



BIRD DOG BOATS OF FLORIDA INC.

ADAPTIVE OPERATING PROCEDURES

By Capt. Thomas Griffin
Managing Director of Bird Dog Boats
Over 250 Adaptive Voyages on Bird Dog Boats since 2018
100% Safety Record



Special thanks to Eddie Hall for assisting in the development of these procedures.



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Ramping from a Cement Boat Launch

The most secure method of embarking a person using a wheelchair is on a private cement boat launch or a boat launch that has very little from other boats launching on the ramp. The eight-foot static ramp is positioned with the side rails onto the deck, not just the transition. In almost all cases, the wooden skeg chock is not needed if the boat is floating and the ramp reaches a dry area.

Pic 1 shows operations at the TECO boat ramp in Apollo Beach, FL for access into Tampa Bay. We have private use of this facility on our days of operation. This is the safest scenario possible for embarking and disembarking wheelchair users.

Pic 2 shows operations at Venetian Park in Leesburg Florida for access to Lake Harris. The boat ramp has six launch positions. During the week, there is always a launch position open for BDB's use. On weekends and holidays, this boat ramp is very crowded and not safe for BDB's operations.

Warning: Do not attempt to embark wheelchair users on a cement boat launch that has other boats using or waiting to use the boat launch. This can be very dangerous. It is the responsibility of the adaptive boat captain to make sure the area of embarking is safe, and the general environment is calm and conducive to good communications between the boat captain and guests coming aboard.



Pic 1



Pic 2



Ramping from a Cement Boat Launch

Ramping from a cement boat launch can only be done in calm conditions. The boat must be stable and secured to a dock or other static point on land. The boat needs to be secured and not moving for embarking wheelchair users.

Pic 1 shows operations in Bayport, FL which give access to the Gulf of Mexico and the Weeki Wachee River. In this picture both gates are open and two 6-foot folding ramps are used for extra wide access (side rails on deck). This boat ramp has three cement launches. One is separated and allows safe embarking on weekdays at the Bay Port Boat Ramp. Nearby is accessible parking and accessible bathrooms.

Pic 2 shows operations at Lake Parker Park in Lakeland, FL. This is a small two launch boat ramp. The northern launch is too shallow and sandy for most boats to launch but perfect for Bird Dog Boats to embark. On Lake Parker, most boats including Bird Dog Boats launch at another boat ramp across the lake. The Lake Parker Park boat ramp is not used much making it perfect for embarking wheelchair users on weekdays. Nearby is accessible parking and accessible bathrooms.

Warning: Do not attempt to embark wheelchair users on a cement boat launch unless conditions are calm, the boat is secure, and there is safe access from the guest's car to the ramp on the boat.



Pic 1



Pic 2



Ramping from a Cement Boat Launch

In most cases the wooden skeg chock is not needed if the conditions are calm, the aft is floating, and the skegs are not touching the cement boat ramp. But in some cases, use of the wooded skeg chock on cement boat ramps will protect the skegs from scrapping and/or give better stability for embarking.

Pic 1 shows operations in Safety Harbor, FL which gives access to Old Tampa Bay. The wooden skeg chock is used to give extra stability for embarking a very heavy power chair.

Pic 2 shows operations at the 2019 SportsAbility on Lake Hall in Tallahassee, The wooden skeg chock is used because there were 18 voyages in a 4-hour period. The wooden skeg chock made it easy for the boat to be positioned and secured by two land-based assistants for quick and safe embarking and disembarking. Notice Capt. Thomas Griffin standing on the ramp as the guest rolls onto the ramp.

Warning: When using ramps for embarking and disembarking wheelchair users, the adaptive boat captain should stand on the ramp, securing the ramp, as the guest rolls onto the ramp. After the guest is secure on the ramp, the boat captain steps off the ramp allowing passage onto or off the boat. The adaptive boat captain always gives his full attention to guests embarking and disembarking and encourages everyone involved in the process to pay close attention to ensure a safe and enjoyable process.



Pic 1



Pic 2



Ramping from a Shoreline

Ramping from a shoreline is not used very often because typically there is not very good wheelchair access to a shoreline in which the boat can be secured. But a solution can be the use of Mobi-mat. Sometimes shoreline logistics need to be used on out-islands or for emergency disembarking.

