

Pikes Peak River Runners

Frequently Asked River Questions

Updated: February 15, 2025



This compilation of river information about river etiquette began because of confusion about "doing the right thing". Depending on the river ecosystem, rules change concerning the disposal of dishwater, human waste, etc.... I have outlined the most frequently asked questions (FAQ's) that river runners have about river etiquette. The information has been gathered from Idaho, Grand Canyon, Westwater, and Arkansas river running regulatory agencies including personal experience. Follow these guidelines and you will be "doing the right thing" on your river and protecting your canyon for future river runners. [Check out our Managing Expectations page as well!](#)

Green, Yampa, Westwater, San Juan, Rio Grande, Rio Chama, the Arkansas, and Grand Canyon rivers fall under the category of desert ecosystems. Idaho rivers fall under the category of mountain ecosystems. If in doubt as to which type of river you are running check [the permit regulations for specific guidelines](#), ask the river manager/ranger or make an educated guess based on the type of vegetation and rainfall along the river corridor.

Pre-Launch:

How many dry bags do I need?

- See our Personal [Dry Bag Packing list](#) for advice.

Got Allergies or Medical Issues?

- TELL THE PERMIT HOLDER AND TRIP LEADER ASAP!
- Insulin? Let trip leader know!
- Bee sting allergy? Bring and EPI Pen and let others know where it is!
- Keep current on your Covid vaccines!

Launch:

Do I need my photo ID at the put-in?

- YES! Do not forget it in the shuttle car. Many river rangers require a photo ID/or passport at the put-in and will not let you on the river without showing proof of identification.

What boating equipment do I need to bring on the river?

- Pump, first aid kit, spare oarlock and stand (nicer to have 2), one spare oar minimum (2 spares for the Grand Canyon- good idea on most rivers), repair kit, and spare valve(s). Firepans, toilets and throwbags are required as well. Idaho requires a small shovel and the Grand Canyon requires an Air Force Signal mirror and two plastic panels of International Orange (dimensions 3 feet x 10 feet). Firepan blankets are a newer requirement on some rivers.

Do I need to bring a repair kit?

- Yes, most rafts have different material and glue requirements. Make sure that glue and activator is fresh and sealed tightly and check the expiration date. Some rafts have different types of valves (i.e. pressure relief floor valves on self-bailing rafts). Make sure you have a spare valve type and know how to replace it.

How many lifejackets do I need and what type?

- One per person and one extra per boat. Type III or V with minimum 15.5 lbs to 22 lbs buoyancy. In addition, the Grand Canyon requires a throwable cushion (Type IV) for any boat 16 feet or longer - works as a great boat fender as well!

How often should I wash my hands before handling/preparing food?

- Every time and set up a hand wash system as described in the "How do I set up a toilet" section. Always make the hand wash soap available at lunch. Intestinal troubles are no fun on the river and germs can spread quickly. Do not use the same hand wash system equipment that was set up for the toilet for the kitchen or at lunch stops. If you become sick- tell the trip leader – and do not prepare food!

Typical woman's question: What if I get my period?

- Helicopter out! Just kidding. This is a very easy issue. Bring plenty of tampons, many small Ziplocs, small roll of tp and liquid soap and make sure they are accessible during the day in your personal day drybag. Place used tampons in Ziplocs and dispose in trash. A handy way to discretely dispose of this in the trash is to enclose in a dog poop bag. Do not rely on the trip leader to bring hand soap (bring your own), HE may have overlooked this essential item. NEVER put wet wipes, sanitary napkins or tampons in the Groover (river toilet)! Only poop and toilet paper goes in the toilet.

How do you do laundry on the river?

- Bring a small collapsible bucket and Ivory dish soap. Wet and soak your dirty clothes (one day's worth) in the bucket with a small amount of Ivory soap. Rinse either in the river or above highwater line depending which river you are on. Hang to dry.

How do I deal with the trash?

- Home Depot and Lowes have excellent HD plastic contractor bags. Burlap bags are excellent bag protectors. When bags become full, twirl shut and use duct tape around the top to seal the bag permanently. Bury it on your raft. Splash river water on the burlap to keep the odor down during longer trips.
- Get rid of trash before trip begins (i.e. cardboard boxes, beer case boxes, soda boxes, wine boxes, extra packaging, etc...)
- Fill ½ a bucket with river water. Drain waste liquid from tuna cans, canned fruit, pickle juice, etc... into the bucket. Empty the waste bucket into the river main current at the end of each meal.
- Crush soda or beer cans below the highwater mark in the wet sand. The sticky drops from beer and soda cans attract wasps, bees and flies in camp if you throw them in a pile or crush them near the kitchen.
- Never put glass in the trash because it could puncture a raft or injure those who do not know glass is in the trash. Glass goes back in a securely closed cooler or dry box. The best plan is to avoid bringing glass all together.
- Deal with your trash on your cook day. Do not clean out your coolers on your non-trash day (i.e. fill up someone else's trash bag so they have to deal with it for days).

