

Bob Winston- Bio:

My Dad bought a 1969 Grumman Canoe when I was a kid. After a lifetime of adventures, I still have the boat in my collection.

I was inspired to paddle the Missouri River after a few short trips on the Mississippi. I wanted to take the river to New Orleans someday, but realized that the more remote wilderness of the Missouri River was more desirable than the industrial Mississippi. The idea of starting in Montana to paddle and sail all the way home evolved into two years of planning, after life changes opened a window. I drove out to Montana, dropping off two resupply packages on the way. I sold my vehicle at the Missouri Headwaters Campground and put in on the Madison River on May 16, 2025. I expected the trip to take about three months. After four full months, I finished at Grand Tower, IL, on September 15, 2025, with over 2500 miles behind me.

#1: What were the most difficult parts about your paddle trip and how did you overcome the situations?

I had a couple of close calls involving shallow mud flats at the deltas leading into Ft. Peck Lake and Lake Sakakawea. Pay close attention to MoRP advice and directions regarding these tricky areas! If you go the wrong way, into shallows, you could get stuck in deep mud, requiring a helicopter or airboat rescue. I sailed into some muddy shallows and got stuck in UL Bend, before Ft. Peck Lake. I had a square of plywood that I used for a kitchen table. I plopped it onto the mud and stood on it like a snowshoe to keep me from sinking, just long enough to skooch my boat forward and break the suction of the mud. Another method involves straddling, standing, skooching, and sitting, over and over until you are free. I was lucky, more than once.

Ft Peck Lake was difficult for me. The monotony of endless bay crossings was wearing on me. The landscape felt unaccommodating, and the weather was dreary. The distance to put the first big lake behind me was daunting. I felt paddling was like shoveling lead. I wanted to sail, but the winds would not cooperate. I was angry and yelled at the sky when the wind did not help me. I was scared when the wind blew too strongly. I decided that I liked being scared more than being mad. Fear is closer to fun than anger, but there is a fine line between fun and danger.

Take a shade break, get some water, eat some food, call a friend. Sleep on it before you decide to quit. "Just keep paddling."

The day before I arrived to resupply in Sioux City was a bad day for me. No tragedy, just a bunch of annoyance. Weekends and holidays can definitely affect your life on the river. It was a Saturday, and the river was very busy with recreational motorboat traffic. Some were very rude. It was super hot, and the wind was strong against me. The braided stream was very shallow, I was running aground frequently and having to get out and walk the boat to deeper water. Biting flies nipped at me all day, everything was muddy, and prickly beach stickers were stuck all over. There were people everywhere! I could not find a good, quiet place to camp. Coming up on a boat ramp access, a drone was buzzing over my head. I looked to shore and a guy was waving me in, yelling something. I wanted no part of it. Sorry if that was a RiverAngel with good intentions. After a good visit in Sioux City, I was recharged, resupplied, and ready to go again.

#2 What do you feel was the most important thing that you planned for on your trip that you actually benefited from?

All the planning for two years. I think my focus on customizing my boat and gear was very worthwhile. I spent a lot of time with my boat before the trip, tinkering, paddling, and practicing sailing. After all, the most important thing on the trip is the vessel that will carry you. I made the boat comfortable. I chose my gear very carefully and did not skimp on costs. I weighed my gear, planned gear arrangements, practiced how it all fits, and tested systems on short outings. I also put a lot of resources and thought into food and resupply planning.

#3 Was there anything that you planned for that you felt was unnecessary or overdone? Explain.

Too much stuff, too much gear. A bunch of "just in case" items. Two of almost everything.

#4 What were the most important pieces of gear you carried on the trip? Explain.

Tent - built by Kelty for military use, with plenty of upgrade stakes. A good shelter is very important, and my tent served me well through the entire trip.

Umbrella - Euroschirm telescope hands-free trekking umbrella. Reflective silver on the outside, black underside for anti-glare. This was a lifesaver in the hot sun. It is meant to attach to a backpack, but I put it on my PFD and wore it while paddling in calm conditions. It is very protective and cooling. I also attached it to my camp chair. Telescopic, adjustable, adaptable, and very well built.

Falcon Sail - I emphasized sailing as much as possible.

