

Paddle and Pedal

By Cindy Ross

A Pennsylvania troop combines canoeing and bicycling with nature study and conservation on the historic Lehigh River.

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From the darkness of the boathouse, Scouts and leaders from Troop 362, Bethlehem, Pa., launch their canoes into the brightness of the placid Lehigh Canal.

After practicing canoeing skills and teamwork in these protected "nursery waters" at Allentown's Canal Park, the nine Scouts and six adults will be ready to head down a four-mile stretch of "metro wilderness" on the Lehigh River to Bethlehem's Sand Island.

The river parallels the historic Lehigh Canal, part of the 150-mile Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor trail, from Wilkes-Barre to Bristol, Pa. Tomorrow, Troop 362 will make the return trip riding bicycles on the canal's well-cared-for towpath.

Fun and learning

The weekend program is provided by the Wildlands Conservancy, a nonprofit organization dedicated to land and river preservation and environmental stewardship through education. It features canoeing, bicycling, and educational experiences in conservation and nature study, blending activities from the organization's Bike & Boat and River Rats education-recreation river trips. All equipment (except bedding), including canoes, bikes, helmets, and personal flotation devices (PFDs), is included.

A certified river-safety guide provides water-safety training and canoeing instruction, while an environmental educator coordinates learning experiences designed for each group's specific needs.

For Troop 362's trip, Chuck Shiner fills both roles. Before launching the canoes, he reviews paddling strokes, what to do if someone falls out, what to do when encountering a "strainer" (a tree branch or other obstruction in the water), paddling signals, whistle blasts, and other canoeing skills.

On the river, Shiner demonstrates more advanced strokes, like ruddering with the paddle, easily shown when there is a current. (Most of the trip is through calm, scenic waters, although some sections offer enough gentle riffles to suggest the excitement of navigating a river.)

In the faster water downstream, Shiner shows the Scouts how to do "eddy turns," placing the canoe in a quiet swirl of water (an eddy) behind a river boulder. A good way to rest or wait or check out a rapid ahead, an eddy turn is also a powerful stroke that requires teamwork to overcome the force of the current. The Scouts beam as each boat crew successfully executes the maneuver.

Downstream by canoe

At a lazy spot in the river, the Scouts rest their paddles. Dozens of swallows dive and catch insects in midair. Geese come in for a landing, feet laid back. A great blue heron flaps its huge wings and parts the air.

When the river gets deeper, Shiner tells the Scouts they can jump in for a swim. (During their dip, they continue to wear their PFDs, even though all have passed their swimmer's test, and the location complies with the standards required by the BSA Safe Swim Defense plan.)

Then, it's time to learn a canoe rescue skill. Shiner swamps an empty canoe and demonstrates how to break the "seal" of water holding the hull in the river, empty the water out by turning the canoe over, pulling it up and over another boat, spinning it upright, and sliding it back into the water.

Each team tries the maneuver, welcoming the chance to add one more canoeing skill to its repertoire.

Later in the day, the troop stops at the warehouse where the bicycles for the next day's return ride are stored. Each participant is issued a helmet and assigned a bicycle. In the morning, the bikes will be shuttled to the canoe take-out point.

Next stop is the evening's campsite, on Freemans Island in the middle of a wide section of the river. The Scouts are familiar with the island, which is owned by the conservancy, because they help keep it clean as part of an ongoing service commitment.

"We've sort of adopted it as a troop project," says Scoutmaster Jim Roberts. "It's close to home, so we can come here on a regular basis." He describes how the Scouts, using canoes and a rowboat to haul trash and holding onto a rope stretched across the channel for stability, have ferried 30 tires, an old boat, a shopping cart, and large amounts of other debris to the mainland.

Their overnight camping gear is waiting on the island. It was ferried over separately from the mainland, to allow the Scouts to traverse the river in canoes free of personal gear.

They set up the tents and a dining tarp, then roast cubed ham, potatoes, and vegetables in aluminum foil packs in a charcoal fire. Later, around a bed of glowing coals, the Scouts share their thoughts on the day.

"The rapids were the best," Carl Worsley says. "But even the flat water was fun."

"I liked learning to do the eddy turns," Chris Fraley adds, as many of the other Scouts nod their heads in agreement.

Riding home

In the morning, as their gear is ferried back to the mainland, the group gathers at the historic locktender's house and the remains of a canal lock. As they wait for the bicycle van, Shiner delivers a colorful history lesson that adds depth and richness to the weekend experience. He describes the Leni-Lenape, the American Indians who once lived in the area; life on the canal during the waterway's heyday; and the coal and steel industries that came later.

When the bicycles arrive, Shiner switches from storyteller to cycling instructor. He offers pointers on safe riding on the canal—keep in single file, pass on the left, announce your presence when you come up from behind...

Everyone is grateful the path is flat, and the seven miles seem to fly by. After working

their upper body so hard on the river the previous day, the Scouts are happy that pedaling allows them to stretch their legs.

The boys arrive at their vehicles with big smiles. The canoe and bicycling weekend, with its varied experiences, has maintained their interest and enthusiasm at all times—and given them a double dose of newfound self-confidence.

Cindy Ross lives near Pennsylvania's Lehigh River. Her latest book, Scraping Heaven—A Family's Journey Along the Continental Divide (McGraw-Hill), tells of her family's five-year, 3,100-mile crossing of the Rockies from Canada to Mexico, an experience she shared with Scouting's readers in the March-April 1999 issue.

A Partner With Scouting

Founded in 1973 to provide environmental education and conservation services to the community, the **Wildlands Conservancy** is a membership-supported, not-for-profit organization working with government agencies, businesses, and organizations to resolve the environmental challenges facing society.

More than a quarter million children—many in Scout, church, and school groups—have participated in nature education programs at the organization's Pool Wildlife Sanctuary in Emmaus, Pa., and in learning experiences like the one- or two-day Bike & Boat and River Rats Education-Recreation programs.

Programs at the Pool Wildlife Sanctuary can be custom designed for Cub Scout and Boy Scout groups to include specific advancement requirements, such as those for the Webelos Forester or Naturalist activity badge.

The organization has also helped more than 50 Boy Scouts achieve their Eagle Scout Award by providing opportunities for Eagle service projects, ranging from installation of bat boxes to construction of a greenhouse.

The conservancy's work with Scouting has included presentations at Cub Scout blue and gold banquets and the incorporation of program components into district wide "Bike and Boat" camporees. And the Trail Tenders program enables Scout troops to adopt sections of the Lehigh Navigation Canal, participate in stabilizing canal locks, or working in other areas of the community in need of cleanup or maintenance work.

"Many other grassroots watershed organizations would welcome the opportunity to work with Scout groups," says Maureen Ruhe, Wildlands Conservancy's director of education. "And most states have government conservation associations and land trusts that would be appropriate for this type of partnership. We would be willing to use our extensive database to help troops get in touch with such organizations in their area."

Contact her at Wildlands Conservancy, 3701 Orchid Place, Emmaus, PA 18049, (610) 965-4397 ext. 36, www.wildlandspa.org.

[Top of Page](#)

[Current Issue](#) | [Archives](#)
[September 2003 Table of Contents](#)

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