Pic 1 shows operations at Lake Thonotosassa near Tampa, FL. The grassy bank was good enough to provide access for a manual wheelchair user with an assistant. This private venue offered accessible parking near the boat, accessible bathrooms, and a nice accessible restaurant.

Pic 2 shows operations at Lake Parker in Lakeland, near parking at the boat ramp. Note how the sandy shoreline naturally secured the aft of the boat. Twenty feet from shore the depth was 2.5 feet which is more than enough to motor. The small, protected cove keeps the boat out of the wind and current. This makes for a safe and enjoyable shoreline logistic.

Warning: When using a ramp operating from a shoreline, it is very important to understand the wind direction and current direction. The best scenario is a breeze blowing onshore and no water current, so the boat is naturally secured to the shore. Otherwise a boat line may be needed from the bow of the boat to the shoreline to secure the boat and keep it perpendicular to the shoreline.



Pic 1



Pic 2



Ramping from a Floating Dock

Ramping from a floating dock opens a new world of challenges to the adaptive boat captain. The captain should understand the logistics from the time the guests leave their car until the time the guests get back to their car. This includes making sure there is good accessible parking and accessible restrooms available. A place to rest and eat like an accessible picnic area is nice too.

The captain should give notice to the guests in advance that he will meet them on the shore and escort them onto the floating dock and onto the boat. The floating dock could be considered the most dangerous part of the day! Pics 1-4 show operations at Julian B Lane Park in Downtown Tampa.

Pic 2 shows the boat firmly secured on aft to the floating dock and the 8-foot static ramp firmly secured to the floating dock by its cleat. The side rail of the ramp is always on the dock, not just the transition plate. The surface height of the dock should be no more than 18" higher than the surface of the boat deck.

Warning: The adaptive boat captain is responsible for the safety of wheelchair users while on the floating dock. The captain should have everyone boarding the boat focus on the transition from shore to boat. Manual wheelchair users should have an assistant. Power wheelchair users should be mindful that their back wheels stays on the dock when turning.



Pic 1



Pic 2



Ramping from a Floating Dock

When the boat is secured to the floating dock, the surface of the gunnel should be higher than the surface of the floating dock (pic 3). The large transition plate should be on the dock and the small transition plate should be on the deck of the boat (pics 3 & 4).

After all guests are safely aboard, the 8-foot static ramp should be stored safely on the floating dock or ashore. Arrangements should be made in advance to store the static ramp, so it is not removed during the voyage. A secondary 6-foot folding ramp should be stowed on board, on the gunnel (pic 4) in case the static ramp goes missing or there is a need to disembark at another location.

When boarding wheelchair using guests, the adaptive boat captain should double check that the side rail of the ramp is on the dock and the ramp is firmly secured. The boat captain should stand on the ramp prior to the guest rolling onto the ramp. Once the wheelchair-using guest is firmly on the ramp, the boat captain steps off the ramp and allows the guest to embark or disembark.

Warning: It is the adaptive boat captain's responsibility to make sure the floating dock is safe for wheelchair-using guests. This process takes place well ahead of the event when the captain makes a survey of a venue to determine if it is safe for adaptive boating. The dock may be ADA approved, but not safe for adaptive boating.



Pic 3



Pic 4



Ramping from a Floating Dock

There are many factors at play when deciding to use a floating dock. Pasco County Parks funded over \$4000. for improvements and railing so Bird Dog Boats could operate from Anclote River Park near Tarpon Springs, FL. Knowing the type of wheelchair (manual or power) and other guests' requirements is important to understand if they can enjoy a particular venue with a floating dock.

Pic 1 shows Bird Dog Boat's owned facility and operations in Cedar Key, FL. The adaptive dock operation is railed on the wooden static dock. The Cement floating has ample run-off for the gangway and boat ramp. The dock is located in interior near the clam boat docks and provides safe embarking before a charter for touring or fishing in the Cedar Keys.

Pic 2 shows operations at Emerson Point Preserve, a county park in Palmetto, FL. The 6-foot folding ramp (side rails on dock) was OK to use for a guest we know well that has paraplegia and very good upper body strength. The boat was launched further up the Palmetto River and the folding ramp was brought aboard.

