

## Getting Afloat

*“...I think fishermen who can afford the luxury will be wise to make a portable boat one of their items of travelling equipment.”*

H. Cholmondeley-Pennell 1885.

GETTING on the water is often necessary and generally increases one's chances of catching fish. There are several ways to do this, each with its advantages and disadvantages. Cholmondeley- Pennell's portable boat was an inflatable India-rubber raft with a seat, not in my opinion a comfortable fly-fishing platform but quite remarkable considering the era. Regardless of platform choice remember to carry plenty of fluids as a dehydration headache will quickly ruin a day.



*Any rougher than this and there'll be no floating for me – Lough Corrib*

### FLOAT TUBES

Most newer models of float tubes are of U or V-shape design for ease of access and egress and have plenty of storage space aboard. The V-shape reduces drag and in some models like Outcast's Fat Cat offer above-water seating, but the shape may reduce storage space. I favour having two types of fins available; full size skin-diving fins for large water, and Force Fins for ponds and small lakes. Force Fins make getting in and out of the water much easier, particularly around tangled shorelines, and let me sit up straighter when maneuvering. However, they will not get you around nearly as well as good skin-diving fins. Also, wearing wading boots or boot-foot waders leads to rapid fatigue, so stocking-foot waders with the feet protected by light, flexible sole, neoprene booties are best.



*Tim Hiltz slow trolls in a float tube on a Nova Scotia lake.*

An American writer, Dave Engerbretson, ran extensive tests on a variety of swim fins for float-tube use. He found that the fins with the highest performance were long, fairly narrow, and smoothly flexible without being soft, and that the best of these were competitive skin-diving fins. Unfortunately the top of the line cost much more than a float tube, and so it pays comparison shop at a dive shop. I priced one of Engerbretson's best-buys locally, the IDI Frogfoot, and it rang up the register at around \$100.00 (Cdn.). For anything larger than a small pond avoid fins that are short, very wide, or extremely stiff (or soft) as they cause rapid fatigue or are inefficient. Normally the best kicking style is from the hip/thigh with a slight bend at the knee; like swimming the crawl stroke upside down. A slow, deep kick produces little fatigue but really moves the tube.

## Tips

- In virtually every sport, smooth describes optimum technique. Keep your kicking strokes relaxed and as long as possible. One way to get some extra help when moving locations against the wind is to pack a couple of ping-pong paddles or kiddie's hand-fins in the back pouch with your lunch. Make sure they have wrist straps to avoid loss.
- If you wear fins over the neoprene feet of your waders, or over neoprene socks, carry a pair of oversize, inexpensive, boat-shoes along. Often it's far easier to walk to the car along the shore than to kick your way back, especially if a nasty wind springs up.
- Particularly when fishing deep chironomids, it's necessary to have the float tube stay still, i.e., anchored. I have used old lead sash weights with integral eyes but a better solution is the lightweight folding anchor type sold primarily for kayaking.
- Use your anchor rope as a depth gauge by tying a knot every 5 – 6' (1.5 – 1.8 m).
- Check float tube bladders at least once a year for signs of deterioration and remember that widely fluctuating temperatures affect inflation pressure.
- Even though the angler in the photo isn't, consider wearing a flotation vest (some jurisdictions require them). Stearns makes a comfortable and convenient inflatable.
- It may seem elementary, but to change lines without danger of losing your rod, break it down in the middle. Put the tip section in the rod holder and string the butt section. Exchange, string the tip, and rejoin.
- Don't use rods shorter than nine feet. Being so close to the surface makes long backcasts very difficult with shorter rods.
- Never clip anything on the outside of a float tube unless it has a safety cord. Flipper keepers are another good idea.
- When fishing a long leader in a float tube, don't hesitate to reel the leader into the guides when trying to land a trout. Don't worry about hang-ups, just make sure there is a smooth connection between line and leader and drop the tip if a big fish runs.

- Ensure any potential purchase has a large stripping apron—few things are as annoying as having a sinking line continually falling off the apron and tangling in your feet.
- While neoprene waders help keep one warm when spending hours with various anatomical parts underwater, my choice is Goretex fortified with a couple of Polartec layers when necessary.
- Most problems occur during exit/entry. Back into and out of the water and don't sit or stand until at knee depth. If you start to fall, save the rod by throwing it into the water.

## Advantages

From my perspective float tubes have only two advantages over other ways to get afloat, portability and cost. Both are obvious and neither is insignificant. Some consider the low profile less likely to spook trout, but I disagree. With one significant exception noted elsewhere, visibility isn't a problem, movement is the killer. If this wasn't so herons would starve.

## Disadvantages

Float tubes have three preeminent disadvantages: lack of height above the water's surface, making visual tactics far more difficult, in some cases impossible; lack of rapid mobility, a particularly annoying drawback on large waters; and some useful searching tactics are essentially precluded.



*Paul MacDonald is my longtime fishing companion.*

## PONTOON (OR KICK) BOATS

Serious float-tubers will likely graduate to pontoon boats; mine is an Outcast Laker 7000. Many of the float-tube tips are applicable; those that aren't are obvious. Ensure your prospective purchase has fast-fill/empty valves, an integral anchor system, and oars that function properly. Depending on the type of boat, a useful accessory is a pump powered by your vehicle battery; however, a simple double-acting hand-pump easily inflates my model.

### Advantages over Float Tubes:

- Improved mobility, either by rowing or electric power.
- Carries more gear.
- Angler sits higher, thus improving sight-fishing capability and reducing the chances of chills.
- Can be rigged with a small drogue for drifting-boat methods.
- Because fins are only necessary for maneuvering, wading boots (or boot-foot waders) and short fins become practical.

## Disadvantages Compared to Float Tubes:

- Less portable and more expensive.
- Not a big deal, but the anchor rope is no longer available as a depth-finder.



*Angler casts from a one-person pram (Jim Wheeler, Spring Creek Fly Fishing Prams)*

## PRAMS

Prams are the first of what might be called dry-platforms and are easily transported in the box of a pick-up truck or on a car roof-rack. Although used elsewhere in the world (such as smaller UK stillwaters), they are particularly popular in western North America. While ideal for a lone angler, larger versions will accommodate a not-too-large partner. Prams are usually powered by oars or an electric motor but the largest ones will handle a small outboard motor.

### Advantages vs Float Tubes or Pontoon Boats:

- Angler is out of the water which reduces potential chilling and, not insignificant for we older anglers, one can relieve oneself without going ashore.
- Able to stand, making casting and sight-fishing easier.

### Disadvantages:

- Less portable, and I consider prams less stable than float tubes under adverse conditions.