Paddle - ZRE bent shaft single blade. This weighs one-third of a kayak paddle. It is very efficient. Stop swinging that log around and try a lightweight single blade!

MicroKitchen, including a JetBoil stove. I have long been a fan of Trangia alcohol stoves, but I'm now a JetBoil convert.

Rain Gear - I had three rain jackets and rain pants, and used them all. I highly recommend a Kokatat Hydrus Storm Cag. It is oversized and easy to throw on over other jackets and pfd. It covers your lap while paddling a canoe or kayak. I weathered more than one storm sitting in my boat or on a stool, completely covered and protected. Seam tape is the first thing to fail on rain gear. Seal your seams. Buy the best new gear you can afford. Used gear fails quickly.

Spray Skirt - RedLeaf designs.

NRS Boundary Boots - Warm, waterproof, tall, and comfortable.

Malone boat cart - I definitely put my boat on wheels enough to justify carrying a portage cart.

Boat hook - I used it more than I thought I would.

#5 Prior to your trip, what was your weakest asset or least skilled or qualified trait for the trip and how did you overcome this?

I was challenged with GPS use and the associated apps. By the end of the trip, I almost had it figured out.

#6 What were the least important items that you brought and discovered there was never a need for?

I never used the neoprene paddling mittens that I packed. I was scared of sun and heat exposure in the sparsely vegetated regions, so I carried a five-pound beach shade tent. I found enough shade tree shelter and only used the tent once. I also had a shade umbrella that I used much more. I had a backup stove that I did not need. I did not use my collapsible pail enough to justify carrying it. I had an unnecessary crazy creek chair in addition to a larger camp chair. I had two of several items that were unnecessary. Twice along the trip, I mailed home gear to reduce weight.

#7: What was the biggest surprise of the journey? Something you did not anticipate.

My worst fear of the trip was heat and sun exposure, but I got lucky with the weather and did not suffer too badly.

I knew about River Angels; I've served in the role myself, but wow! People are really giving all along the way. It somewhat restored my faith in humanity. Many of them don't know they are River Angels. Some River Angels can call upon an army of River Angels to descend upon you with all your needs, when you need them. I'm very grateful to the paddlers, the people I met, and the help I got throughout the entire trip.

#8 What kind of boat did you paddle, and what were its good qualities, and also the things you did not like about it?

Kruger SeaWind decked canoe, paddled with a single blade. Very seaworthy, stable, durable, efficient, and capable craft. Comfortable and dry with a good spray skirt arrangement. Fits everything you need without piling it on. A SeaWind canoe was designed to be slept in.

A SeaWind is not super light or fast. I got an eye-opener one day when I traded boats with another paddler, Kyle Parker. His Swift Cruiser canoe was longer, narrower, lighter, and faster with very nice seating and back support. He said my boat paddled like a barge in comparison, which was more heavily loaded with more water, food, and gear than his.

For this trip, I had also considered a Clipper Sea-1 decked canoe. Whatever boat you choose, I feel a rudder is a good idea and helps a lot. But that means steering with your feet and your heels can get sore. Ensure your heels are padded and that your feet are well planted so they won't slide around when muddy.

#9: How did you plan your meals/food? Did this system work good for you and what would you change regarding this?

I ate mostly freeze-dried Mountain House meals, generally two a day, supplemented with snacks. During the winter before my trip, I purchased two 30-day supplies of Mountain House meals in bulk, on sale (prices have gone up since then). With 180 meals, I planned two a day for three months, with plenty of other snacks. I broke the trip into even thirds, 800-mile segments. On my drive out to Montana, I dropped off prepared resupply packages in Sioux City and Tobacco Gardens, to be waiting for me along the trip. My mistake was dividing it into even portions. You'll see, the first third of the trip will take longer than the second and third segments. My trip took four months instead of three, and I had to make up for the lack of provisions along the way. I was undersupplied on my first segment and was over-supplied on my fastest final segment of 800 miles.

I highly recommend Mountain House granola with blueberries, for a yummy 500 calories, just add water. Check out Fillo's Walking Tamales for a great savory snack. Better yet, eat them with precooked packaged bacon. Shop for calories, you'll need them.