Where do I urinate?

- Directly in the river or a pee bucket.

Does the group always need a toilet?

- YES, even on Westwater day trips. The ranger will check and it needs to be accessible during the day. Cheating behind a bush or rock is not allowed and is not ethical. Plus, it is gross!

What is Tolio & how do I avoid getting it?

- This is a complicated question. I have been unable to get a definitive answer from either NPS or the Grand Canyon Clinic and think most boaters are embarrassed to report it to any medical folks until they get off the river and then it begins to cure itself. The several podiatrists I have asked about it have never heard about it. It acts like “Athlete’s Foot Gone Wild” in between your toes and on the bottoms of your feet. It can happen overnight and can be painfully crippling and once you have it on your feet you are stuck with it for the remainder of the trip. No fun hiking or even walking about camp. Even the two links below were conflicting when I looked them up online at web md type sites. Especially concerning steroid use as a potential treatment.
- [https://www.wemjournal.org/article/S1080-6032\(19\)30168-1/fulltext?fbclid=IwAR1AyOmnYI1Ct-QlyEmnEhjbEHDGM7AL3crRLTb2iUBylsMN-YBe4t-NQLI](https://www.wemjournal.org/article/S1080-6032(19)30168-1/fulltext?fbclid=IwAR1AyOmnYI1Ct-QlyEmnEhjbEHDGM7AL3crRLTb2iUBylsMN-YBe4t-NQLI)
- [https://rrfw.org/RaftingGrandCanyon/Hygiene and Personal Care](https://rrfw.org/RaftingGrandCanyon/Hygiene%20and%20Personal%20Care)
- <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1080603219301681>
- So... how to avoid it? Do not walk barefoot in camp, wash your feet nightly with antibiotic soap, slather with lotion (see links below), spray generously with Athlete’s Foot Spray (you will need 2 cans for 2-week trip) and wear clean white socks. You will need 2 cheap pkgs of socks from Walmart. I go as far as protecting my feet from blisters with those same socks the next day on the river. By the end of the trip, my feet act as though they have had a lovely 2-week pedicure. Grand Canyon boatmen have been using [Vagisil](#) cream (do not freak out men, just put it on your feet) and begin pre-treating your feet a good week before and during the trip. Others swear by using [Mom’s Stuff](#) or [Dr Naylor’s Udder Balm](#), or [Original Udder Balm](#) or [Bag Balm](#) or [Tea Tree oil](#) or [Udderly Smooth Cream](#) or [Tinactin](#) cream or rinsing in very diluted bleach solution and betadine or lemon juice (bleach and betadine or lemon juice sound too radical for me) or keep feet dry as possible when off river or crème would make the situation worse (but then she did not know what Tolio was- she meant in relation to athlete’s foot). using lots of sunscreen. The diluted bleach method seems dangerous to me. One podiatrist told me that steroids should work. In other words, lots of people are trying lots of preventative remedies. I suspect this fungus (just a guess on my part) is in the sand and spread by so many of us camping at the same beaches every night. We have had people get it on Day 2 others go all the way to Day 10 and some never get it. I have heard of boatmen getting it on the Arkansas River but it seems to have become chronic in the Grand- maybe some people are more susceptible? Glen Canyon dam sewage was re-routed to Page several years back but this does not preclude what gets washed down Little Colorado River and Havasu Creek drainages (do not open your mouth in these “heavenly” pools). NPS sent out bio-sampling kits to commercial companies in 2011. Not a single sample was returned- there could be



a lot of reasons for the Zero response rate. I believe commercial companies do not want it broadcast to clients. Again, due to embarrassment factor or the potential negative public relations concern. However, I know their boatmen preventatively treat for and do get Tolio. I would believe that their guests are just as susceptible. I guess the point of this advice is do something, do not let Tolio happen to you, nip it in the bud and do all that you can to prevent it. If you get it, despite all preventative measures, keep actively treating with the same regimen to keep symptoms to a minimum. Once it has spread all over your feet (which can happen within 48 hours)- your hiking plans turn into hobbling to and from the groover and that is about it. It can really put a damper on fun. Note the little ringworm shaped raw blisters exposing the red flesh on these feet pictured below. These were not the worst cases I have seen but still very painful for those on our trips. I continue to encourage the NPS to design a study to find out what Tolio is and how to prevent it. In the meantime, take care of your feet!

Camp:

How do I set up the toilet (Groover)?

