

Tidal Rivers – Staying Safe



A tidal river is one that flows into the sea and whose level rises and falls twice a day. The East of England has some wonderful tidal rivers to explore, including the Deben, Orwell, Stour, Blackwater, Crouch and Thames. In the right conditions and with the right equipment & appropriate skills paddling on these can be an enjoyable experience. But they are not without their challenges which has led British Canoeing to define many tidal rivers as Moderate Water.

Two incidents are shown here by way of example, on the Deben and the Stour.

- <https://www.eadt.co.uk/news/trapped-men-stuck-up-to-their-chests-in-mud-before-2279740>
- <https://www.gazette-news.co.uk/news/18766465.dramatic-rescue-mission-save-man-stuck-mud-river-stour/>

Some of the risks that should be considered before deciding to paddle on tidal rivers include:-

- **Tides:** You need to plan your trip around the tides and if you get this right and paddle with the tide or on slack water this will make your journey easier.
 - Whilst it is possible to paddle against the tide this will vary depending on the strength of the tide and the tidal flow. If you get this wrong, it will make for a hard paddle and could make it difficult for you to reach your destination.
 - You need to be understand tide times and how the time of high or low tide, and the height of the tide varies depending on where you are and the cycle

of the moon. You should be aware of the tide times for the locations where you will be paddling, and plan your trip accordingly.

- Good sources of tide information are: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/weather/coast-and-sea/tide-tables/1> and <https://hha.co.uk/leisure/downloads/>
- **Wind:** Wind is the next factor in deciding whether to paddle/launch or not. This decision cannot always be made at home as the conditions will be different at your home address, to the car park, to the bank where you launch from and the middle of the river where the wind will be much stronger. As tidal rivers tend to be quite exposed the wind can have quite an affect as there will be little shelter. And the wind will affect each craft differently. A competent paddler in a sea kayak may be less affected by the wind than a solo paddler in an open canoe, sit on top kayak or stand up paddle board.
- **Wind and Tides:** Another impact of the wind is the way it interacts with the tide. When wind and tide are in the same direction, conditions can be reasonably calm, but if the tide turns so that the wind and tide are opposed, then the conditions can become quite choppy. Paddling into the wind and waves can be hard work, but paddling with the waves has its own problems as the boat starts trying to surf and unless controlled will yaw around to become broadside to the waves (often leading to capsize). Spray decks on kayaks are essential in these conditions to prevent the waves filling your boat up, but so is knowing how to deal with a capsize and removing the deck if you are unable to right yourself. Paddling an open canoe could be a very wet experience in such conditions.
- **Running aground:** As the river levels rise and fall with the tide, it is easy to run aground. Normally this is not much of an issue for paddlers, but with a falling tide it is possible to end up stuck in a dip, with no way out apart from across deep mud. (This is particularly problematic in low-light conditions and/or fog)
- **Mud:** At most states of the tide there is a lot of mud along the banks of the rivers and this mud can be difficult to cross and difficult to stand in (e.g. to empty a boat). Whilst you may just get muddy feet in some areas, the mud can be waist deep, or deeper in others.
- **Steep Sides:** Many stretches of tidal rivers have man-made edges, e.g. if they run through towns etc. In these areas, there is often very limited access, as the edges are vertical or near-vertical.
- **Access/Egress:** Many stretches of a Tidal River can be a mile or more from the nearest access point, often across mud, creeks and salt marsh. This can make access/egress in the event of an emergency difficult.
- **Cold Water and Wind Chill:** The water is cold all year round, but particularly so in the winter. Added to that, the air is usually much colder in the winter, and there is often a reasonable amount of wind. The wind can lead to significant wind chill, especially if you are wet.

- **Fog:** On a calm, still day in the winter, a sea mist/fog often descends on the river making navigation difficult and can lead to disorientation. This can also herald a dramatic drop in temperature, as the sun is obscured, and the damp seeps in.
- **Wildlife:** Finally, whilst not really a safety issue, please be aware that tidal mudflats are often home to migrating birds and occasionally seals. Please avoid disturbing them when paddling and also if stopping for lunch etc.

There are several things that can be done to mitigate some of the risks, but there really is no substitute for training and experience. Groups should always be prepared for the worst case scenario and should be competent to handle it.

- **Rescue:** Can you rescue yourself and the folk in your group if necessary? What would you do if one of your group fell in – could your group rescue them? If you rely on swimming to shore, then on a Tidal river that could be a long way off, and in autumn/winter, that would be a very cold swim – and what if they then just sink into mud?
- **Skills:** Do you have the skills to keep your craft upright if the conditions deteriorate? (e.g. The wind picks up, the waves get bigger)
- **Equipment:** Have you got a compass, spare paddles, spare warm clothes, food/hot drink if out for a while, repair kit if paddling something that could get damaged (e.g. inflatable), a map or way of understanding where you are and where the nearest emergency access would be.
- **Numbers:** Generally it is recommended that if paddling somewhere challenging that you should paddle in groups of 3 or more. Paddling solo is always a higher risk scenario, though of course the actual risk depends on the conditions, activity and skill of the paddler.

Always assume that a worst case scenario could happen, (e.g. you fell in or someone didn't have the strength to reach the end or was taken ill) and make sure that as a group you are able to handle such an event.

Above all, keep safe. If in doubt, find a group that has training and experience of leading on tidal rivers. The appropriate British Canoeing qualifications for a leader would be a “British Canoeing Coach” (specific to moderate environments) or a “British Canoeing Moderate Water Leader”.

For further reading most of the tips in the Go Paddling blogs on Sea Kayaking can also be applied to tidal rivers

- <https://gopaddling.info/tips-for-beginners-paddling-on-the-sea-know-before-you-go/>
- <https://gopaddling.info/11-things-to-consider-when-paddling-on-the-sea/>
- <https://gopaddling.info/what-to-wear-sea-kayaking/>

Or if you want to immerse yourself in the subject this website has lots of resource about sea kayaking which can also be applied to tidal rivers and estuaries

- <https://www.kayarchy.co.uk/>