

Stream Crossing Tips For Backpackers

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Wait for high water to drop to a safer level.

Fording a river or stream that's running high from rainfall or is a raging torrent from snowmelt is dangerous and unnecessary. High water levels usually fall quickly and waiting for the level to drop is safer even if it means a delay.

It's easier to cross a stream or river in shallower water when you can see underwater rocks and holes that can trip you up. High water also carries with it hidden limbs and subsurface debris that can injure or entrap and drown you during a crossing. Wait out water levels that exceed your low to mid thighs or find a safer crossing point.

The marked route may not be the best place to cross.



River and stream beds change year to year as a result of spring thaws and erosion, but most trail blazes or cairns don't and might not be the best place to cross anymore. If a crossing looks sketchy, hike up or down stream and try to find a better crossing point that's shallower, has slower current, or has a better route across the rocks. Be sure to identify a good exit point on the opposite shore.

Face upstream and use trekking poles to maintain your balance.

Trekking poles are very useful in maintaining your balance during a stream crossing and for probing the bottom to find hidden rocks or holes that can trip you up. Facing upstream lets you see where the fastest current is and weather it.

Pointed rocks provide better grip than flat rocks.

When crossing a stream, people look for flat rocks to put their feet on under the assumption that they'll be easier to walk across. But flat rocks can be slippery when they are wet and often have slippery algae growing on them. You can initially get a better grip walking across irregular pointed rocks even if they are wet because your shoes will bend over their top and grip them more securely.

Wear foot protection.

It's important to wear some sort of foot protection during a stream crossing to protect your feet from injury, even if it means carrying a pair of waterproof camp shoes like Crocs with you. Rivers and stream beds are full of sharp rocks, broken sticks, broken glass and other debris. If you won't hike barefoot on dry ground, what makes you think it's any safer to cross a stream barefoot when you can't see your feet or the stream bottom clearly.

Other safety tips.

If you slip and go down into swift water, ditch your pack, and attempt to float on your back... feet first until you are able to exit. Alive without a pack sure beats the alternative.

Be aware of stream chokepoints. Avoid crossing where the banks of the stream are narrowed. This is where the current will be swiftest and may knock you off your feet.

Watch out for strainers, branches and trees in the water. If you slip, strainers can pull you under and drown you. Never cross upstream from an obvious strainer.

Cross as a group. If you are hiking with another person, you can increase your safety level by crossing together with one person standing directly behind the other. The upstream person breaks the current creating slower water behind them and making it easier for the downstream person to help keep both upright. With four legs on the bottom. There is less chance that two people will fall over and get

washed downstream. Three people can form a triangle, which is even more stable. Crossing in groups requires coordination and should be practiced before trying it in a risky stream.

Stay low.

While it's tempting to clamber over big rocks during a stream or river crossing, it's often better to cross on rocks closer to the surface, even if they're partially submerged. The problem with big rocks occurs when you need to climb down onto wet rocks closer to the surface and your momentum increases making it easy to slip and fall. Staying low and going slow are often better.

Unbuckle your hip belt and chest strap.

If you're carrying a heavy backpack, unbuckle your hip belt and chest strap before you cross a fast moving stream or river. Otherwise, there is a real chance that your pack will fill with water if you fall and the added weight and surface area can hold you underwater or catch on a snag (strainer). By undoing your hip belt, its easier to shrug off your pack if you need to eject it.



Make sure beaver dams are solid before you cross them.



Beaver dams can provide a convenient way across a stream as long as they haven't been damaged and are still actively maintained. If you see a hole in the dam or a spot that has been breached and water is flowing through it quickly, find another place to cross. Chances are it's not structurally sound to hold your body weight.

Wear trail shoes that drain and dry quickly.

Many backpackers wear trail shoes that drain and dry quickly because getting your shoes wet during a stream or river crossing is often unavoidable. If you plan to hike somewhere where there are a lot of stream crossings, you can save yourself a lot of time and hassle by wearing mesh trail runners or mid-height boots that don't have waterproof breathable liners because they dry so much faster when water comes over the top of your ankles and swamps your shoes.

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