



Negotiating Five Finger Rapids

The famous Five Finger Rapids represent the only whitewater stretch that teams must paddle through over the entire length of the Yukon River Quest. They are named for the five channels, or fingers that pass through four basalt columns. The right finger is where you want to be for safe passage through the rapids.



The approach – stay river right. Aim for the far right notch, or finger.

You will hit the rapids well-rested about 24 miles after leaving the Carmacks checkpoint. The rapids are not at Five Finger Coal mine, they are about 6 miles past the old mine site. You will hear them first at the end of a long left-turning bend. High above the rapids on river right, you will see a long stairway leading down from a parking area along the highway. The stairs lead down to a viewing platform on a cliff above the rapids.



Lining up for the right channel.

When you enter the long bend you will want to be on the right side of the river, and stay right. This will line you up with the right channel, the right finger, if you will.. This is where you want to be.

DO NOT DRIFT TOWARD THE MIDDLE OR GO RIVER LEFT – THE MIDDLE & LEFT FINGERS CAN BE DEADLY!!!!

As you line your boat up with the right channel, the current will pick up very quickly. As you pass the high rock wall under the viewing platform, get lined up with the V in mid-channel, and you will be on track for a fun ride. Do not get too close to the right wall – if you go too far right you will meet a rather nasty eddy line. And if you are paddling with other teams, go through one at a time, allowing plenty of space between teams, so you have room for maneuvering if you get into trouble.



The bigger Class II waves are at the end of the rapid. Expect to ride up and over as many as half a dozen 2-3 footers. In a high water year, the waves can reach 4 feet or more, approaching Class III. After the waves, also be wary of squirrely water moving at you from river left, coming from the middle finger.



A view from downstream of teams entering the rapid – allow more space between teams than above, because this is what can happen...





If you dump, a Ranger boat will be nearby, either at the island about .5 km. downstream, or standing by in the river, and can assist you. The island is usually marked with a fire or beacon. The Rangers are allowed to guide you to safe water or shore so you can dry out and get back in your boat and carry on. If you do decide to scratch at this point, there is road access at Tatchun Creek on river right about 2 kms. downstream. And you will need to go back to Carmacks or on to Dawson and notify race officials of your situation.

But on average, only 2 or 3 teams dump each race. If you are alert, line up right and enter the right hand channel dead center, you should have a nice, exhilarating ride.



Photos by Harry Kern and Jeff Brady