



▲ Resist the urge to rush during a difficult river fording. Slow, careful steps will help you to maintain your balance against a strong current.



CAREFUL CROSSING!

Because taking a plunge while river fording could end in disaster

BY LAURA LANCASTER



Five inches. That's the average height difference between a man and a woman.

In the front country, this is at most an inconvenience: an item difficult to reach on a high shelf, or a crowd of taller people hard to see over at a concert. But in the backcountry, the physical differences start to stack up between men and women. Longer limbs make it easier to scale routine obstacles like blowdowns or rock scrambles. Increased muscle mass allows for a faster pace over difficult terrain. And backcountry gear—so often designed to fit a man's physique—also compound these challenges.

But don't be fooled: women possess physiological and psychological advantages that make them more than a match for Mother Nature. The trick is knowing how to maximize your abilities. Take a difficult river crossing for instance. Here, a man's height means that he may be able to leap across a raging glacial creek or keep his pack dry during a wide river crossing. His larger mass is also an important advantage, providing increased stability against the river's current. To enhance confidence and ability during a river crossing, women should think less about how to "keep up" with men, and more about what strengths they possess that will help them succeed. More often than not, this means that your strategy for the crossing will be different than your male counterpart.

Pathfinding

Start by selecting a place to cross the river. Where your trail or route indicates to cross may not be the safest option, as conditions change throughout the season and even from year to year. Head upstream and downstream a few hundred feet, or farther, if necessary, to explore other options. Ideally, a little scouting will reveal a log wide enough to cross safely, or a series of rocks for stepping-stones.

But if neither is a safe option you must be prepared to cross the water directly. Paradoxically, the safest and easiest places to cross a river are often where the banks are farthest apart because frequently they're shallower and slower moving. Even better is a place where the river is "braided," or broken into multiple channels, with small islands in between.

Prep Your Gear

Next, get your gear ready. You want to hope for the best but prepare for the worst. If you and your gear end up taking a plunge, it's essential that critical items stay dry. At the top of your list should be clothing and sleeping bag. Here, a dry bag can be worth its weight in gold. To keep the rest of your gear dry, take advantage of a few common household items: a trash compactor bag and a handful of Ziplock freezer bags. The trash compactor bag works as an ultralight liner for your pack, protecting everything inside, while the Ziplock bags protect smaller items like your first aid kit, headlamp, and matches.

Consider weight distribution as you repack your gear. A top-heavy pack can throw you off balance even under normal conditions, which can be downright dangerous during a tricky river crossing. Finally, check to ensure everything on the outside of your pack is tied down securely.

Unless you are crossing a perfectly clear sandy bar, resist the urge to save your shoes by tackling a river crossing barefoot. Jagged rocks can cut your feet, and slippery stones make it all too easy to fall. But there are dangers, too, in plunging into a river in your hiking


advantage over men in the vast majority of river crossing scenarios. No, it's not our caution or our patience (although those will probably help too), but our hips. That's right: a woman's wider hips mean that her center of gravity is proportionately lower on the body. Once

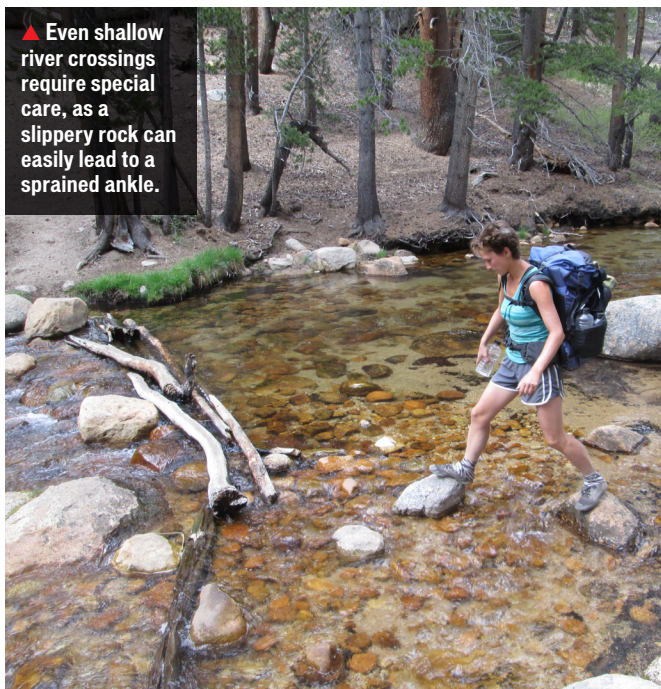
you get out into the middle of that river, with the current knocking against your knees and your feet searching for purchase amid slippery rocks, it'll become clear that a woman's physique is ideally suited to this backcountry scenario.

As you step to the river's edge, take a moment to adjust your pack for maximum stability. Conventional wisdom says undo your hip belt and sternum strap first. That way, if you lose balance, you can shed the pack and swim to shore. But that may not be wise. Unfortunately, losing your pack might be just as risky as falling into a dangerous river. There is no guarantee that you can retrieve it, and the survival gear it contains after it heads downstream. If losing your gear could lead to disaster, choose to maximize your balance by tightly securing it to your body.

Another way to maximize your balance is to increase your points of contact with the ground. This concept usually comes in one of two forms: a trekking pole (or a long, sturdy stick),

or with one or more people. During especially difficult river crossings it can help to cross in a group of three, all facing inward with everyone's arms across one another's shoulders. This technique is sometimes called the "pivot crossing."

In deciding which method to cross, pick the one that is right for your size, skills, and abilities. If you don't like the look of the crossing, then trust your gut, and look for another way. Sometimes the advantages of getting to the other side simply aren't worth the risks. 



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boots. It can take days for boots to completely dry after a river crossing, increasing the risk of blisters and chafing, both of which can cramp your pace and even cause infection. Instead, pack a pair of hiking sandals (such as Chacos) or secure, lightweight camp shoes (such as minimalist trail runners). Either option will give traction and security while your boots stay dry.

Make Your Move

Here, I've got some good news: women have a significant biological