I enjoyed what I call my Micro Kitchen. In a small tool bag, I fit everything needed for a meal, including a JetBoil stove, fuel, water, utensils, a wind screen, a cup, coffee makings, and a couple of meal pouches. My kit was always at the ready for a quick hot meal. I even cooked in the boat, underway at times.

#10 What was your system for obtaining drinking water and what were the benefits as well as the disadvantages you had dealing with water?

I carried up to 30 liters of water. I used 3-liter cranberry juice containers, distributed evenly throughout the boat, including under the seat. I carried two water filters, used only when necessary, and it was necessary. Clean drinking water was hard to find at times, and I used both filters. If you go to a campground and find no running water, ask RV campers if they can spare any from their holding tank. I carried a heavy load of water for several reasons. One reason was to minimize resupply stops. Another big reason is for ballast. All that weight, when packed down low in the boat, makes it very stable. Using a sail calls for some extra stability. I was willing to carry the water weight for the security of a big supply and the stability for sailing.

I also used MSR dromedary water bags when I started the trip, but I got rid of them because of the horrible taste. Handling the floppy things was like holding a peeing fish.

#11 What was your strategy for getting across large reservoirs, including dealing with bad weather?

My plan was to sail as much as possible. With patience and luck, I was willing to sit and wait for favorable conditions. With no deadlines or schedule to keep, I hunkered down for a few days at a time, watching wind apps and weather reports closely until the right window opened. I got inside my tied-down boat, under the spray skirt, to shelter from a couple of storms. I'll admit that I sometimes sat still when I could have gone, and I went out in some risky conditions after losing patience.

#12 Did you update the trip details on a website or social media? Was this worth your time, and are there any tips for doing this from the river?

I admire the folks who take all the time, energy, and devices to blog, post and share about their trips, but I did not invest a lot into it. On my trip, I wanted to try to disconnect from what I call digital madness and cybercrap. I wanted to step away from the internet a bit and limit the news it brings.

I do like to share my photos, and I did post on the MoRP group a few times. It is worthwhile because photos, posts, blogs, and information from paddlers can help inspire and educate other paddlers. I usually waited till I was in civilization with good wifi and electricity to post. Out on the river, you can often get a better signal if you climb up a hill. Give your legs some exercise, see a great view, look at your boat down there. Watch out for cacti, which are much more plentiful than rattlesnakes.

#13 Did you use solar power to recharge any devices?

I tried not to overdo it with electronics. I had two small solar systems. One was a 10-watt Goal Zero solar panel paired with a power bank. I also had a small all-in-one power bank with an attached solar panel. They were just barely enough to keep up with charging needs. I suggest going with a lighter-weight, flexible panel of 30 watts or more, with more than one power bank. Go lightweight, if you can.

#14: If you were going to give advice for someone planning the same journey, what do you feel

What would be the best advice and things to consider that you now know about this journey?

Secure your boat! Boats slip away very easily from waves, boat wakes, wind, and rising waters. It happens to paddlers constantly. When stopped on shore, pull your boat far up and tie it down, too. Bring plenty of line to tie to distant trees, logs or big rocks. Bring a stake of some sort to drive into the ground, or find good, strong beaver-chewed sticks. I carried a hammer to drive in stakes.

Montana is the best part of the trip, with great scenery and lots of wildlife. Don't rush through it! Take it slow if you have the time.

#15: Something about your personality that helped you succeed, whether it be a personal belief, lifestyle, family upbringing, mental state, or learned quality?

I'm very comfortable with solitude and don't mind being alone for days or weeks. I might require it sometimes. As a kid, I delivered newspapers daily alone at zero-dark-thirty, in inclement weather, by bicycle or on foot pulling a sled. I was in the Army Infantry and dealt with plenty of adverse conditions. Working outdoors and learning how to dress for all kinds of weather has always been a normal part of my life.

#16: Worst moment of the journey?

When I landed at The Pines on Ft. Peck Lake, I discovered that my rudder was out of sorts and falling apart with missing pieces. Already in a bad funk, my heart sank; the trip was instantly ruined. I inquired in an online forum, explaining that I was on an expedition and needed help finding parts. I got answers like "You should be able to waltz into any hardware store..." I snapped out of it, adapted, improvised, and patched it up. I improved the repair later on at Tobacco Gardens.