Warning: When using floating in salt water, it is very important to pay attention to the tides and the impact they have on 1) the ability of the boat to position back to the dock for disembarkation and 2) the angle of the gangway to the floating dock and the ability for the wheelchair using guests to use the gangway.



Pic 1



Pic 2



Deck Arrangements for Guests

The Bird Dog Boat is custom designed and built specifically for wheelchair users to roll on board and enjoy a day of boating or fishing. After 250 adaptive voyages, a proven deck arrangement has emerged. Two large coolers located aft function to accessibly store safety equipment, buffer the aft gates, and provide seating for able body guests. Except for the 6-foot folding ramp, gear should not be stored on the gunnels, where the ADA railing plays an important role in the guests' safety and comfort.

Pic 1 shows boat underway with guests using railing for security. The wheelchairs are not locked to the deck of the boat. The non-skid surface and railing provide stability and security for manual wheelchairs and power wheelchairs while underway.

Pic 2 shows boat at anchor or drifting while fishing. The angler is able to roll to all parts of the boat and fish on the railing. Keeping guests in their wheelchairs and giving them mobility to move around the boat is a big benefit of Bird Dog Boats.

Warning: Before motoring up, make sure there is equal weight disbursement bow to aft. Guests should be riding in the aft section of the boat, not in the bow near the engine well. A good practice is to have guest stay in area behind the helm, keep safety gear in the large coolers at aft, and operational gear in the bow.



Pic 1



Pic 2



Twenty Minute Multi-Voyage Events for Guests

How many guests can come on board during multi-voyage events? It is common for Bird Dog Boats to get invited to participate in large events that have many types of adaptive recreations.. A good example of this is SportsAbility in Tallahassee, FL. In 2023 there were over 600 participants. Bird Dog Boats made 18 voyages for 71 guests. Each voyage was about 20 minutes. Because the guests stay seated and do not move about the boat, we can board up to five guests including up to three manual wheelchairs or one power wheelchair.

Pic 1 shows Bird Dog Boats at SportsAbility 2019 in Tallahassee, FL with one push wheelchair and four other abled body guests.

Pic 2 shows Bird Dog Boats at SCI 2022 in downtown Tampa FL with one power wheelchair, two manual wheelchairs and two able body guests.

Warning: Take special care when transitioning between groups of guests during multi-voyage events. It is important to have support personnel ashore to coordinate the groups and assist in securing the boat. The group on board needs to clear the vessel to a safe area on shore before the next group can start boarding. The adaptive boat captain needs to closely mind the ramp during the transition between the groups.



Pic 1



Pic 2



Four Hour Touring & Fishing Charters for Guests

How many guests can come on board during a four-hour touring or fishing charter? The Bird Dog Boat is not limited by weight capacity on the deck, which will load approximately 8,000 lbs. The main consideration is the ergonomics of a safe and enjoyable outing. Because the guests need to move about the boat to enjoy their day, we can board up to four guests including up to three manual wheelchair users or one power wheelchair user.

Pic 1 shows Bird Dog Boats touring with a family of four on the Anclote River near Tarpon Springs, FL. One manual wheelchair user and three able body family members.

Pic 2 shows Bird Dog Boats fishing with Veterans in Anclote Bay near Tarpon Springs, FL. One power wheelchair user and three able body friends.

Warning: It is important to keep all guests behind the helm while the boat motor is operating, even at an idle speed. When the motor is turned off and the boat is secured by anchor or drifting, the guests are free to move about the boat. When the boat is underway, guests should be secured and seated. The captain should always ask everyone if they are ready to go before the boat is throttled up.



Pic 1



Pic 2



Design for Wet Operations, But Not Too Wet

Bird Dog Boats are designed for adaptive operations. With the motor well in the bow, wheelchair-using guests can easily roll on aft and have freedom to move about the boat. The gunnels are low so wheelchair-using guests can get close to the water and enjoy the activities.

Pic 1 shows Bird Dog Boats in Cedar Key, FL. The guests enjoy battling and landing a 3-foot bonnet head shark before safely returning it to the coastline of Atsena Otie Key.

