

## Whispering Death— Strainers, Sweepers, and You

By Tamia Nelson

*You can never know, till you try it, what a dead pull a river makes against a man. Death himself had me by the heels, for this was his last ambushade, and he must now join personally in the fray.*

*Robert Louis Stevenson, An Inland Voyage*

April 16, 2002

**W**hitewater! It's that time of year—at least in northern North America. Even in near-drought areas, the winter snowpack's melting, and the ice is off the water. The rivers are running fast, and paddlers' pulses are keeping step. It's a good time to be in a boat, on a river. It's a good time to be alive.

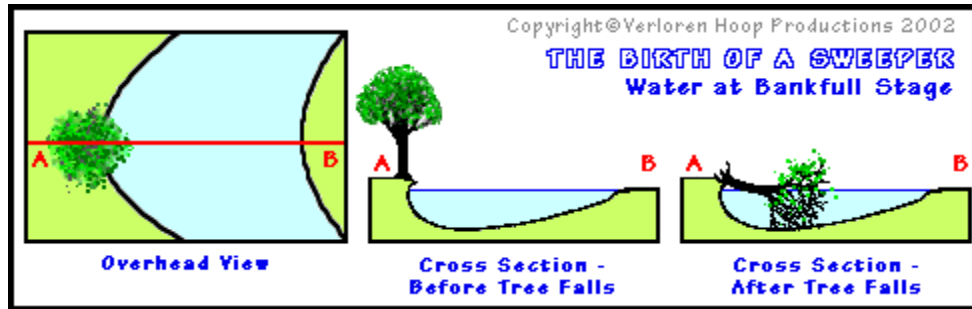
*Alive.* Get it? Spring whitewater is **cold and fast**. And it can kill as well as thrill. Even tiny streams hold whispering death.

What's "whispering death"? It's my name for one of the deadliest killers on the water: the *strainer*. And what's a strainer? Anything with holes big enough to let water through, but still small enough to stop a boat—or a body. There are a lot of them around: culverts, downed trees, undercut ledges, fences, even abandoned cars.

Why are strainers deadly? Have you ever watched a fly that's been caught in the blast of air from a fan and then thrown against a screen? The blast slips right through the metal mesh, but the fly is pinned down by the force. It struggles and buzzes until you shut off the fan. Or until it dies.

The same thing can happen to a paddler caught in a strainer. The water slips through easily. The paddler doesn't. She struggles, of course, but unless she can haul herself up and out of the water, or unless she's rescued by someone else, she stays pinned like that fly on the screen. Nobody's going to shut off the water, after all. And what if her head happens to be under the surface when she's pinned? Then her life expectancy is measured by the length of time she can hold her breath.

Ledges and abandoned cars notwithstanding, the commonest strainer on most rivers is the fallen tree. It's a familiar story. Spring floodwaters eat away at the riverbanks on the outside of each bend, **where the current is fastest**. Sooner or later, the undercut banks collapse, often bringing one or more trees down at the same time. Sometimes the trees keep their connection to the bank, hanging down over the water. (Then they're called *sweepers*.) Sometimes the whole tree is submerged and wedged fast where it fell. Either way, the end result is a thicket of branches. The river sweeps right through. But you won't, will you?



Where does "whispering death" come into the picture? The next time you're on a river—or walking on the bank—keep your eyes open. When you spot a downed tree in the water, stop and listen. (**CAUTION** If you're paddling, approach strainers from *downstream* only! Never float down on a strainer from upstream. And if you're walking along the bank, be sure that it's not about to give way, tumbling you in.)

Listen! Hear the water's sibilant *shush, shush, shushing* through the branches? That's the siren song of whispering death.

Chances are good that you won't have to look very far to find a strainer. They're not rare. You can see them almost anywhere: big rivers, small streams, even along the margins of reservoirs with fast-moving deep currents. And while spring floodwaters are the most dangerous times, strainers can be killers at any season of the year. Farwell once rescued a woman who got into trouble in early summer, on a placid reach of a tiny trout stream. The current probably wasn't moving along at more than one-half-mile an hour, but that was enough. The water was still cold. The woman was weak. And she was stuck in the branches of a downed sycamore like a fly on a screen. Happily, she survived. She was lucky.

