

OUTDOORS

Keeping the cooler cold

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Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

A freezer is similar to a cooler, with the exception that a cooler has no refrigeration unit to keep items inside at a stable temperature. When the electricity that operates the refrigeration unit disappears, the freezer becomes just an insulated box, gradually warming and hoping for the best.

At our home in the Keys, I always kept a good supply of frozen shrimp for bait, squid, menhaden, and boxes of ground chum, used in catching live bait. We also kept fish that we could cut up and use in lobster traps.

Since my wife objected to my keeping such “nasty” fish bait anywhere near her precious food supply, all of this nasty stuff was sentenced to live in a small chest freezer. She did not want it in the house either, so the little freezer lived in the carport, all in the interest of marital bliss.

We had one of the many hurricanes move through, during a very hot time in August, leaving us with an amount of storm damage to clean up. The power was knocked out. Usually, the power comes back in a few days, thereby saving all your frozen goods.

This time it was three weeks before the power returned, long enough to “perish” all perishables around our place. The first



I have a long history with coolers. This Gott cooler was with me in San Salvador back in 1993, used as a fish box. I still have this cooler today. I guess when you buy a cooler, you adopt it for life. In case you were wondering, that is a 53-pound mahi mahi we caught on 12 pound test tackle. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

rule was that nobody was to open that freezer in the carport for many obvious reasons.

One of my fishing buddies happened by, passing through the carport on his way to my patio. Whether he suffered a temporary moment of mental acuity or a bout of garden variety stupidity, he opened that freezer, presumably to check my supply of fish bait. Bad idea.

The stench that emanated from that chest freezer was enough to give a road-kill eating coyote the dry heaves, and it did similar to my friend. They say loud noises can permanently damage your hearing, and I believe that a horrible stench can permanently damage your olfactory system. I know his was useless for years after the incident, and my ears were damaged from his screaming.

One of the biggest chal-

lenges to using a cooler properly, is preventing the ice from melting quickly, thereby warming the contents. Not only can your sandwiches turn into a soggy, inedible mess, you could be faced with spoilage, creating a health hazard. Besides, your cold drinks will be warm and who wants a hot beer?

We will assume that you have a quality cooler suitable for the outing you are planning. The soft coolers are fine for day trips, and possible a quick overnigher as long as you don't encounter extreme heat. For longer trips, from several days to a week or better, will require the better hard-sided coolers with maximum insulation.

For the longer trips, I started using dry ice instead of the big blocks of frozen water. My complaint with the regular ice is the water in the bottom

of the cooler that my food is floating around in. You need to drain that water periodically, but the problem usually gets ahead of me, releasing the great flood on my food.

Dry ice has a temperature of minus 109 degrees F. When it melts, dry ice releases a gas rather than turning to water and ruining your paper wrapped steaks. Dry ice melts rather quickly, so you will need more of it for a long trip. 3 pounds of dry ice will melt in 24 hours, so 15 pounds will keep your food frozen for several days.

Opening and closing the cooler throughout the day will cause ice or dry ice to melt quicker, so it is best to keep out of the cooler as much as possible, kind of like when my grandmother yelled at me for staring into the open refrigerator when I was grazing for snacks.

The secret to keeping dry ice cold longer is to put the ice on the bottom of the cooler and pack the already frozen foods on top of it. Fill any voids in the cooler with newspaper or bubble wrap. You don't want any open airspaces.

Have two coolers for your trip. Store drinks, snacks and lunch sandwiches in a cooler with regular ice. This is the cooler the kids will hit 20 times a day for sodas and candy bars. Use the other cooler for your frozen goods, packed with dry ice, and use it as a freezer.

Dry ice does not come without drawbacks and safety concerns. Dry ice is more expensive than water ice, and you can't make it at home. You never want your skin to come in contact with dry ice, as instant frostbite will occur.

As dry ice melts, it gives off carbon dioxide

gas, which should never be inhaled. If the cooler with the dry ice is in your vehicle, you should drive with the windows down, or don't keep the cooler in the passenger compartment. Headaches, rapid breathing, and passing out can occur if exposed to too much carbon dioxide.

Proper ventilation is the key. Experts recommend keeping the drain plug loose to allow the gas to escape and not have a pressure buildup inside the cooler. Carbon dioxide is heavier than oxygen so it will sink to lower areas in a vehicle or camper and you must be especially mindful of your pets.

Dry ice is a great alternative to conventional ice, especially if you use it as a freezer and not a regular use cooler. Be sure to follow all safety protocols and keep pets and people safe from the carbon dioxide gasses and your food should be safe from spoilage.

Above all, remember to not open a bait freezer if the power has been off a week or better. My friend can attest to that, and I think he has finally stopped gagging, but his sense of smell has not returned.

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Higher water, higher risks

When high runoff occurs in the Colorado River basin, riverside campsites become fewer and fewer.

Such levels of snowmelt and runoff happened to back off last week on the Green River, during which a group of us had planned several days of paddling boats on a multi-day trip in Labyrinth Canyon.

Before making a final decision in times of such higher and faster water levels, even upon rivers without whitewater, groups of self-propelled boaters must objectively consider their individual members' interests, skills, and experience. Within our group we encouraged each boater to consider their personal answers to several questions before committing.

Have I ever experienced very cold river water from capsizing into it? How strong of a swimmer am I? Do I have the skills to recover myself, my boat, and my paddle after suddenly spilling?

Can I keep my boat upright during the sudden crossing from fast current into an eddy of water moving the opposite direction, to reach a landing? Have I ever assisted in the rescue of a group member who capsized in fast moving water? Further, have I ever taken a multi-day whitewater rescue class? Am I still interested in being on a



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By John T. Unger

trip that may have increasing chances of involving such events?

Important questions such as these prompted over half of our group to withdraw from the planned trip, hoping for another chance at it later in the season. They wisely sized up their own interests, skills, and experience. They then recognized that paddling 45 miles of desert canyons in the summer heat is preferable to getting in over one's head this spring.

Literally over one's head.

In addition to higher waters having impacts on agriculture, grazing areas, and lower valley housing, it also impacts the portion of Colorado's economy that is based on outdoor recreation.

So many factors must be considered in the somewhat unpredictable spring river levels. Dead timber that has been

laying for years above the waterline will soon become floating hazards as high runoff gets higher in the month ahead.

In the microcosm of our multi-day river trip plan, we now had a group of three people planning on paddling two boats.

In order to play it safer, we changed our plan to make it three people in three separate boats. This would improve our chances for assisting any one of our members whose boat may capsize.

Never having been on that segment of the Green River at 21,000 cubic feet per second (cfs), we worked to stack the deck of cards in our favor as best we could.

As it turned out, two items that members of our group carried in our small, self-supported boats, made the trip safer and very worthwhile. One was a small folding camp shovel, about the size of a Bible. The other was a basic foam sleeping pad, with deep horizontal ridges.

At such relatively high water, the riverside campsites (that were not already underwater) had steep, slick banks as landing areas, were narrow, and could not fit all three boats tied up at the bank.

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Sunrise from a side gulch on the Green River reflects in the high waters from the runoff after this winter of remarkably deep snows. (John Unger/Special to the MDP)