

KAYAK CAMPING IN NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND

BY: DIANA MOORE



Night on Richardson Lake

Kayaks on Richardson Lake

Photos courtesy of Diana Moore and Huiyeng Chang

Northern New England is a paddler's paradise with its pristine lakes, winding rivers, and dramatic coastline. There are countless opportunities for kayaking of any variety from sea kayaking, whitewater, or recreational touring. In the summer months, I tend to step back from hiking the high peaks and focus on more mellow outdoor experiences. I have always enjoyed camping overnight in the woods or by the water, and I love being on the water in my kayak. Zen for me is floating down a river or paddling around a lake quietly and unobtrusively observing loons and other wildlife — capturing beautiful photos of water flora and other plants that grow along the water's edge. So several years ago, when my girlfriend at the time suggested kayak camping, combining two of the things I loved, it was an easy yes. Our backyard here in Northern New England affords numerous opportunities for such excursions, from remote wilderness trips to more accessible family-friendly paddles.

What is Kayak Camping?

Kayak camping is simply camping while using a kayak as your primary mode of transportation. This can involve paddling to a campsite on a lake or river, or it can involve paddling to a remote island. You can pack more things than you would on a backpacking trip but far less than if you were car camping. Everything must fit in your kayak preferably in dry bags to protect it from the water. Decisions must be made such as leaving behind your nice car camping stove to bring along the Jetboil instead. You don't want the kayak to be too heavy, because your route to the remote campsite could be several miles. It may be an effort to get to the site, but once you are there, the payoff is so worth it. Many lakes and waterways in Northern New England and the Adirondacks have remote campsites, which are primitive — so no facilities except perhaps an outhouse —

but your neighbors are far from you, and you will likely not hear or see a soul while at your campsite, except the occasional passerby on the water. It's peaceful and quiet, and truly a chance to commune with Nature and enjoy the natural wonders of our environment.

Here are a few of the best kayak camping destinations in Northern New England:

- **Richardson Lakes, Maine:** Richardson Lake, a picturesque body of water nestled in the heart of Maine, captivates all who lay eyes upon it. Surrounded by lush forests and rolling hills, this pristine lake offers a serene escape with its crystal-clear waters that mirror the blue sky above, creating a breathtaking panorama that changes with the seasons. South Arm Campground offers traditional car camping as well as remote campsites, accessible only by boat. There is a lot to offer here for the outdoor adventurer or simply time with family connecting with nature.
- **Umbagog Lake, New Hampshire & Maine:** Umbagog Lake straddles the border of New Hampshire and Maine near Errol, NH. Umbagog Lake is surrounded by the Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge, which protects over 12,000 acres of forest and wetlands. Umbagog Lake State Park Campground, similar to South Arm Campground, offers traditional car camping options as well as remote campsites accessible only by boat.

- **Allagash Wilderness Waterway, Maine:** This classic Maine paddling route offers a chance to experience the state's remote interior. The waterway is 92-miles in length flowing in northern Maine. It is one of the longest canoe trails in the United States and is known for its remote beauty and pristine waters. It is part of the Allagash Wilderness, a 200,000-acre protected area that is managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The waterway offers a variety of camping opportunities from primitive campsites to more developed campgrounds. There are also several lodges and cabins located along the waterway. It is a challenging but rewarding experience. The waterway is dotted with numerous rapids and waterfalls, which can be dangerous for inexperienced paddlers. Despite the challenges, the Allagash Wilderness Waterway is a truly special place offering a unique opportunity to experience the beauty of the Maine wilderness.



Sunset on Richardson Lake. Photo courtesy of Diana Moore

Gear Needed for Kayak Camping

The gear you need for kayak camping will depend on the location and duration of your trip. Kayaks can quickly become quite heavy if you pack too much. While it is luxury backpacking, since you can pack more than you would into a backpack — too many luxuries can complicate your trip to the remote campsite. The luxuries I have generally brought are: a queen-size inflatable mattress, a two-person sleeping bag, a Jackery for power, a bit more clothing (water clothes, dry land, and sleeping), and real food for cooking, not the typical freeze-dried backpacking fare.

Essential gear includes:

- **Kayak:** Choose a kayak that is stable and comfortable to paddle. The larger the kayak, the more stuff you can haul, but you also have to have the strength to paddle it. You also want to consider the type of water you will be paddling through. A whitewater kayak might not be the best choice for this sort of adventure.
- **Paddle:** You will also need a paddle that is the right length for your height and arm length.
- **PFD (Personal Flotation Device):** A life jacket is required by law in most areas.
- **Map & Compass/GPS:** Make sure you know where you are going and how to get there. Be prepared in case you lose your way.
- **Tent:** Bring a tent that is waterproof and lightweight. A backpacking tent would be appropriate to keep your kayak load lighter.
- **Sleeping bag:** You will need a sleeping bag that is rated for the temperature range in which you'll be camping.
- **Sleeping pad:** A sleeping pad will help to insulate you from the cold ground.
- **Cookware:** Bring cookware to cook and eat your meals. You can bring more here than with backpacking, but don't go overboard.
- **Food:** You will need to bring food that is lightweight and easy to prepare. Some people choose backpacking fare, while others enjoy cooking something more elaborate. Just keep in mind weight, space, and associated tools needed.
- **Water:** You will need plenty of water to stay hydrated, especially if you're paddling in the summer, however, water is heavy. Many kayak campers opt to bring a filtration system and containers, which are light when empty.
- **First-aid kit:** Things happen, so be prepared as you would on the trail or car camping.

- **Folding Saw/Ax:** Something that can cut wood is helpful. Most sites do not allow you to cut live wood, but you can burn dead-wood in the fire ring provided. Please remember to douse your fire and follow proper fire safety protocols to protect our natural places.
- **Small Trash Bag:** Carry in and carry out. Please leave no trace.
- **Appropriate Clothing:** Pack for the weather. Raingear, camp shoes, hat, and layers. Bring something warm for cool nights.
- **Other Items:** Flashlight, toilet paper, matches/lighter/firestarters, lamp, small towel, tarp, rope, bug spray, sunscreen, knife.

How to Plan a Kayak Camping Trip

I've kayak camped in places that were shorter paddles and others that were longer. Part of the planning process is determining what you are capable of paddling with a heavier boat, as well as the capabilities of the members of your group.

Here are some things to consider:

- **Location:** Choose a location that is appropriate for your skill level and experience. If you're a beginner, you may want to start with a short trip on a calm lake or river.
- **Duration:** Consider the duration of your trip. A weekend trip is a good option for beginners.
- **Weather:** Check the weather forecast before you go. You don't want to get caught in a storm while you're out on the water.
- **Wind speed:** You can check this with the weather, but strong winds can make paddling much more difficult and/or unsafe.
- **Packing:** Pack light and only bring the essential gear.
- **Safety:** Always let someone know where you're going and when you expect to be back.

Just like selecting a campsite for car camping, you can use a map provided by the campground to see how far remote sites are from the put-in. If it is your first time, consider a site within a mile. Once you have the experience of paddling a loaded kayak, you will know how much more you could do on a later trip. Be safe and have fun out there!

Diana Moore is an AMC New Hampshire Chapter hike leader and paddling leader and a state ambassador for LGBT Outdoors. She has an MFA in creative writing and a PhD in educational technology. She is a perpetual student of nature — including plants, trees and local wildlife, and an avid environmentalist with the deep-seated desire to protect the natural world and all the beauty, secrets, and natural cures she holds.