

SMALL CRAFT ADVISORY

DON'T OVERLOOK LITTLE BOATS FOR MOUNTAIN RIVERS AND LAKES.

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Barely waiting for the canoe to bump gravel, my buddy leapt out. With one strong tug, he grounded the boat, not wanting to leave me with all the work, I suppose. Then he raced to the base of the shoal. By the time I got out and scurried down the edge of the shoal, he was grinning like a kid on the last day of school as he did battle with a feisty smallmouth in the swift current.

I waded in beside my friend and cast a grub across the deep, rocky run he had just pulled his fish from. Soon, I too was hooked up and sporting a similar grin. We would fish the entire shoal by wading, casting to every eddy and seam that the rocks and the current combined to create. Then we would relaunch the canoe and continue downstream, making scattered casts as we went but looking toward the next shoal.

My canoe served mostly as a taxi that day, shuttling us to several fish-filled shoals that were spread along 5 miles of river. But on other days, the same craft has served as a fishing boat for exploring remote mountain lakes or float-fishing Piedmont rivers.

Modern bass boats, with rod lockers designed to carry a closetful of gear and big outboards that hurry fishermen from point to point, offer tremendous usefulness for many fishing applications. Likewise, pontoons, deep V's and various other kinds of craft have their places. Not to be overlooked among watercraft, however, are those boats that can be tossed on top of a car or into the bed of a pickup truck and slid into the water, even without the luxury of a ramp.

Car-toppers, small and unassuming, offer an undeniably romantic appeal, as do many of the waters they are most often used to explore. More important, though, these kinds of boats offer practical advantages. They come at a low cost, and you need neither a trailer nor a high-torque truck to tote one to the lake. Above all, they take you to places where you simply cannot go with other kinds of boats.

Many of the rivers and lakes I like best for fishing with a car-top boat don't have paved boat ramps. Meanwhile, most of the best shoals to wade on North Carolina's larger small-mouth rivers are not accessible from the banks. They are either surrounded by deep water or flanked by private lands, so the only way to get to them is by canoe or kayak.

Car-toppers include all kinds of watercraft that can be transported with no trailer, whether flipped and tied to the top of a car or slipped into a pickup. Float tubes—also known as belly boats—fit the bill by my definition, and you may not even have to tie a tube to the top of your car. A float tube fits neatly in the back of my station wagon, and





Canoes are ideal for fishing larger bodies of water and have plenty of room for gear and another angler. Float tubes, on the other hand, are more suited for small ponds.

you can get a couple of tubes in a normal car trunk by partially deflating the air chambers.

Car-top boats come in an array of styles, each with its strengths and weaknesses. Beyond belly boats and canoes, major car-top categories include johnboats, kayaks and various designs of hard-plastic miniature fishing boats.

TYPES OF TOPPERS

If you want to slip out on a summer afternoon to cast crickets under corks toward the banks of a secluded high-country lake, you'll find nothing more enjoyable than sitting waist deep in the seat of a belly boat. You can also take a belly boat almost anywhere. Stick your gear in the pockets, grab a loop and toss the tube over your shoulder, and it's no big deal to tote it a few hundred yards to access remote waterways.

Float tubes rely on leg power, whether it is walking the bottom of a shallow stream or kicking fin-clad feet to propel you. Therefore, tubes lend themselves best to fishing small waters, where there's no need to run from spot to spot. Tubes also leave you pretty low in the water, so you probably should stay away from waters with significant boating activity.

Canoes and kayaks are typically propelled by paddle, utilizing efficient hull designs to

maximize mobility. Kayaks will get you around quickly without a lot of effort, but cramped quarters put obvious limitations on comfort and gear capacity. Canoes, likewise, limit the stuff you can carry, but to a much lesser degree. You have room for a couple of rods and a bag stuffed with fishing gear and a sandwich or two.

General recreational canoes offer the most versatility as fishing boats. Most are made to handle small whitewater, but they also track nicely and offer decent stability for lake fishing. Plus, they are modest in cost, unlike specialized whitewater or touring boats. I have a 15-foot canoe, which is fairly short by canoe standards, but it allows plenty of space for two people and doesn't hang terribly far off the front or back of a car.

