

# Row, Row, Row Your Boat

How to choose the right oar for your rowboat

BY PETER A. ROBSON

**M**ost boaters have accumulated a number of various oars to go with the tenders they've owned over the years. While it's a simple matter to grab whatever pair is handiest or in the best repair, using the right oar for the boat can make rowing a much easier and more pleasant experience.

In an effort to make sense of my own collection of half a dozen pairs, I talked to Ken Lott of Qualicum Beach-based Barkley Sound Oar and Paddle ([www.barkleysoundoar.com](http://www.barkleysoundoar.com)). Lott has made thousands of wooden oars and paddles,

and he may be the only full-time oar and paddle maker in the province. Who better to ask?

**Wooden Oars** Lott builds his oars from Sitka spruce, which he laminates. In years gone by, oars were crafted from solid pieces of lumber. Today, however, good straight lumber is harder and harder to find. With the advent of great epoxy adhesives, laminated oars are now just as strong and weigh the same as solid oars. While spruce (whether Sitka or another eastern variety) is the most common oar material, some manufacturers use ash, which is heavier and more limber yet very durable, or "generic" wood, which is often associated with the lowest-priced wooden oars. There are also aluminum and plastic oars—usually the least expensive of all—and composite oars, for sculls and other high-performance rowboats. However, most oars are still made from laminated wood.

**Length** is probably the most important consideration. Ken uses a simple formula for the average rowboat: One-half the beam of the boat (measured at the oarlocks), in feet, multiplied by 25 then divided by seven. He rounds the answer up to the nearest six-inch increment if the boat is more than 10' long and rounds down if the boat is shorter than 10'.

For example, let's look at a 12' boat with a four-foot beam. One half the beam is two, which is multiplied by 25 to get 50; 50 divided by seven is 7.14 feet. Because the boat is 12' long, round up. The oars should each be seven feet, six inches in length.

Think of the oarlocks as fulcrums. If the oars are too long, there will be too much weight outboard, making the arc of the strokes longer and the boat harder to row. ▶

The author's neighbour with an armful of oars in a variety of styles.



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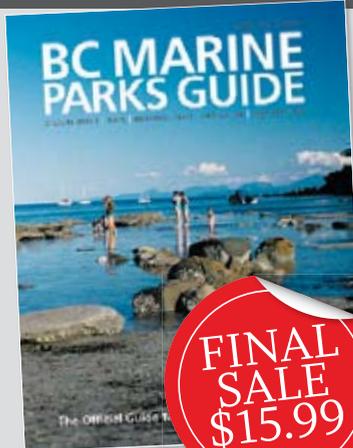
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As well, the farther out the oars, the lower the handles will have to be held in relation to your body. If the oar is too short, the opposite will be true and you'll have to make shorter and more frequent strokes and hold the oar handles higher in relation to your body. The ideal oars will be comfortable to row at about 24-30 strokes per minute.

**Blades** Most oar blades are between 4.5 and six inches wide. The ridge that runs down the centre of the wide part of the blade provides stiffness. The blade then thins as it gets to the edges, which means less weight where it isn't needed—and this is very important. Narrower blades are more efficient, as they move through the water easier, but the trade-off is they're more fragile. They are most common on higher performance rowboats and racing shells. Wide blades have more surface area and a bit more weight.

Some rowers prefer spoon blades; these are thin blades that are cupped for more hydrodynamic efficiency. Most of the famous Tyeef skiffs used in Campbell River are fitted with this type of oar. Their increased efficiency makes them ideal for those who are rowing

high-performance rowboats for long periods of time. Spoon blades are also more expensive since they are more difficult to craft. They often have fibre and epoxy tips for added durability. Copper sheet was used in the past, but fishing guides found the sharp edges too often cut their lines.

Some oars are now capped with plastic blades, which can be more durable than wood. While they are less costly to produce, if the blade is too flexible, it will bend and therefore be less efficient. Flex is fine for casual rowing, but too much flex can make a noticeable difference to the avid rower.

**Handles** are generally either barrel-shaped, tapered, reverse-tapered or straight. When choosing oars, your hands should fit comfortably around the handles. If the handle is too thick, your hands will cramp easier; too thin and the chances of blistering your hands increase. Remember, in choosing a handle, fit and comfort are key.

**Oarlocks** There are three common types of oarlocks: O-shaped, open horn (U-shaped) and stainless/plastic P-shaped. The P-shaped



Ken Lott crafts an oar, from beginning to end, at his Qualicum Beach shop.



models are made locally by Scotty. They should be used with the P facing forward.

There are several standard oarlock sizes; the size should match the diameter of the oar and its collar. Regardless of type, the collar should have 1/8-inch clearance all around. There should be just enough play in the oarlock sockets so they can move freely; too much play can overstress the oar shaft. One caution: Bronze oarlocks should not be left in place on aluminum boats, as the two dissimilar metals can accelerate corrosion.

**Collars** are most often made of plastic or leather. Plastic collars have a lengthwise split that allows them to be fitted over the oars. They are the most common and least expensive option. They should be tacked in place so the seam is upright, in line with the blade edge. Plastic collars come with tacks. Be careful not to use big nails, as they will create a weak spot on the shaft.

Leather collars usually come in kit form with thread and complete instructions. While about four times the cost of plastic collars, they are much quieter, which is a bonus for fly fishermen trying to sneak up on "The General." They are also longer than plastic collars, thus protecting more of the oar shaft from chafe.

When fitting new collars, one simple way to determine where along the oar shaft they should be is to put the oars in the oarlocks and put a thumb over the inboard end of each oar. Your thumbs should just touch (a gap of about 1.75 to two inches). But before tacking in place, make sure both collars are equidistant from the ends of each oar handle.

**Lott uses his thumbs to demonstrate the preferred gap between oars.**

Some rowers opt to overlap oars by about six inches or more. This is most common in narrow, high-performance boats (such as racing sculls), where it

is more difficult to get a good stroke because so much of the oar is outboard. Overlapping allows greater leverage and counterbalances the weight of the oar with more inboard weight. Rowing with overlapping oars is generally done with one oar higher than the other. But be warned, it takes good technique to avoid chewing up your hands.

**Finish** Most oars are finished with several coats of clear urethane. This is great if you plan on taking good care of them. Otherwise, if they are going to be stashed in the boat, beat up and left in the weather, it might be best to apply a couple coats of a solid-colour, urethane-compatible paint. 🦉

## Oar manufacturers

**Alder Bay Boats** (custom oars only)  
604-685-1730

**Barkley Sound Oar and Paddle Ltd.**  
[www.barkleysoundoar.com](http://www.barkleysoundoar.com)

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