



Local information for DofE Leaders and participants wishing to paddle the Great Glen Canoe Trail for their Expedition section

For general advice on paddle skills or canoe access in Scotland please go to <http://www.dofe.org/en/content/cms/leaders/resources-download/expedition-downloads/>

This document should be read in conjunction with The DofE Expedition Guide available from www.DofE.org/shop

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1. Overview

The Great Glen Canoe Trail has been classified by the Lochaber Expedition Assessor Network (LEAN) as “sheltered, coastal waters” and as such, can provide a superb challenge for Gold DofE expeditions. Previous notes have emphasised that although this trail is along the Caledonian Canal, this must not be equated to the concept of “canal” which is normally associated with waterways in Central Scotland, England or Wales. The extensive waters of Loch Lochy and Loch Ness are linked by the canal and these lochs can, under certain conditions, provide a very serious challenge even to strong, experienced, adult paddlers.

2. Suitable goals

Travelling from the top of Neptune's Staircase to Lochend, or Dochfour, is feasible for most DofE teams who have undertaken appropriate training and practice expeditions, provided the weather cooperates. Travelling from one side of Scotland to the other, i.e. from sea lock to sea lock, whilst an excellent goal in itself, is generally not feasible within the confines of the minimum of four days and three nights required for Gold level expeditions. This complete passage is not recommended in the canoe trail literature as there are two busy roads and a railway line to cross. The complete passage would generally take five to six days, due to the variable weather and the challenging nature of the lengthy and strenuous portages at both ends of the Caledonian Canal.

3. Prevailing winds and direction of travel

Because prevailing winds in this area are generally reckoned to be south westerly, the advised direction of travel is Fort William to Inverness. Planning should not be so rigid that a reverse direction could not be put into operation if the long distance forecasts predict steady winds from a northerly direction.

4. Hazard, other risks and contingency planning

The major hazard associated with paddling is capsizing, particularly when a canoe 'broaches' on a downwind wave or has to approach shore through surf. Scottish Canals state that '*in a strong south westerly wind waves up to 1.5m (5 feet) high can develop, particularly on Loch Ness.*' <http://www.scottishcanals.co.uk/our-canals/caledonian-canal/paddling>.

DofE expedition teams must be armed with knowledge of these potential problems in strong winds, must practice rescue skills and develop an awareness that decreases the likelihood they will be caught out in such conditions. Obviously, long before waves reach such heights, Supervisors will have ensured their team is off the loch.

If DofE teams have only received paddle skills training to enable them to undertake the Expedition section, it is quite feasible that some of the young people have no experience of weirs or understand their concept. As there are weirs along the trail, it is important that the all participants have a clear idea of the potential dangers involved in getting too close, know where they are and understand warning signs are variable and non-existent at Aberchalder weir. For DofE teams going all the way to Dochgarroch there is the danger that once off Loch Ness, individuals will be noticeably tired, will have "switched off their antennae", and even be euphoric at the near completion of their expedition. In this state of mind they may not pay proper attention to the perfectly adequate danger signs announcing the weir that is the source of the River Ness. Once in the grip of its waters, they may not have the strength and skills to escape. Supervisors should warn their teams of this scenario, as more than one paddler has been dragged over the weir with consequent damage to their boat and themselves.

The standard DofE Expedition Training Syllabus makes every effort to get young people to anticipate, prevent and, where necessary, apply first aid skills to meet a range of possible accidents. One way of viewing this training is to think of it as contingency planning.

The weather in the Great Glen, and North West Scotland in general, can frequently be the reverse of the weather experienced in more southerly latitudes of Great Britain. During some summers it almost seems as though only the extremes of weather are experienced; it is either wet and windy, or calm with brilliant sunshine. Sunny days, still require safety planning as dehydration and sunburn can often affect participants. In addition, with the calm weather comes the midge, especially in the morning and evening in low light. Participants need to be informed of, and equipped to cope with these problems.

5. Camp sites

Most DofE teams starting at Fort William book their first night's stay at the Lochy Camping and Caravanning Park or, if travelling north to south, Bught Park, Inverness, could be an option.

<http://www.lochy-holiday-park.co.uk/>

<http://www.invernesscaravanpark.com/>

The Trail Guide leaflet, also downloadable from the Great Glen Canoe Trail website* indicates the locations of "informal" camping areas. These are situated at most lock gates and consist of an area of mowed grass on the canal side which, in most cases, is associated with toilet, laundry and fresh water facilities. All these excellent locked facilities are accessible, provided the Leader registers their team(s) with Scottish Canals and pay the returnable deposit upon the key. Apart from this deposit, registration is free, so most teams forgo claiming their £5.00 deposit and retain the key for future trips. Hot showers, washing machines and tumble dryers are not free: all require a ready source of £1.00 coins. If the night's stop-over is along the canal sections, these informal sites must be used, as wild camping is forbidden along the towpath.

* <http://greatglencanoetrail.info/plan-a-paddle#>

6. Camping and wild camping

Such has been the initial success of the Great Glen Canoe Trail that wild camping may, in time, become a difficult issue. At present, people may exercise their access rights provided they adhere to the code. Many DofE teams choose Clunes (207887) for their first night's campsite. DofE teams will tend to land at the same point as it is the most accessible beach, and after exploring will usually select the same suitable camping spots as previous teams. As the land is not too steep and the undergrowth is not too dense, normal wild camping toileting procedures can apply. It is highly likely that individuals will choose similar routes from their campsites and find the same privacy cover that others before have used. Despite using a trowel to bury the waste, campsites like this one will soon become overused. The situation further along Loch Lochy is even more challenging. There are shingle beaches, e.g. the one at 233910, that are fine for camping upon, but a very steep, densely vegetated hinterland poses real problems for complying with the usual wild camping advice associated with toileting. Going "for a walk with a trowel" just isn't a feasible option. It does not take much imagination to appreciate the cumulative effect of wild campers during the height of the season.