Johnboats and other small fishing boats open up a lot of possibilities for fishing with a bit more gear and in more open water. I spend a lot of time fishing from a Coleman Crawdad, which is essentially a heavy-gauge plastic johnboat. With a 4-horsepower outboard on the back and a trolling motor on the front, I can cover all the water I want to in a day. It rides as nicely as a canoe atop a car and is very stable to fish from.

Most johnboat manufacturers make one or two 10- to 12-footers that are light

enough to toss on a car. Other small boats that fit this general class are the flat foam-filled plastic boats, which have raised fishing seats and sometimes come wired for a trolling motor or otherwise rigged for fishing.

Johnboats and their kin offer space and stability, more so than other car-toppers. You can bring an extra rod or two if you want, and even some extra toys such as coolers, bait buckets and portable electronics. Stability comes in handy with bouncy kids in the boat and at times when winds or other boaters make the water a bit choppy.

But what these boats lack is the go-anywhere quality that makes canoes really shine. As much as I enjoy fishing from my Crawdad, I won't lug it too far down a hillside to launch it, especially with a motor and a battery. And it definitely wasn't designed to be propelled by paddle or maneuvered down a mountain river.

If you plan to tote a boat atop a car, you want to stick with something that weighs less than 100 pounds or so. For truck-bed hauling, where you won't have to lift over your shoulders, you can go a bit heavier—but not too much heavier. Also, be sure to consider the width of any boat you're thinking about buying compared to the width of your car roof or truck bed.

The best style of car-top craft for you really depends on where you want to take it and how you want to fish with it. Of course, that's where the price tag for a small boat really comes into the equation. A float tube costs less than half of what just the prop for a larger fishing boat's motor would run, so buying a belly boat in addition to a canoe or car-top johnboat might not be out of the question.

RIGGING UP

Float tubes call for fewer extras than other kinds of craft. In fact, for warm-weather fishing in shallow water, all you really need in addition to the tube itself is a life jacket. If you need to deflate your tube significantly to transport it, a hand pump comes in handy. For most lake fishing, you'll also need a pair of fins that strap onto your feet. Depending on air and water temperatures, you might also want a pair of waders.

For canoes and kayaks, add paddles, a life vest for each person, a throwable flotation device and some sort of tie-down system. For truck-bed hauling, a rope and a flag for the end of the canoe will do the

job. Car-top carrying calls for more padding and ropes. Commercially made kits designed for carrying boats on cars make things simple and secure.

Other stuff you'll probably want in your canoe includes some form of bailing device, a rope to tie off with and a light anchor. Makeshift items, such as half a plastic drink bottle for bailing or a window weight for an anchor, work fine. Some fishermen also rig canoes with electric motors or very small outboards, using special adapters for motor mounting.

For anything wider than a canoe, some type of motor borders on being necessary. An electric motor with 30 or 40 pounds of thrust will pull most car-toppers around just fine. "Pull," incidentally, is a key word in trolling motor talk. It is far easier to control a small boat with a front-mounted trolling motor than with a back-mounted motor.

Adding a gas motor to your car-top rig gives you the capability to cover a lot more water. Beyond getting you across the lake in shorter order, a small outboard will go a lot farther on even a modest amount of gas than will an electric motor on one battery charge. I use my outboard to move from spot to spot, but turn to the trolling motor for fishing.

If you go with a gas motor, consider size and weight when you pick one. Keep in mind that with car-top transport, you'll be carrying the motor down to the water, mounting it at water's edge and reversing the process every time you use the motor.

Also, check the size of the motor's built-in tank. A 1-gallon built-in tank will run a small outboard for a long time. Any smaller and you'll need to get an accessory gas tank and hose, which isn't a big deal, but it is one more thing to put in the car and carry down to the water.

Whether you opt for an electric motor, a gas motor or both, don't forget to stick a paddle in the boat. Assuming the worst won't happen is certain to leave you up the proverbial creek at some point. A paddle also comes in handy for pushing off the bank or out of the shallows after you pull a fly from an overhanging hemlock.

A final thing worth noting is that any motorized vessel, no matter how small, must be registered. Be sure to add boat numbers to your accessories list before you head to the lake. Also, be sure you have your life preservers and that you know the "rules of the road" for safe boating. ☒

One of the best no-trailer fishing boats is the aluminum johnboat. It can be placed in the bed of a pickup or on the roof, and offers plenty of stability when handling fish over the side.

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