safer to put your fins on once you're in the boat.

The first thing I look for in a fin is whether it is sturdy enough to handle the heavy kicking motion required to move the boat through the water. Some of the lighter-duty fins on the market fold back on themselves when kicking through a rapid or trying to power across a wind-blown lake. I also like fins with quick-release straps and a wide enough foot pocket to accommodate wading shoes, which provide more sup-

port than the neoprene booties popular with float tubers.

I always wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket, even when fishing flat water. Because they are lightweight and less bulky, I prefer inflatable life jackets for flat water or slower rivers. On heavier water, I use a conventional life jacket, despite the additional bulk, to be safe.

On a river, an anchor helps keep your boat in place if you get out and fish. On a lake, one will keep you stationary when the wind is blowing. There are many types of anchors on the market, but I like to use a 14-pound drift-boat anchor.

Do not anchor in fast-moving current. It can be done, but it is an invitation to disaster. An accessible knife should be part of your safety equipment in case your anchor is caught (cut anchor rope) or you get tangled in any hazards. Anchor systems incorporated into the boat frame are popular. Make sure your anchor rope is adequately secured so you don't accidentally drop your anchor in whitewater.

Stripping aprons on pontoon boats usually consist of a piece of nylon mesh fastened to the frame and stretched across your lap, then hooked behind you so it wraps around your waist. Without a stripping apron, sinking line can be a real nuisance as it pools in the water in front of you, wrapping around your fins. A stripping apron also helps keep your line free of coils and ready to shoot on your next cast. Newer stripping aprons incorporate two taut lines that run along the pontoons, allowing you to quickly slide the apron forward when you want to jump out of your boat and fish a run more thoroughly.

You'll need a two-way hand or foot pump to inflate the pontoons. While most come with many adapters to fit different valves, be sure to ask the manufacturer of your boat what you'll need.

When I fish, I always have multiple rods rigged in rod holders attached to the boat frame. Each section of a river dictates different techniques and equipment, and having different rods prerigged and in rod holders saves valuable fishing time.

You can also outfit your pontoon boats with all sorts of amenities from drink coolers to tippet dispensers to suit your needs. Many different attachable bags are available, including dry bags for longer floats. Side bags, often compartmented to keep your gear organized, are handy and come as standard equipment on most pontoon boats.

DAVE SCADDEN is one of the pioneers in the pontoon boat industry and author of *Fishing Untouched Waters*, a book of pontoon boat techniques and tales.