

BEAR RIVER MERCANTILE - BOWRON LAKE BC

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Info Sheet #3 – Packing for the Portages at Bowron Lake

Packing your gear to head out around the Bowron Lake circuit is not exactly rocket science.... but it can be a little more finicky than most realize. The circuit is unique because, although it is a back-country paddling adventure, you have to negotiate the three longest portages within the first two days of your trip, so you can't just throw everything in the canoe and head out. Planning and packing your gear is essential.

As I already covered gear lists in Info Sheet #1, I'll just get to the part where you start carrying it. And the key word here is.....'Carrying'! Everyone will have to carry something – unless you are minimalists who live on nothing!

Although the Park allows the use of portage wheels (aka carts), they limit the weight of the camping gear allowed inside your canoe while you trolley it along the trails. This is to prevent undue wear and tear on the portage trails, carts and canoes (more about trail conditions later on). Of course the allowable 28 kg (60 lbs) does not include the weight of the cart, canoe or paddling equipment such as paddles and lifejackets, but unknown to many is the other 'free-weight' items allowed inside your canoe over and above the 28 kg (60 lb) weight limit. These include essential/emergency items such as: first aid kit, a tarp and the rope to string it, drinking water for the portage and an axe; but please be aware that the Park can change this list anytime at their discretion.

For those unfamiliar with portage carts; they are an apparatus usually consisting of two wheels that are strapped to the bottom of your boat enabling you to push/pull it along the trails, instead of carrying it. Carts can be rented at the local outfitters or you can bring your own. The Park allows carts with a maximum axle width of 75 cm (30 inches) and they recommend wide track tires. If used, these carts are part of your gear, you have to take them around the whole chain with you. There is no system in place where they can be picked up or dropped off at each end of the trail, so you need to plan on the extra weight and the space they take in your canoe while paddling. BRM rents the Expedition 16 carts, although they are the best on the market they are a bit heavy, weighing in at 4.5 kg (10 lbs).

The use of a cart is not required, you are always welcome to carry your canoe and if carrying, you will not be weighted in. Kayaks are also not subject to the weight-in, but be careful when packing

your kayak, as over loading has resulted in damage (again more about the trail conditions is coming).

So you have arrived at Bowron Lake and unloaded your gear at the trailhead. For a party of two (one canoe) the pile should include two large back-packs / river packs, one for each person; most people like to carry their clothing, sleeping bag, toiletries and other softer, lighter stuff. Next in line is your food, which can be contained in a barrel, pack or other case (coolers are often used, but they are not the best containers on the market). If planned carefully the food, along with your cooking kit, a stove and fuel could make up your allowable 28 kg (60 lb) weight limit carried inside the canoe. Basically you want the heavier, bulkier stuff to be portaged inside the canoe.

Any gear over and above this (camera case, fishing tackle?) can be contained in day packs and hung on your front or over your shoulder, or in dry bags / buckets and carried by hand. If you still have a pile of gear left on the ground then you might have to resign to walking the portages twice. How careful you pack will determine your portaging strategy and of course if you are a party of three or four canoes, you get the allotment of 28 kgs (60 lbs) per each canoe, so the heavier stuff can be distributed between the canoes (it can always be redistributed at the water's edge to allow for proper freeboard or placement while paddling).

Now for the dreaded portage conditions..... not bad, really; though don't expect smooth trails. Depending on the weather conditions you can encounter mud, ruts, holes, erosion, rocks, roots and other bumpy, ankle twisting, wheel catching obstacles. Gear packed inside the canoe / kayak should be placed in the center of the boat to prevent flexing at the ends (this is especially important in kayaks!). The gear should be placed as low in the boat as possible and it should be secured so it can't slide around to prevent roll overs on eroded, uneven trails.

During your Park orientation, you will be required to separate the 28 kg (60 lbs) pile of gear that you wish to carry inside your canoe from the rest of your bags. It will be weighted by Park Personnel to ensure it doesn't exceed the limit; they do not weigh all your bags, they do not care about the weight of gear you are carrying on your person. The weight scales are at the trailhead and paddlers are most welcome to test weight and re-arrange bags as necessary. To expedite this weight-in procedure, having each 28 kg (60 lb) load separated from each other and ready is essential. Once you are weighed and finished all the steps of the orientation, it is as simple as loading your canoe, shouldering your packs and off you'll go.

When it comes to packing your canoe for the paddling part of your adventure, there are literally hundreds of configurations you can work with. The basic rules are keeping your center of gravity low, keeping the canoe fairly balanced (level) in the water and making sure you have at least 6 inches of freeboard when fully loaded. Freeboard – amount of canoe showing above the waterline.



Left: The weight-in process can get busy. Right: Having your pile of gear separated and ready can help things go a lot smoother.



Left: A well-planned outfit can make for minimal gear to carry over the portage, two backpacks to carry completed this outfit. Right: A well-planned outfit also makes for a neatly organized canoe to pack and paddle each day.

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