Not all downed trees are dangerous to paddlers, of course. On the margins of lakes they're part of the scenery, and good habitat into the bargain. Lunkers often lurk among the tangled branches of lakeside sweepers.

Still, any combination of fast (or even not-so-fast) water and downed trees can be deadly. This isn't a new discovery. The nineteenth-century English writer Robert Louis Stevenson (*Treasure Island, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) was a keen kayaker. But a sweeper nearly put an end to his career before it had properly begun. Here's the story, just as he told it in his first book, *An Inland Voyage*:

I was aware of another fallen tree within a stonecast. I had my back-board down in a trice, and aimed for a place where the trunk seemed high enough above the water, and the branches not too thick to let me slip below.... The tree caught me about the chest, and while I was yet struggling to make less of myself and get through, the river took the matter out of my hands and bereaved me of my boat. The *Arethus* swung round broadside on, leaned over, ejected so much of me as still remained on board, and, thus disencumbered, whipped under the tree, righted, and went merrily away down stream.

I do not know how long it was before I scrambled on to the tree to which I was left clinging, but it was longer than I cared about.... The stream ran away with my heels as fast as I could pull up my shoulders, and I seemed, by the weight, to have all the water of the [River] Oise in my trousers' pockets. You can never know, till you try it, what a dead pull a river makes against a man. Death himself had me by the heels.... And still I held to my paddle. At last I dragged myself onto my stomach on the trunk, and lay there a breathless sop, with a mingled sense of humor and injustice.... On my tomb, if ever I have one, I mean to get these words inscribed: *He clung to his paddle.*

Stevenson may have hung onto his paddle, but he did one Very Bad Thing: he tried to slip through the branches of a sweeper. He didn't make the same mistake again. Neither should you.

There's only one way to tackle strainers. Avoid them.

How? Any way you can. Sometimes you'll have to portage. Sometimes—particularly in spring—you'll even have to pick a different river. But most places, most of the time, your paddle will keep you out of trouble.

Here's the deal. Sweepers are most often found on the outside of bends. Unfortunately, that's right where the current wants to take you. But be of good cheer. If you're a strong, competent paddler, you can almost always [take the ferry out of trouble](#).

"Take the ferry"? What does that mean? Back in the old days of wagon-roads and cart-horses, there weren't as many bridges as there are now. Many roads ended at the riverbank. If you wanted to cross, you had to take the ferry.

But how did the ferry get across? Ferry operators, being clever folks, looked for a free ride. They gazed out at the river. It's too bad all that energy couldn't be harnessed, they thought. And then they realized that it could. Just string a pair of cables across the river at the ferry-crossing. Tie the ferry to the cables at bow and stern, with loops in the lines. Kick the stern (upstream end) of the ferry out into the current. Cast off. What happens next? Magic. The rushing water pushes hard on the angled boat, but the cables keep it from slipping downstream. So it slides sideways, from one bank of the river to the other. The bow points where you've been. The stern points where you're going. It's fast. It's cheap. It's easy. It's a piece of cake. A lot of ferry-operators got rich.

