

River Technique *by* Steve Fisher



Many people fear whirlpools. Just the word conjures up images of maelstroms engulfing vessels and men, sucking them to the depths. Big whirlpools on the river must be treated with respect, but often the best way to deal with them is to understand them and take them on.

Using Whirlpools to Your Advantage

RIVER whirlpools are formed when there is a velocity difference between two currents (typically on an eddy line), causing a "shear layer" that forms a vortex going DOWN. That particular body of water then rises elsewhere, as in a "boil." Whirlpools in river right eddies always spin clock-wise. Whirlpools in river left always spin anti-clockwise. They typically move down the eddy line until they eventually fade. Rivers with higher flows and a bigger difference between currents and eddies will cause stronger, bigger whirlpools.

My first useful concept is fairly self-explanatory once you find yourself faced with the situation. When entering an eddy always break-in on the downstream side of the whirlpool. Use the upstream side of the whirlpool for entering the current. Think about that for a second...if you do it the wrong way around you'll find yourself paddling directly against the flow of the whirlpool and will most likely end up in it. So use it to your advantage, which brings me to my second and less obvious concept:

Tackle the whirlpool head on. Use its 'slingshot' effect to drive you away from it. You would be surprised how hard it is to end up in a whirlpool when you paddle straight at it. It's usually when you're trying to outrun one that it gets you. Take a look at the sequence below for an idea.

Fig. 1 • If I feel that a whirlpool is about to grab me I immediately turn and face it.

Fig. 2 • I then paddle towards it, just avoiding the center.

Fig. 3&4 • I drop down towards it at speed and use that momentum to break out of it.

Keep paddling in the same direction as its flow, being careful to lean in the correct direction so as not to catch an edge – this often means leaning towards the vortex to avoid catching your edge in the slower water on the outside. You may need to re-enter the eddy or current and retry your intended move, but at least you're in control and out of the 'maelstrom'.

For good practice, play in some smaller whirlpools the next time you're on a high volume river. It's quite fun! But then you ask, "What happens once you're in a whirlpool? How do you get out?" Out spin it. You're pretty much stuck in there until it fades so spinning as fast as you can in the same direction as it is the best way to stay in control. I usually face outwards and do a series of stern pirouettes using a bow rudder. Practice this so that the next time good times go bad you'll know what to do and maybe even enjoy it.

Photos by Dale Jardine

