

RICKA Whitewater School

By Erik Eckilson

My doorbell rang at 5:15 in the morning. It was Bill Luther. When I opened the door it was still dark outside, but it was clear that Bill had been there for a while. His gear was neatly stacked in my yard even though he wasn't totally sure he was at the right house. When I didn't come out to meet him, he took a chance and rang the bell. Fortunately for him, it was the right house.

I'm usually pretty good about packing in advance, but this time it just didn't happen. I was supposed to be ready when Bill arrived, but instead my stuff was spread out in a jumble across my kitchen and living room. We needed to be on the road by 5:30 to make it to the RICKA Whitewater School by 8:00, so we got to work. Camping gear went in the trunk, boats went on the rack, and paddling gear went in the back seat. Before long, we were on our way.

We arrived at the Zoar Gap Picnic Area on the Deerfield River a little before 8:00. Mike Rock was already there, along with most of the students. This is the second year that Mike and Bill had agreed to teach a class II whitewater school for RICKA members. Last year we had 5 participants; this year we had 10.

It was a mixed group, but everyone had some moving water experience. Several had taken the RICKA class last year, and a couple had taken

classes with other groups. We also had a couple of guys from the sea kayak group who wanted to see what whitewater was all about.

Mike started off by explaining the agenda. The first morning would be spent on flatwater reviewing strokes. The rest of the time would be spent on the river. Mike promised two full days on the water, and he delivered.

We got on our gear and headed to the put-in below the Fife Brook Dam. There is a section of flatwater directly below the dam where we could practice strokes. Before we got on the water, though, anyone who hadn't taken the class before had to perform a wet exit. Paul went first. An experienced sea kayaker, he rolled his boat a couple of times before performing the required wet exit – nice! Everyone else followed. Nothing like a chilly dip in the river to get you enthused about paddling.

Practicing strokes on flatwater is definitely not very exciting, but proper execution is even more important in moving water. Forward stroke, backstroke, sweep, reverse sweep, draw stroke - by noon we were ready for a break.

After lunch we headed out to the river to practice ferries, eddy turns and peel outs. You probably know the old saying "no pain, no gain". In paddling that translates to "if you're not swimming, you're not learning". Well, there must have been a lot of

learning going on that afternoon because just about everyone in the class swam at least once.

By the time we got off the river we were tired and hungry. Jay offered to host supper at his campsite, so we gathered there for a great potluck meal. In my opinion, paddlers always bring the best food. Then again, maybe I am just real hungry after a day on the water.

The next day started early – by 8:30 we were back on the river. Everyone looked a lot more comfortable as we worked our way down the rapids. By late morning we needed a break, so it was time for some safety training.

Foot entrapment is one of the more significant hazards facing whitewater paddlers. Safe swimming in moving water involves rolling onto your back with your feet near the surface and pointed downstream. Paddlers are taught not to stand until the water is below their knees. Throw ropes are

often used to help swimmers out of moving water. We found an easy rapid, and everyone had a chance to practice swimming. We also practiced throwing and being rescued with throw ropes.

In the afternoon, we continued paddling more difficult rapids until we reached Zoar Gap. Zoar Gap is rated class III, and is considerably more difficult than the class I/II rapids that we had been paddling all weekend. Other than Mike and Bill, only two of us decided to run the gap. For me, it would be my second attempt. For Brendan, it would be his first. Mike and Bill made it through with no problem. Brendan and I both took a swim, but that's OK – you know the old saying.

With the class over, we packed up our gear and headed home looking forward to the next opportunity to practice our skills. Fortunately, fall is a great time for paddling.