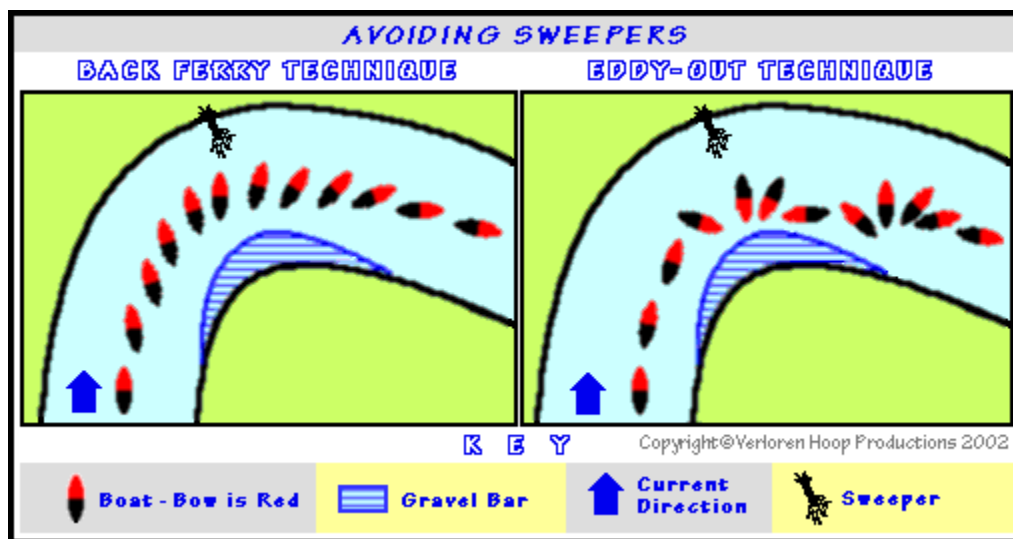
Of course you're not tied to a cable when you're in your boat, are you? But you have a paddle. All you have to do to hold yourself stationary is to back-paddle. The force of the current will do the rest. Strainer coming up? No problem! Just point your bow at it—yes point the bow *at* the strainer—kick the stern toward the *inside* of the bend, and back-paddle. You'll glide away from danger as easily as if you'd taken the ferry.

Well, maybe it's not always that simple. You have to get the angle right, for one thing. You need to remember that the current doesn't run parallel to the banks in bends: it heads for the outside. And you have to set your angle relative to the current. When you're headed downstream, you aim your bow toward the thing you want to avoid and then kick the stern away from it, making an

angle *across the line of the current*. If you're still heading where you don't want to go, open the angle: push the stern over even more.

Of course, the faster the water, the harder you'll have to paddle to hold your own against the current. And you'll have to close the angle to keep from being swept downstream, too. In slow water, you can afford to be almost broadside to the current. As the river speeds up, however, you have to tighten the angle. Then, when the river runs faster than you can paddle even when you're paddling as hard as you can, it's time to open up the angle again. But now you can't help slipping downstream. Fast. So be sure that you've given yourself plenty of room to maneuver.

Confused? I'm not surprised. You can't learn to do this in your living room. Supervised practice is essential.



Fast water is one thing. Big waves are something else. Executing a ferry in Class III-IV whitewater is neither simple or easy. So start out in safe water first, with skilled friends standing by and not a strainer in sight. You'll also want to work on the bow-upstream ferry. It gives you more power and better control, but you won't be able to see where you're going. You'll need to remember that you've swapped ends, too: when you've turned around and you're facing upriver, you want to point your *stern* at the danger, and angle the *bow* away. (Need help keeping this straight? Just remember to point the downstream end of your boat—whether bow or stern—at the thing you want to avoid, and angle the upstream end toward safety. That's all there is to it.)

Of course, it's even better to avoid trouble in the first place. Stay off rivers in flood. When rivers rise over their banks, even familiar things can become lethal traps, and there's no strainer more deadly than a barbed wire fence. Once the water falls, *scout every drop you plan to run*, every time you run it, even if you ran it just last week. A single heavy rain can create new strainers overnight. And except for the low-water days of summer, *stay on the inside of bends*. This is where the ferry comes in handy. If in doubt, simply keep your stern tucked in and back-paddle.

Taken by surprise? (This shouldn't happen, but from time to time it does.) No time to set up a ferry? In a narrow stream you can sometimes eddy out in the slacker water on the inside of a bend, drift down till you're clear of danger, and then peel out into the main current again. It's worth trying.

And what if, despite your best efforts, you find yourself caught in a strainer someday? Don't try to swim through the branches! You don't want to be pinned underwater. Instead, lean downstream and grab your would-be killer with both hands. (Forget about your paddle. Sorry, RLS!) Then haul yourself out and up—out of your boat and up toward safety. Leave your boat to look after itself. Get right up on the trunk of the tree if you can. If you can't, concentrate on keeping your head above water. And be very glad you never paddle fast water alone.

Does this sound scary? It is. And there aren't any guarantees that you'll live to tell the tale. I don't call strainers "whispering death" for nothing. So when danger looms up in front of you, use your head and take the ferry. You'll be glad you did.