Pic 2 shows Bird Dog Boats in Apollo Beach, FL. The guests enjoy pulling some blue crab traps. Note all four guests including a power chair are on the starboard rail and the boat is not listing.

It is normal for some water to come out of the motor well and over the gunnels. The boat is self-bailing and water flows out the aft and does not affect its non-skid surface. It is the responsibility of the captain to use his/her boating skills to make sure that too much water does not come on board for the guest's comfort. Salt water should not be splashed on manual or power wheelchairs. Yet a mild sea-spray can be very nice.

Warning: Because of the low gunnels, this boat is not intended for children under 12 years old who are not using wheelchairs.



Pic 1



Pic 2



BIRD DOG BOATS OF FLORIDA INC.

ADAPTIVE OPERATING PROCEDURES

Welcome to the Helm

An outstanding feature of Bird Dog Boats is the opportunity for a wheelchair user to roll up, take the helm, and experience the thrill of operating an outboard motor powered boat. During this operation, the captain should stay next to the helm with his/her hand on the throttle, while the guest has hands on the wheel.





Evaluate, Plan & Practice Venues

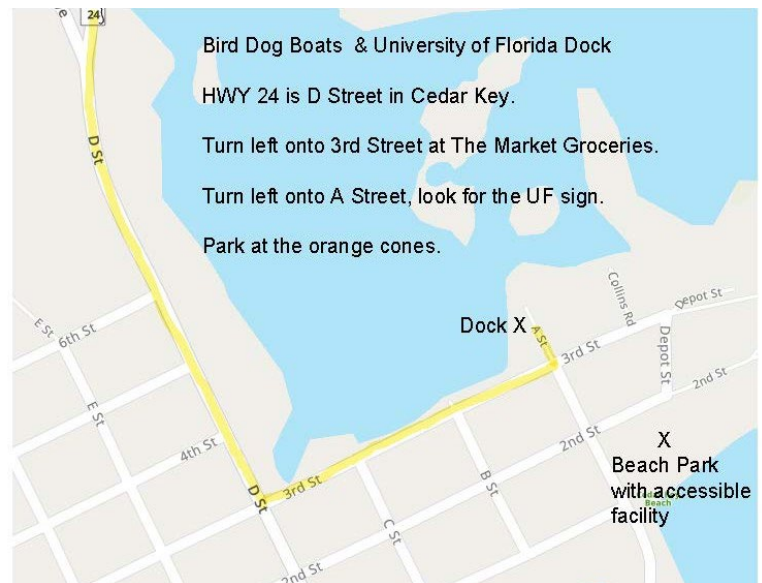
A good adaptive boating venue starts well ahead of the day of the outing. The adaptive boat captain is constantly evaluating potential venues and the many elements needed to make it successful. The director of Bird Dog Boats, Capt. Thomas Griffin is always available to add input to evaluation of adaptive boating venues.

Google Earth is a good place to start. Sometimes an adaptive venue can be eliminated just because it does not have an accessible restroom. Google Earth can provide other clues like do you have enough turn radius to launch the boat.

The next step is a visit to the venue without the boat. This is a good point to establish your ramping strategy. If all looks promising the operational trials with the boat and without the guest follow.

Ultimately the adaptive boat captain builds a sequence of events and checklists that lead up to meeting the guests at a scheduled time, on time, for a nice day out. It is important to give the guests maps and pictures of the venue, so they know what to expect.

Warning: Typically public boat ramps are too busy during weekends and holidays to safely execute adaptive boating operations. Unless there is a dedicated or private operation to embark and disembark the guests, it is better to operate from public boat ramps during the week.





Operational Support

Adaptive boat captains operating programs like Bird Dog Boats that serve wheelchair users should take extra precautions that allow quick response to mechanical problems like the motor not starting. At the very least, the captain should have a Sea Tow (or similar) membership and be in communication with the local Sea Tow captain on the day of operation.

For big events, it is a good idea to have Sea Tow at the event with standby operations, as shown in these pictures taken at the 2022 SRI event in downtown Tampa.

Sometimes Sea Tow is not available. This is the case on many freshwater lakes. The best option in this case have a dedicated support boat on the water with you. At the very least, on the day of the outing, be in communication with the party that will respond and provide tow services back to the launch.

