

Learning in Nature - Rivers and Creeks

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Rivers have long been a favorite metaphor in children's literature, representing the "journey of life" and the path toward self-discovery (Burk, 1996). Whether you are looking for a whimsical picture book about a paper boat or an epic survival tale, here is a list of books that capture the magic of floating away to distant lands.

Classic Tales & Poetry

- **Paddle-to-the-Sea** by Holling C. Holling: Paddle to the Sea is perhaps the ultimate example of a floating journey in children's literature. This 1941 Caldecott Honor book follows the odyssey of a small wooden canoe carved by a young Indigenous boy in the mountains above Lake Superior. The figure, "Paddle-to-the-Sea," is set loose to travel through all five Great Lakes, over Niagara Falls, and down the St. Lawrence River until he finally reaches the Atlantic Ocean. The book is renowned for its detailed illustrations and maps that teach geography, ecology, and industrial history as the little canoe navigates through locks, storms, and various human encounters.
- **A Child's Garden of Verses** by Robert Louis Stevenson: Includes the timeless poem "Where Go the Boats?", which depicts a child floating paper boats down a river and wondering where they will eventually land "away down the river, a hundred miles or more" (Stevenson, 1885).
- **The Wind in the Willows** by Kenneth Grahame: A foundational classic of river literature, following the adventures of Mole and Ratty as they navigate the joys and dangers of life "messaging about in boats" on the riverbank (Goga, 2025).
- **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn** by Mark Twain: Perhaps the most famous "floating journey" in literature, documenting Huck and Jim's voyage down the Mississippi River on a wooden raft (Goga, 2025).

Contemporary Picture Books

- **What Is a River?** by Monika Vaicenavičienė: A philosophical and beautifully illustrated "hybrid" book that explores a river's many roles—as a journey, a home, a mystery, and a link to the past (Goga, 2025).
- **River of Dreams** by Hudson Talbott: Follows the history and ecology of the Hudson River, framing the water's path as a dream-like journey from the mountains to the sea.
- **A River** by Marc Martin: An imaginative journey where a girl looks out her window and follows a river through forests, cities, and farmland until it reaches the ocean.

Adventure & Journeys to Faraway Lands Middle Grades

- **Streams to the River, River to the Sea** by Scott O'Dell: A historical fiction classic based on the life of Sacajawea, focusing on her journey with Lewis and Clark as they traveled the Missouri and Columbia Rivers toward the Pacific Ocean (Burk, 1996).
- **Children of the River** by Linda Crew: Uses the Mekong River as a powerful symbol for the journey of a young Cambodian refugee adjusting to life in America (Burk, 1996).
- **Swallows and Amazons** by Arthur Ransome: While set on a lake, this series captures the spirit of independent nautical adventure as children sail to "Wild Cat Island" to set up camp and live like explorers (Dewan, 2021).

Nature & Ecology (Non-Fiction)

- **Rivers: An Incredible Journey from Source to Sea** (2023) by Simon Chapman: A deep dive into how rivers shape the world as they travel across continents (Goga, 2025).
- **Think of an Eel** by Karen Wallace: A poetic non-fiction book that follows the incredible thousands-of-miles journey of eels from the Sargasso Sea to freshwater rivers and back again (Wallace & Bostock, n.d.).
- **Amazon River** (2021) by Sangma Francis: Explores the wildlife and indigenous cultures found along the world's most famous tropical river (Goga, 2025).

References

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- Goga, N. (2025). Vibrant Rivers in Three Hybrid Books for Young Readers Addressing Climate Change and Matter Awareness. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 63, 51-58. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2025.a952087>
- Stevenson, R. L. (1885). A child's garden of verses. [https://web.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Stevenson,Child'sGarden of Verses,1885.pdf](https://web.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Stevenson,Child'sGardenofVerses,1885.pdf)
- Wallace, K., & Bostock, M. (n.d.). The Lyrical Voice in Non-Fiction: Think of an Eel. The English Association.

Fieldwork: Engaging Learners with a River

Creating biodegradable boats is a wonderful way to blend a science lesson with environmental stewardship. Since these boats will eventually "sink" or wash ashore, the goal is to use materials that are essentially bird food, fish food, or mulch. Here are several ways to build "leave-no-trace" vessels:

1. The "Snack Boat" (Edible & Safe)

This is the safest option for wildlife. If a duck finds this boat, it's just a floating buffet.

