



's Most Exciting Coverage of Inshore Saltwater Fishing!

Cold-Weather Kayaking Tips for Staying Warm and Dry

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Every year, a handful of fishermen lose their lives due to falling out of a boat in frigid water. Kayak anglers are especially at risk for taking an unexpected swim. One clumsy move or a wake from a passing boat is all it takes to send an unprepared paddler overboard.



Photo: Jason Bryant

Having a good outer layer is important, but if you want to stay warm, a good baselayer is the key. This angler is wearing a fleece sweatshirt underneath his waterproof jacket.

Jeff Herman is a member of the Ocean Kayak pro fishing team, and is also an American Canoe Association (ACA) certified safety instructor. Here he shares his tips for staying safe on the water when the mercury drops.

Cotton Kills

When preparing for cold-weather fishing, most anglers put all their thought into what they'll wear for their outermost layer. But Herman says it's what you have on underneath that's most important.

"You need to think of not only how to stay dry, but also how to stay warm," he said. "Layering properly is vital if you want to stay warm on those cold days."

He urges anglers to stay away from cotton, as it tends to dry very slowly once it soaks up water. Instead, he opts for a few layers of synthetic clothing, which dry quicker, wick moisture away from the skin and still insulate when wet. Silk and wool also do this.

"When paddling, even in cold weather, you can build up a sweat," he noted. "Having a base layer of silk or wool will pull that moisture off your body and keep you warmer."

Shallow vs. Deep Water

When it comes to his outer layers, Herman prepares differently depending on the depth of water he'll have to cross on the way to his fishing spot.

"If I know I'm going to be in shallow water all day, less than 3 feet deep, I'll wear waders," Herman said. As an added safety precaution, he chooses not to wear the waders over his shoulders and instead uses a splash top to keep his top half dry. "I keep (the waders) around my waist cinched up really tight with a wading belt," he said.

"If I do happen to fall in, I don't want those waders up around my shoulders weighing me down," he explained. "Water weighs over 8 pounds per gallon. If you take on a bunch of water in your waders, it's

basically impossible to get back on the kayak. By keeping the waders around my waist, I'm reducing the amount of water I can take on."

If the route to his fishing hole includes crossing a deep channel or any body of water he can't easily stand up in, he leaves the waders at home.

"When crossing deep water, I don't want to risk having those waders fill up and drag me down," Herman said. "Instead, I use a wetsuit as my first layer. The wetsuit insulates you and will help keep you warm. On top of that, I wear paddling pants and a dry top."

Here's a breakdown of Herman's layers for deep and shallow water.

Shallow

> Feet: Extra-thick wool socks. "The socks I wear are ridiculously thick. If you can put them on under a regular pair of shoes, they probably aren't thick enough."

> Base layer: Wool long johns to keep in warmth. If it's extra cold, he adds a layer of fleece on top of that.

> Legs: Breathable waders cinched tightly around the waist.

> Top: Extrasport X-Pert Flex Plus dry top. "That splash top is made for paddling and doesn't restrict your movement," he said. "It also has neoprene gaskets at the neck, waist and wrists. It keeps you dry, but it's also breathable so you don't sweat too bad."



Photo: Extrasport

Herman uses the Extrasport X-Pert Flex Plus dry top pictured here. Notice the gaskets around the wrists, waist and neck to prevent water from getting in, even when submerged.

Deep

> Feet: Neoprene socks and neoprene, zip-up wading boots. "Those socks work just like a wetsuit. They trap water next to your skin and your body heat warms it up."

> Base layer: Shorty style wetsuit, 2mm. "The shorty style has no sleeves, and that really helps when paddling."

> Legs: Extrasport X-Treme paddling pant.

> Top: Extrasport X-Pert Flex Plus dry top.

PFD Always On

"No matter if I'm fishing shallow or deep water, I always wear a PFD on top of everything," Herman said. "And not one of those (manually) inflatable ones. People underestimate how quickly hypothermia can get you. If you start to lose control of your motor skills, you don't want to have to worry about inflating your PFD. Stick with the traditional type."

(Editor's note: The more-expensive inflatable PFDs, such as those made by Mustang, are engineered to self-inflate when they hit the water.)

"Besides keeping you safe in a bad situation, it also adds a little extra warmth and helps keep the wind off your back. Wearing a PFD just makes sense, especially during the colder months."

Know Your Limits

Herman notes a simple way to avoid trouble during cold weather is to be honest with yourself.

"Cold air can sap your strength quickly," he said. "On a warm day, you might be able to paddle a few miles into a strong wind. But when it's cold and miserable outside, that paddle is going to be much more physically demanding. The winter is no time to try and test yourself."

Herman also always files a float plan. A float plan consists of a detailed description of where he plans to paddle, when he plans to return and emergency contact numbers should he fail to check in.

"I usually just send an email to my wife giving her the details of my trip," Herman said. "The float plan has the number to the Coast Guard, so if I don't check in she knows who to call."