Supervisors need to emphasise the importance of using the designated toilets whenever the DofE team has to portage or line through locks. Useful information on campsites and designated toilet can be found on the map below.

http://greatglencanoetrail.info/uploads/documents/GGCT%20Trail%20Map_updated%20AW.pdf

7. Weather forecasting

DofE teams will benefit from a consideration of the range of weather forecasts available. Those forecasts which provide detailed information about the wind, such as XCWeather, <http://www.xcweather.co.uk/forecast/>, are much more useful than generalised forecasts about likely amounts of sun and rain, (although even these more detailed forecasts should not be taken as fact). The young people need to be brought to the realisation that the strength and direction of the wind is probably the single most important factor in the success or otherwise of their journey. They need training in the feel of, and likely effects of, varying strengths of wind upon them when on the water.

8. Paddling skills

DofE participants may think they are going to have their paddling skills assessed and need to be told this is not the case; the journey will do that. All participants need to have received adequate instruction and sufficient time to master most of the required paddling skills. Hopefully they will have experienced differing weather conditions on their practice expedition and will have learned to adapt their paddling to differing conditions. Where DofE teams have not already experienced a range of weather conditions, they are likely to have a shock when they venture onto Loch Lochy or Loch Ness in a wind. By the end of their expedition, most participants show a marked improvement in their boat control and forward paddling technique.

Additional physical skills associated with paddling the canoe trail are the separate techniques of portaging, lining through and using trolleys to convey their canoes. It is better if the team can gain some experience of portaging and lining through during their practice expedition. This ensures that the supervisor does not have to spend too much time and close attention to the team during their first (quite long) portage at Gairloch. Note: 'lining through' is only permitted at simple locks such as those at Kytra and permission must be sought from the Lock Keeper. Most DofE teams appear to underestimate the time, energy and team work required for the various portages. It should be pointed out that these portages are considered strenuous by experienced, well organised, adult paddlers.

9. Equipment

Although the constraints of weight and volume apply to the paddler, every bit as much as to a hill walker, these constraints are of a different order. This means that some quite different equipment choices can be made. For example, a team of four boys and four girls may choose to use two four-person tents, instead of the usual two/three person tents. This would not increase the volume or weight of equipment when compared to taking four smaller tents. One of the tents may then be tall enough to enable adults to stand up inside and either tent could house the entire team for planning meetings and socialising. This can be particularly useful in early or late in the expedition season when rain is common. Most teams choose to take advantage of their greater carrying capacity by packing a higher proportion of fresh foods, rather than taking more complex or heavier equipment. A few extra luxuries might be taken, but the equipment list should remain similar to land based expeditions and teams should remember that they will need to portage.

You can find guidance on use of mobile devices in The DofE Expedition Guide.

10. Paddle craft

Although the Great Glen Paddle Trail could be traversed in single or double, sea or touring kayaks, most DofE teams choose to use tandem, open, Canadian canoes. Gear is usually stored in plastic barrels or large, strong dry bags. All, or nearly all, the gear needs to be removed from the canoes to undertake the portages and this requirement influences the size and weight of the loads.

Lock keepers may have trolleys to loan the team, but this should not be relied upon, as some of the trolleys are not always available. Hence it is essential that the team, or the team's outfitter, undertake their journey with an adequate number of appropriate portage trolleys.

11. Aim / purpose of expedition

Having a flexible aim, with a range of investigation techniques to accommodate variable weather and unpredictable pattern of journeying, is an essential part of a successful Great Glen Expedition. During strong head winds, all eight activity hours could easily be devoted to travelling a distance well short of that planned for the day. Equally, favourable tail winds may permit the accomplishment of the day's journey well within the planned time. Given the overall goal of completing the voyage, it is unwise not to take all the benefit possible from the favourable conditions and push on past the planned campsite.

Project ideas

If some, or most, of the investigation can be undertaken whilst travelling and this can be extended if, and when, additional time becomes available, then this advantage goes a long way towards generating an ideal project. Such a project can also fill the time void if conditions are too severe for paddling. Under these conditions, the four hours travelling component of the day could be walking. Wellington boots and/or flip flops are not conducive to walking the Great Glen footpaths and trails. Participants should follow their Licensed Organisation / Supervisor's policy for appropriate footwear, but when carrying rucksacks, the DofE recommends participants use hiking boots with ankle support.

If the project could be enhanced by taking still photographs or video, ask the team how many spare batteries they intend to carry or ensure they know where devices can be recharged. It is generally a good idea to tell them to double the number they first thought of.

Mature, successful DofE teams are flexible in their decision making. They permit the prevailing conditions to define their activity. They have plenty plan B's and are rarely stuck for purposeful things to do, whatever the weather. But this state of affairs only occurs when the young people take ownership of both the journey and project at an early stage in the planning process.

12. Behaviour

Care for the environment and the inevitable implications of sharing the waterway with other mariners means that it is only sensible for the participants to read the way signs and information boards, and use the toilets and wash facilities provided by Scottish Canals. The DofE Expedition Guide has more information about the behaviour expeditions of the DofE for participants, adults and Expedition Assessors. DofE participants undertaking water based expeditions must observe The Countryside Code and know the Water Sports Safety Code.

13. Further information and submitting voyage and activity plans

DofE Leaders and participants can complete route plans using the water based expedition route card which can be downloaded from: www.DofE.org/go/expeditiondownloads This particular form cues the participants to the proper considerations, e.g. time taken to portage, rather than height lost or gained, and talks of egress points rather than escape routes.

Use: www.greatglencanoetrail.info to obtain a host of useful information and other links relating to the trail.