- Set up the toilet as close to the river as possible. Always set up the toilet as part of making camp. The toilet team should not be the cook team on that same day. I usually recommend that the cook team become the groover team the day after they cook. Urinate in the river or better yet, set up a pee bucket. Solid waste (and toilet paper only) goes in the toilet system. Set up a hand wash system with liquid antibacterial soap. Do not use bar soap (culture tests have shown bar soap can be easily contaminated with bacteria). On desert rivers, use the river directly to wash hands or set up a handwash station with bucket underneath. In Idaho, wash hands with soap above the highwater line. An easy home-made hand-wash setup is to use an empty can with a long string handle and puncture a small nail hole on the bottom side that functions as a spout. Dip the empty can in a bucket of clean river water, hang (can) using string on a tree branch, and wash your hands under your homemade faucet. Do not let dirty handwash water go back in the clean water bucket. Do not assume that everyone in your group knows how to use the toilet or handwashing system. Give a lesson because most boaters need help with the specifics of different toilet and handwash systems for the first-time use.

What type of toilet should I bring?

- Personal preference is the choice. Minimum requirements: No plastic bags!! Leak proof container, bail buckets with lids do not pass the leak test. Porta-potti's can be easy to use (use RV toilet paper and holding tank RV chemical) but do not have a lot of capacity. A rocket box with a good lid, seal, and seat also works but can be a mess to clean up. Partner toilets are great systems but pricey.

Drinking water disinfection guidelines:

- Both the [NPS in Grand Canyon](#) and [EPA](#) issue drinking water disinfection guidelines. I noticed that NPS references treating water to 2 drops of bleach per gallon- however EPA references 8 drops (6% bleach) to 6 drops (8.25 % bleach) per gallon. For a typical 6-gallon water jug, this can range from 12 drops ($\sim 1/8$ teaspoon) to 48 drops ($\sim 1/3$ to $1/2$ teaspoon) per jug. Quite a bit of difference. These estimates are influenced by the initial water quality. The dirtier the water, the more the bleach. The easiest solution is to bring drinking water from home and fill up at safe sources along your river trip (ex. Phantom Ranch in the Grand). Do not count on drinking water availability or good quality at most river put-ins. For example, early season at Boundary Creek on the Middle Fork in Idaho will not have the water spigots turned on or tested yet.
- Lastly, let the bleach treatment work. Do not drink the treated water until evening or the next day.
- Note: **Use regular household bleach solution. Do NOT use powder, scented, color safe, bleach with added ingredients, splash-less bleach, etc... Just use plain household bleach.**

How do I set up the kitchen?

- Arrange tables however you want but place the propane bottle for the stove under the table out of the way. Tie the garbage bag to a leg of a table. Bag up the garbage before retiring for the night because rodents can scatter it and make a mess for you to clean up the next morning. Insects love open garbage. The best place for the garbage is closed up tightly and placed in the boat for the night. Remember to set up a new empty bag before you go to bed for late-night garbage additions. Avoid leaving food accessible to rodents overnight. They will try to chew through Tupperware to get to sugar, etc.... Ziploc the dishsoap and bleach closed in case they get knocked over and/or leak. If you recycle aluminum cans, start a separate bag just for crushed cans. Place a kitchen floor (tarp or mesh floor) placed under the tables to catch the cooking crumbs and debris. When breaking camp in the morning, gather up the tarp and shake it into the trash and then rinse in the river.
- Consider designating only one or two people to set up propane stove daily. The connection is VERY susceptible to sand ruining the o-ring. Sandy hands or one connection drop into the sand can ruin the stove for the rest of the trip if there is no spare stove o-ring. Bring plenty of spare o-rings!

Rodents?

- Mice/Ravens/Ringtails: You'll be very sorry if you put any snack food in your tent at night or in your dry bag or PFD pocket- mice and ringtail cats will chew a hole through anything to get to your snacks even if they are in Ziplocs or airtight packages. Ravens will take anything left out (cameras, food, pills, brushes, etc..) and they can open anything with a zipper. Close up your dry bags all the time, secure your small valuables. It's a jungle out there...

Wasps/Flies?

- Wasps & Flies: Becoming more problematic on river corridors. I recommend bringing both [Yellow Jacket Wasp](#) and [Fly traps](#). Not poisonous, these use pheromone attractants and are disposable.

What utensils should I bring?

- Do not rely on the trip leader to bring your personal dishes. Bring your own plate, silverware, cup and bowl. Expect to wash and store your own dishes (morning and night). Do not bring disposable paper plates, plastic cups, or plastic utensils. These generate excessive trash (burning paper just blows ash around the camp), plastic does not burn, and plastic forks and knives pierce the trash bags and possibly the rafts. Personal dishes get amazingly clean when you know you will be eating on your specific plate the next day as opposed to a stack of group dishes where people pick out the cleanest dish to use the next morning.

