

## Kayaking on Sandy Brook

Since the last two decades of the twentieth century, we have seen the advent of a new sport in Colebrook. From the time of the first settlers through the first three-quarters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sandy Brook was looked upon to supply water to run mills, provide fish for food and recreation and to provide an occasional swimming hole. Now advances in the technology of plastics and fibers have made possible a new generation of water crafts, one of which is the kayak.

The kayak is the invention of the Inuit people, long before the dawn of history. Originally they were constructed of seal skin, whale bone and scraps of drift wood. They differed from another Native American invention, the birch bark canoe, by being completely covered except for one opening for the paddler. There was a water resistant material, part of the covering, which the kayaker tied securely around his waist, thus keeping water from getting inside the craft. Because he was tied securely into the kayak, skills far different from those required for a canoe were needed. Perhaps most importantly, when the kayak turned upside down (and they regularly do), he had to immediately right himself by deft movements of the double-ended paddle, in a maneuver known as an Eskimo roll.

For a kayaker, training and preparedness are everything. Statistics compiled by the U. S. Coast Guard reveal that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the operators in kayak accidents have not had any formal instruction. 86% of fatalities occurred within 90 minutes of departure on an outing; approximately 74% of the victims encountered water temperatures less than 70° F.

The following is the international scale of river difficulty:

- Class I**      Moving water with a few riffles and small waves; few or no obstacles.
  
- Class II**      Easy rapids with waves up to three feet, and wide, clear channels that are obvious without scouting; some maneuvering is required.
  
- Class III**      Rapids with high, irregular waves often capable of swamping an open canoe; narrow passages that often require complex maneuvering; may require scouting from shore.
  
- Class IV**      Long, difficult rapids with constricted passages that often require precise maneuvering in very turbulent waters. Scouting from shore is often necessary, and conditions make rescue difficult. Generally not possible for open canoes; boaters in covered canoes and kayaks should be able to Eskimo roll.
  
- Class V**      Extremely difficult, long, and very violent rapids with highly congested routes that nearly always must be scouted from shore. Rescue conditions are difficult

and there is significant hazard to life in event of a mishap. Ability to Eskimo roll is essential for kayaks and canoes.

**Class VI** Difficulties of Class V carried to the extreme of navigability. Nearly impossible and very dangerous. For teams of experts only, after close study and with all precautions taken.

Additionally, if the water temperature is below 50° [and having swum in Sandy Brook, I can attest to this being the case], the river should be considered one class more difficult than normal.

Read now what authors John Connelly and John Porterfield, in their book *Appalachian Whitewater* have to say about Sandy Brook: “Sandy Brook is Connecticut’s premier steep-creek run, a boulder-choked technical descent that even with medium flows has that big-water feel. There are two awesome drops at the start of the whitewater section, the Waterfall [the site of the Phelps sawmill near the town garage] and the Block [locally known as the Deep Hole], which turn into Class V religious experiences when the Rt. 8 bridge [in Robertsville] gauge measures five feet or above. Low levels feature Class IV rock gardening, with the plastic boat a paddler’s best friend. The run has been successfully negotiated at 6.3 feet, by a strong team of experts who were intimately familiar with Sandy – and scared as hell during the run! Sandy Brook is a real punisher in high water; steep, continuous, nonstop dodging with scarce eddies to boat-scout from. There are usually more boaters starting the run on Sandy than actually finishing it. Sandy Brook Road runs mostly unobserved alongside the river, so those that would rather drink than get dunked can make an early exit.

The Sandy unfortunately has a short paddling season, runnable usually when there is still snow in the woods. When the weatherman says it’s flooding in the Berkshires, Sandy Brook is up, and will be for at least the next 36 hours. The Sandy also comes up in the fall during the hurricane season.

The 1996-97 winter season was particularly hard on Sandy Brook. Two heavy snowfalls toppled countless trees, some in excess of two feet thick, into the section described above, rendering the stream unusable. During the course of the year, the Appalachian Whitewater Club cleared many of these, but more must be removed before the course will be safe once again.

Since this article was first written twelve years ago, there have been more instances of storms toppling trees (called strainers) into the brook, but usually not more than one or two per season. When the snow melts in the spring, take a ride along Sandy Brook Road; you will find it to be very entertaining.