#17: Did you use personal locator beacons such as SPOT or inReach? If so, how often and what was your strategy for using it, and did you feel it was necessary to have?

I used a Garmin InReach GPSmap 67i every day for navigation, tracking, speed, mileage, weather, and communication. The unit was very helpful, but maybe overkill in all its functions. I think I should

have chosen the simpler, lighter, smaller Garmin Mini, although it has a shorter battery life. They all pair with your cell phone, which you end up using more than the actual GPS unit anyway.

#18: Did you modify any gear to help in the safety or efficiency of your trip? (A rudder, Spray cover, sail, pontoon, tent etc?)

I carried a boat hook pole that I planned to use with a paddle float to recover from a potential capsize. The pole was very handy for hooking gear to pull out of the far ends of the boat, and for using as a cane to help get out of the boat. I tinkered with my boat and gear a lot prior to my trip. My boat already had a rudder, but I built a slightly larger rudder blade to accommodate sailing.

I added a Falcon Sail rig to my canoe. Falcon sails are lightweight, very durable, well-engineered, and can be installed on almost any canoe or kayak. I customized my boat with several features to enhance comfort and enable sailing. My spray skirt from RedLeaf Designs was excellent protection both on the water and on shore during rain. I sealed the seams of my tent, spray skirt, and rain gear.

A word of caution about sailing: it won't get you to the end any quicker. It just reduces the effort at times. It does not replace paddling. Choose a sail carefully. Throwing up a homemade rig like a tarp on a big stick can cause trouble and lead to potential capsize. Sometimes sailing can be so fast that you don't have enough time to read the river, resulting in wrong turns and more trouble. Get plenty of experience and practice sailing your craft prior to your big adventure. Plan for capsize recovery. I never turned over.

#19: How did you determine where to camp, and did you have a specific place that you preferred, such as one that was secluded so as not to be seen by others?

I was picky when choosing a camp. My priorities were privacy and protection over the comforts of civilization. I was trying to go stealth and stay isolated. I did not want to see a house, and I did not want to be visible from roads or residences. I avoided access points with concrete ramps, traffic, streetlights, and noise, although they are good places to get help if you need it, and maybe some drinking water. Sometimes, I would stop for the day early if I came across an ideal campsite. I like camping more than paddling. I loved finding developed sites that were sort of abandoned and having the whole place to myself. I did recuperate in a few resorts and hotels, including Tobacco Gardens, Dakota Waters, Great Falls, Ft. Peck, Sakakawea Sunset Lodge, Pike Haven, and Bridge City Marina. These stops were often combined with help from wonderful River Angels.

#20 Did you stop and visit towns? How did you secure your boat?

I did not stop to visit much. I planned my food and water supplies to avoid stops. I did not want to leave my boat or the river any more than necessary. I secured my boat with a 15' steel cable and a luggage padlock. It was only 1/8" thick to be lightweight, so really just a theft deterrent. I buttoned up my spray skirt to conceal gear and crossed my fingers while I was briefly away. I had a tracker on my boat, but it failed before I reached the cities where it was needed. One day, my boat tracker alerted me when waves tried to wash my boat off the beach, so it was a good thing to have.

#21 An interesting unknown fact that may surprise someone and/or has nothing to do with the trip? (This may include an accomplishment, hobby, former job, or experience?)

I've never been very career-oriented, but I got obsessed with sailing! I worked as a carpenter for years and in natural resource roles, including with The Nature Conservancy, the Forest Service, trail maintenance, forest firefighting, a state tree nursery, and a wildlife refuge. I got so into small-boat sailing that I landed a job as the Harbormaster at an active sailing facility, where I gained incredible experience. I'm not into big boats or the open ocean; I'm only into small craft with no engines, including a wide variety of scows, dinghies, and catamarans. When I got into sailing, I sold off canoes and kayaks to support the habit of collecting used sailboats. After some years of that, I reverted to canoes and kayaks, with sails. These days, I have narrowed my interest down to mostly sailing canoes and have a couple of projects to finish now that the Missouri River trip is complete.