- The Hull: A hollowed-out cucumber, a zucchini, or a large dried seed pod (like a Milkweed pod).
- The Mast: A twig or a stick of celery.
- The Sail: A large leaf (maple, oak, or hosta) or a thin slice of apple.
- Binding: Use honey or peanut butter as "glue," or simply poke the mast directly into the hull.

2. The "Twig Raft" (Forest Floor Finds)

This mimics natural debris found in rivers and provides a sturdy platform for "passengers" like acorns or pebbles.

- The Hull: Collect 5–10 straight twigs of similar length.
- Binding: Use natural twine (jute, hemp, or cotton). Avoid nylon or "fishing line" string, as these can entangle birds.
- Technique: Lay the twigs side-by-side and use a simple "over-under" lashing technique with the twine to bind them together.

3. The "Ice Voyager" (Zero Waste)

This boat is the most eco-friendly because it literally disappears into the water it floats on.

- The Hull: Freeze water in a Tupperware container or a recycled yogurt cup.
- The Mast/Sail: Before freezing, place a stick in the water (you may need to tape it to the top of the container to keep it upright while it freezes). Once frozen, attach a leaf sail.
- The Journey: As the boat travels, it melts, leaving only a twig and a leaf behind.

4. The "Bark Canoe" (Traditional Style)

Inspired by indigenous craftsmanship, these use the natural buoyancy of tree bark.

- The Hull: Pieces of fallen birch bark or thick pine bark. Note: Only use bark that has already fallen to the ground; never peel it from a living tree.
- The Sealant: If you need to plug holes, use pine resin (sap) mixed with a little charcoal or sand to create a natural, waterproof "pitch."

Even if they seem "natural," avoid these items in open waterways:

- Bread: Contrary to popular belief, bread is actually junk food for ducks and can cause "Angel Wing" deformity.
- Paper/Cardboard: While biodegradable, many modern papers contain bleach, dyes, or plastic coatings (like those on milk cartons) that shouldn't be in the water.
- Rubber Bands: These are a major choking hazard for fish and turtles.
- Glues/Tape: Even "non-toxic" school glue can be harmful to water quality in large amounts. Stick to natural lashing or sap.

Quick Checklist for a "Green" Launch:

- No Plastic: Check for hidden stickers or synthetic strings.
- Natural Dyes: If you want to "paint" your boat, use berry juice or mud.
- Retrieve if Possible: If you can reach the boat at the end of the journey, it's always best to pack it out, but these materials ensure that if it gets away, the river stays healthy.

Building and launching a boat in a small creek versus a large river:

Building and launching a boat in a small creek versus a large river offers two very different "scientific" experiences. Here is how to approach both, along with a few safety tips:

The Small Creek Journey (The "Scientist" Approach)

Creeks are perfect for controlled experiments and observation.

- The Dynamics: Creeks have "eddies" (circular currents) and "riffles" (shallow, choppy water).
- The Launch: Kids can follow their boat by walking along the bank.
- The Experiment: Build three different types of boats (e.g., a Twig Raft, a Bark Canoe, and an Ice Voyager) and see which one handles the rocks better.
- Pro-Tip: Tie a piece of natural jute twine to the boat. This allows the child to "reel it in" if it gets stuck in a tangle of roots, keeping the child safely on the bank.

The Large River Journey (The "Paddle-to-the-Sea" Approach)

Rivers are about distance and mystery. This is more about the "dream" of where the boat might go.

- The Dynamics: Stronger currents and "strainers" (fallen trees that act like sieves).
- The Launch: Since you likely won't be able to follow the boat for miles, focus on the send-off ceremony.
- The Message: Using a non-toxic marker or fruit juice, write a small "ID" on the wood or bark (e.g., "Carved in [Town Name], 2026"). Like the boy in Paddle-to-the-Sea, you are sending a traveler into the world.
- Safety: Never let a child reach into a fast-moving river to retrieve a boat. If it's gone, it's gone! That's why we use biodegradable materials, so there's no guilt about "littering" if the river takes it.

Curriculum/activities for T-F and beyond

Nature field journals

Technical drawing journals

Plein air painting

Animal photos-iNaturalist posting

Species journals

- Leaf collection
- Seed collection
- Rock Collection

Trading cards

Creative dramatics

Story books

Published class compilation books

Gallery Hanging

Gallery Walk

Artist feedback notes

Resources

Technical Drawing

<https://www.eeducation.org/resources/firefly-drafts/>

<https://www.eeducation.org/resources/austins-butterfly/>

Creative Dramatics

Minnesota State University - Andy Johnson

<https://youtu.be/MXtxLCESqos?si=WHGS9P0VOnaAdnry>