Do I need to bring a firepan?

- Yes, if you plan to grill food or use a fire for warmth. The firepan needs to have a minimum 3-inch lip and legs to keep it up off the ground. Do not forget the metal ash can. Charcoal can still be hot the next morning and dumping it into the river is not allowed. All fires need to be in the firepan. Westwater requires firepans for day trips even if you do not plan to use one. Remember to bring a firepan blanket to catch the popping embers. A collapsible metal shovel helps make cleanup the next day so much easier.
- Cooks that need to grill are expected to bring charcoal and lighter fluid for their cook night.
- If you want a fire, bring your own firewood.

If I have a firepan, do I have to bring a stove?

- Yes, all other cooking is to be done on the stove. Dishwater buckets do not get hot enough on an open fire plus they get black soot everywhere. Blasters are great dishwater heaters.

Do all rivers allow fire building w/firewood even if I have a firepan?

- NO! Firewood gathering and burning is okay in Idaho and Yampa rivers, sort of depends on the times of year and river section. Firewood (driftwood) is becoming a premium resource, check the permit regs for your specific river. Charcoal firepan use is okay on all rivers unless a local fire ban has been issued.

What do I need to make a 3-bucket dishwashing system?

- Any dishwashing soap, bleach, rubber gloves, sponge and scrubber, strainer, two metal buckets and one plastic bail bucket. Fill all buckets approximately two thirds full with river water. Heat the two metal buckets on the stove to a rolling boil. Add small amount of dish soap to one metal bucket. Second metal bucket is hot rinse bucket (no soap). Add 1 capful of bleach to all buckets. Place buckets below or above the highwater line depending on river environment. Place the buckets in order of use with the soap bucket furthest upstream (for consistency). Allow the soap washed and hot water rinsed dishes to soak in the plastic bleach bucket for 60 seconds and then air dry.
- TIPS: Put pot lids on dish water buckets full of cold river water to make it heat faster and keep heat in after the rolling boil. Use XL rubber gloves (so men with large hands have no excuse not to do dishes in your superhot dishwater). Make everyone bring and wash their own personal dishes. It is amazing how clean you can get your personal dish (when you know you will be the next person eating off of it) and you never have "orphan" dishes or get stuck with a dirty dish the next day. Remember to strain/empty the dish buckets at night to avoid accidents and rodent drowning. Prepare fresh dishwater at breakfast and dinner meals. Start the dishwater heating 45 minutes (only about 15-20 min on a blaster) before you want to use the stoves because it takes that long to heat the dishwater to a near-boil. Why? The cooks want the stove clear for cooking. Heating the dishwater after the meal prolongs the cleanup and people lose enthusiasm for cleaning their dish. Blasters are great for heating dishwater quickly but are very loud and can use a lot of propane. Bring one propane tank dedicated to the blaster and you will be fine (two extra propane tanks for the Grand). We typically bring 4-5 propane tanks in the Grand. Two for blaster use, two for regular Partner stove use, one spare in case any of the tanks leak. We had a leaker on one trip.

Cooler Maintenance?

- Ice/cooler maintenance: We recommend buying solid ice block and use dry ice if needed. Keep in mind that the dry ice will freeze and ruin fresh fruits and vegetables so it is best to store these well away (or in a different cooler) from the dry ice. Dry Ice evaporates at 7 lbs./day...therefore 15 lbs. of dry ice will only last 2 days from the day you purchase it. Keep an eye on the coolers that hold your food- keep a white wet towel on your cooler helps a lot. Remember to account for travel days to the river!

Where do I dump the dirty dishwater?

- Through a mesh strainer with holes fine enough to strain coffee grounds. In Idaho, dump the dishwater above high water by broadcasting through the strainer into the bushes well away from camp. Fine metal mesh strainers from the grocery store work great.
- Do not dig a hole. In desert rivers, strain directly into the river main current. Place the strained material in the trash.

Can I use my SunShower to take a river bath?

- Of course, but different rivers require different ways of using it. In Idaho, wash 100 feet above the highwater line. If you do not have a SunShower in Idaho, just take an old-fashioned river bucket bath by dunking yourself in the river, fill a bail bucket, hike above the highwater line, soap up, rinse off, and get dry. In the desert, the wash water has to go below the highwater line and it is best if it goes directly into the river. This can be tricky because it is usually difficult to find a place to hang the SunShower and privacy is an issue. Oar tripods and a tarp can solve those problems. Desert environments have such low rainfall that soap above the river's edge accumulates and is rarely washed away. If you do not have a SunShower in the desert, just dunk in the river, soap up in the river and dip (rinse) in the river. Never wash in the side streams. Personal bathing is like the dirty dishwater concept. Be careful about using camp stoves to heat up water for baths because this can wastefully burn through your fuel.