

Lightweight rescue line

A standard item on the paddling checklist is a tow rope, and on any major paddle it is taken along. But many people don't bother or remember to take one for less serious trips. No more excuses - here's a lightweight multi-purpose version small enough to live permanently in your PFD, so it's always handy and you can't leave it at home.

It's a tow line, a leash if you're in the sea and need to attach yourself to a kayak, or a swim line. It can become a mooring line or be used for emergency repairs. It stays in a compact hank until you need it and it self deploys when used.



1 The finished 4m rescue line, snap hook on left side and snap shackle on right

To make one, you need 5 metres of Spectra line. Cut off 80 cm and set it aside. With a breaking strength of almost 300 kilos (2mm) and 450kg (3mm) it's strong enough for most towing in moderate conditions. This one was made using 2mm line.

Attach a snap hook to one end in a way that will not come undone. Spectra line can be very stiff, and some normally reliable knots do not hold. If using a bowline it is necessary to crimp (as shown here) or otherwise secure the loose end.

On the other end you need a quick release device such as a snap shackle. The smallest size (32 mm long) is adequate and weighs a quarter as much as the next size up. In use, the snap shackle will go at the paddler's end to allow a quick escape if necessary. Use a bead or a bulky knot as a grab toggle. Test the split ring by giving it a good pull. If it deforms, replace it with one from a fishing tackle shop.

There are two keys to success for neat stowage and quick deployment of the line. The first essential is to prepare the line carefully, so you know it will pull out cleanly when you need it. You must not roll or coil it as it will tangle on deployment. You want the loops of line to slip

cleanly through the rubber retainers when either end is pulled. Use a corner cut from a small cardboard box to ensure your loops are all the same length. Snip half way into one end to hold the line. Slip the line into the cut with about 2 cm between box and snap shackle. Fold the line from one end of the box to the other making sure you zigzag it and you're not making a long coil or a figure 8. This is really important as both of these arrangements will tangle when you come to use the line.



2 Zigzag the line without coiling or figure eighting into a box as a length guide

Leave a couple of centimetres of line between the end of the box and the quick release by adjusting the length of the final zig.

The other key requirement is for neat stowage that will hold the line firmly but release the moment you need it. For storing the line, you can use normal rubber bands, but they perish quickly, and the line could tangle. The best thing found is small tight natural rubber loops. They are made for tailing lambs, but they are on sale in small numbers as 'Nooski' replacement rings. They're soft doughnut shaped rubber rings obtainable from big hardware stores. They're made for Nooski brand rodent traps and you get a pack of 20 replacement rings for three dollars.

Don't try to pull or stretch them open by hand. Roll them onto the item you want to put the ring round. Roll one Nooski band over the snap hook and another over the quick release shackle – they will easily stretch over an object fatter than a thumb.

Remove the hank from the box. True up the bights of line at one end and thread a piece of spare cord through all the loops. Double this cord and thread its ends through the Nooski ring. Roll the soft rubber band over the end loops of the hank of tow line. Do the same at the other end and tidy the hank up. On soft lines you might need a third ring in the centre. The line is ready for use, but you need something to attach it to.



3 Use a loop of spare line to ease the loops through the rubber ring

Most people secure the tow line to their PFD. An easy way to do it so you don't have to grope around behind you is to first attach a towing tail.

Find a strong place as a tow point on the back of the PFD. The mid point of the waist band webbing is good. Take the 80 cm piece of spectra line and find a way to pass the end around the webbing of the PFD without causing damage. Tie it off with a reliable knot to attach the tail. This will take the force of the tow so it needs to be really firm.

Tie a figure eight loop in the loose end of the tail big enough to take two fingers. This loop is what you'll attach the snap shackle of the tow line to. Most people don't want a tail dangling behind them, but it's simple to fix it lightly at the front of the PFD where you can easily reach it. Stitch a Velcro tag onto the loop end. Bring the tail round the side of the PFD and stitch the opposite gender of velcro somewhere toward the front of the PFD where you can easily find it. If necessary, adjust the length of the tail.

An ideal system is to attach the rescue line hank to your PFD tail loop and make some sort of retainer such as a pouch, elastic straps or sleeve to keep it safe so it's always attached and always ready to use, and you can't possibly drop it.

An easier but less foolproof method is to keep the hank of line in a pocket of the PFD and when needed, slip the snap shackle onto the loop of the towing tail with the line still stowed in its bands.

To tow a kayak, clip the snap hook onto the toggle of the boat to be towed, and paddle away – the line will deploy itself behind you as the zigzagged loops are pulled out through the rubber rings.

If you're in the water in windy conditions and using the line as a safety leash to keep you with your boat, don't pull out line, but keep the hank intact. You may want to attach it to a different bit of your PFD. While you're in the water, keep the line stowed in the rubber rings to reduce risk of entanglement. It will make itself longer if you move away from the boat.

A swim line is something you can use to tow your kayak to shore or river bank in the event of a spill. You can swim with both arms and progress is much faster than if you have to hang on to a kayak as well. For this use, the towing tail from the PFD waistband is the ideal attachment.

For any safety device, use good quality materials such as stainless fittings and high grade line from a sailing shop. Check the quick release shackle now and again as the spring component will eventually rust.

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May 2012