



Tom Elpel Q&A

Tom Elpel Bio: Tom is a wilderness survival instructor and the author of numerous books on nature and sustainable living (www.elpel.info). He regularly invites friends, family, previous students, and complete strangers to join him for one- to two-week canoe trips in Montana. In 2018 Tom had the rare privilege of carving a dugout canoe with Churchill Clark, direct descendent of William Clark. Planning for the “Missouri River Corps of Rediscovery” began upon completion of the canoe. Tom and four other men enjoyed a leisurely five-month trip down the Missouri River in 2019 with four of the five completing the trip. The goal of the expedition wasn’t so much to get to the end, but to discover—or rediscover—the land and its inhabitants, meeting the flora, fauna, geography, geology, local communities, and people along the way.

#1: What was the most difficult part about your paddle trip and how did you overcome (if you did) the situation?

Paddling the big lakes was a major concern, especially with the dugout canoe. In general, I enjoy paddling as a means of steering, but not so much for propulsion. The main concern ahead of the trip was that one-third of the Missouri River consists of lakes, and I don’t actually like paddling. On lakes, the dugout canoe required perhaps twice as much effort per mile as the more streamlined modern canoes. I sought to paddle all the lakes in Montana for the experience, but had little interest in paddling the big lakes in the Dakotas. We ultimately lashed the canoes together and clamped an outboard motor to the back of the dugout canoe (thanks to

a very generous river angel), and motored across the lakes at 4.5 mph. It still took six weeks to cross lakes Sakakawea, Oahe, Sharpe, and Francis Case. Without the motor, it would have taken another month to paddle these lakes, more than half of that spent on shore waiting for a lull in the wind.

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

I initially envisioned winging the trip without a detailed plan, but found it necessary to coordinate portages of the heavy dugout canoe around the dams. Working with Dave Miller's book *The Complete Paddler*, along with Google Earth, I drafted a theoretical plan campsite-by-campsite for the entire river with modest daily goals and a scheduled layover day about every fourth day to hike, explore, read, write, or hang out in town. Having a daily plan and destination greatly simplified coordination as a group. We knew how far we were going and where to stop, so we weren't paddling down the river debating how much farther to go or where to camp. Yet, we also had the flexibility to mix-up the schedule to paddle more or less or camp at undesignated sites. We aligned our layover days with the weather, and only once paddled in a significant drizzle.

#3 What was the 5-most important pieces of gear you carried on the trip? Explain.

There are the obvious necessities: a canoe, paddles, life jackets, ropes, tent, clothing, water, food, dishes, etc. Otherwise, a1) GPS navigation is crucial on the big lakes where it can be difficult to distinguish the path towards the dam from dead-end side bays. 2) Long (50-foot) ropes are essential, as is a metal stake when there is nothing else to tie off to. 3) Binoculars become essential on the lakes and lower river where the banks are too far away to distinguish signs or campsites with the naked eye. 4) Hobbies and projects are mentally helpful, such as bird-watching, reading, or writing. 5) It's nice to have a good camp stove, such as a propane burner, for actual cooking (rather than merely warming) food. We preferred campfires, but resorted to propane as necessary due to wind, fire hazards, lack of fuel, or fire bans.

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

I had no prior GPS experience and never owned a mobile phone. Rather than learn myself, I was fortunate to partner with Scott Robinson who brought a Garmin system that connected to his phone. He practiced with the system ahead of time and became our chief navigator for the expedition. With campsites pre-loaded on the device, it was easy to see how far we had left to go each day. We added new waypoints as needed during the journey.

#5 What was the least important item(s) that you brought and discovered there was never a need for?

Many Missouri River paddlers have lightweight canoes or kayaks and bare essential gear to match. With the 20-foot, 500+ lb. dugout canoe, we packed generously for the journey, yet had less gear than the other canoes in our fleet. I brought excess clothing I never wore and packed food from home we never ate.

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

I anticipated 90° to 100°F temperatures through most of the summer, yet found temperatures typically ten to twenty degrees cooler. We encountered rain about every four or five days throughout the journey. 2019 was a high water year, nearly matching the record runoff of 2011, but distributed more evenly throughout the season. Overall, we benefitted from the excess water. High water gave us faster river currents and fewer sandbars to negotiate. There was also less mud, since the reservoirs and river didn't draw down, thus maintaining water levels up to the vegetation lines. The landscape was spring green throughout the journey.

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

It was fun to travel in a dugout canoe in the spirit of Lewis and Clark. It was heavy, at least 500 lbs. empty, probably considerably heavier, actually. Being flat-bottomed, the canoe was exceptionally stable, enough to stand on the gunnels on the water. Paddling the river portions was fine, while the lakes were a slow drag, more like paddling a log than a canoe.

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

For the remote backwaters of Montana we planned on taking a full month between the towns of Fort Benton and Fort Peck. Thus, we had a month worth of food in our barrels and dry bags and tended to maintain a month-long food supply even when we were hitting towns every few days. We ate what fish we could catch, plus we bought fresh meat and veggies in town, eating far more fresh food than anticipated, and less of the dry goods. And then there were the river angels, which was a complete surprise. We ate better than I ever imagined!

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

We carried three 5-gallon water jugs in the dugout canoe and nearly as much in the other canoes, mostly in preparation for the long hauls between water sources in central and eastern Montana. We used a water filter only once on the entire journey, and that was to refill jugs on Fort Peck Lake.

#10: If you were going to give advice for someone planning the same journey what do you feel would be best advice and things to consider that you now know about this journey?

Take time to reflect on your goals to understand why you are paddling the river and what you hope to gain from the experience. Are you interested in the destination or the journey? Especially make a plan for the big lakes. Some people paddle every mile. Some paddle most of each lake, but portage before reaching the dam. Others portage around the lakes entirely. We used the outboard motor for the lakes in the Dakotas, then sent it out for storage afterwards. It's your trip. Do it your way.

#11 Worst weather day? What happened?

Our worst weather day was on Canyon Ferry Lake, less than week into the journey. We had pleasant weather on the river, then hit big winds on the lake. We were following the east shore and probably should have followed the west shore instead for more protection from the winds. There was no place to get off the water, so we paddled furiously into a headwind for hours, progressing forward at 0.5 mph until the wind finally died down.

#12: Biggest source of inspiration?

We were nearly overwhelmed by the kindness and generosity of river angels and everyone we met along the way. It was truly magical to paddle through the heart of our country and meet some of the nicest people on the planet.

#13: Something nobody really knows about you? (Hobby, skill, previous job, talent?)

I was the leader of a gang in elementary school in California. We had t-shirts made with our names. Our gang name was "The Jets," and I was "Killer," which is funny because I really couldn't hurt a flea. When I moved away to Montana, my friends started a band and named it after me, "Elpel and the Electric Albatross."