

Physical Fitness For Kayaking

Form, function and fitness make kayak fishing more fun



Anglers scan the horizon for fishy signs. Kayaks provide an unmatched level of stealth.

By Mike Price

I was drifting in my kayak, working a soft plastic over a Matagorda Bay oyster reef, but no bites. It was discouraging, and it did not help that gulls and terns were dive-bombing shrimp about a mile away. In Texas coastal waters, fish and birds feeding on shrimp are typically on the move, so I dismissed the thought of sprint-paddling to them. But these birds were not moving. So I was really tempted.

Sixty-two-year-old Tim Sexton was nearby in his kayak, but with his lower back and leg problems I did not want to encourage him to join in any high-speed chase. He has since had an operation to correct the problem, but at the time Tim had to put his hands beneath his legs to lift them out of the truck. He could get out of the boat and wade to his kayak in shallow water, but had to flop down on the kayak because his legs could not hold his weight and let him sit down more gracefully.

I pointed the birds out to Tim. "Think you can paddle that far?" I asked.

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"Sure, my legs don't work very well but my upper body is strong, Mike," he said. So we took off. The birds were still feeding when we got within casting distance and hungry trout were quick to slam the soft-plastic lures.

Tim is from Dallas where he frequently goes kayak fishing for bass. So when he gauged the distance to the birds his decision to go was based on confidence in his paddling ability and experience. Wherever you fish in shallow salt water, practicing good form and training enhance the kayak fishing experience.



Conditioned, outfitted kayaker enjoys "net" gains.

Paddling Basics

Bruce Gillan founded Canoesport in Houston, Texas in 1983. His store specializes in teaching and equipping people to go kayak fishing in Texas bays.

"Kayak fishing can be done at whatever intensity level you are in the mood for," said Gillan.

Gillan and co-owner, Charles Duvic take novice kayakers on a 6- to 7-mile paddle after an orientation in the classroom. They help people develop an efficient paddle stroke. The keys are to sit comfortably erect, rotate the shoulders toward the paddle side by pivoting the torso, reach as far forward as possible without hunching over and then drop the blade close to the hull and bring the paddle back parallel to the keel line, but not past the hip, while extending the off-side arm forward.

"Some of the guys put in too much effort per stroke instead of getting into a rhythm. It is like setting up a spin rate, or cadence, on a bicycle," said Gillan. "If you spend all your time in high gear, you will wear out. And if you spend all your time in low gear, you will wear out, too."

I wish I had taken paddling lessons when I started kayak fishing seven years ago. Better technique may have prevented two pulled forearm muscles. On one occasion, I paddled across a 2-mile-wide lake with a 25-mph tailwind, and in the process of trying to keep the stern of the kayak perpendicular to the wind, put too much strain on one forearm. I have since learned to control that situation by dipping my paddle in the water and using it like a rudder. The second time I pulled a forearm muscle was paddling against a strong wind. If I had set a cadence, as Bruce suggests, rather than using a power stroke, I would have moved the kayak more efficiently, and avoided the pain.

Paddle Styles

Using a light paddle with a light-weight blade that pulls smoothly through the water is important.

"There are a lot of really bad paddles out there," said Gillan. "A properly designed blade will reduce flutter and increase control. Werner and Aqua-Bound are two good paddle companies."

Paddles have either straight or bent shafts. Most kayak fishers launch close to the area they intend to fish and do not plan to paddle far. In that case a straight-shaft paddle is adequate. But for

anglers with tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, arthritis, or those who intend to paddle long distances, a bent shaft is better.

The type of bent paddle shaft best for kayak fishing is a touring paddle with a "neutral bent" shaft. This type of shaft allows your wrists to remain straight, greatly reducing the stress on the wrists.

The Seat

Some anglers hesitate to get started kayaking because they are concerned about back pain. One of my kayaks is an Ocean Kayak Scrambler. My son Andy, who is slim and six feet tall, used to complain about lower back pain when he used the Scrambler. After I purchased a Surf to Summit fishing seat he no longer has back pains when using the kayak.

Eric States, founder of Surf to Summit explains, "We designed a seat six years ago called Tall Back that curved around and supported the lower back. But I kept hearing from anglers and dealers that hours sitting out there on that seat caused sore butts and legs to fall asleep. So we came out with a seat called the GTS Pro. The biggest change is a 2-inch foam pad that you sit on. This seat is made from a rubbery, squishy compound that is ergonomically fitted."

Charles Duvic of Canoesport says that kayak seats should support the lumbar area of the back, or, the small of the back. Canoesport likes gel-filled seats and back supports from Yakpads.



When moving from kayak to boat, center your weight, and then pull yourself aboard.

Getting In and Out of a Kayak

Anglers mistakenly think the boats will easily tip over during fishing, but sit-on-top fishing kayaks are very stable. You are at the greatest risk of tipping over when getting in and out of a kayak in deep water, or when going through the surf.

When boarding a kayak in shallow water, simply sitting sideways and then pivoting your legs into the craft is easy. Getting in and out of a kayak in more than waist-deep water can be tricky because your feet are not touching the bottom and you are unable to quickly shift your weight from the ground to the kayak, or vice versa. In the unlikely event that you fall out of your kayak and find it necessary to re-board in water more than three feet deep, drape your upper body over the kayak, and then shift into a seated position. You should practice this skill in controlled conditions.

When getting out of a boat and into a kayak you have to be very conscious of where your weight is centered. Beginners mistakenly hold onto the side of the boat. Rather, put your feet in the kayak while sitting on the boat (leaving your weight on the boat), and then shift your weight to the kayak. When getting back into a high-sided boat from the kayak, place your feet on the boat ladder and hands on the gunnel or ladder rail, while keeping all of your weight in the kayak. Then pull up and shift all your weight to the ladder.



Invest in a kayak cart to take strain off your back.

Loading and Moving Kayaks

Injuries happen off the water, too. Loading a kayak on and taking it off of a boat or vehicle can injure your back if you are not careful. Any time you can employ two people in the task of transferring a kayak to a boat or vehicle definitely do so, and lift using your legs rather than your back.

A kayak cart works well for moving a kayak on land. In order to get to one of my favorite fishing spots I have to paddle across a river and then cross 150 yards of earthen dam between the river and the bay. I use a Roleez kayak cart to move my well-loaded kayak over the bumpy terrain.

Yakima makes racks to carry kayaks and they have a nifty add-on feature called the BoatLoader that makes it considerably easier to get a kayak on or off of a vehicle roof. An extendable arm comes out of the end of a rack, on the side of the vehicle, so the stern of the kayak can be set on it. Then the bow can be placed in the rack, and finally the stern can be lifted from the extender to the rack.

Rudders for Good Tracking

The guys at Canoesport helped design the popular Wilderness Systems Tarpon series fishing kayaks. They do not believe a rudder is needed for most fishing situations. A fishing kayak that tracks well without a rudder will do the job. If you intend to do really long open-water crossings, a rudder can be put in the water to compensate for crosswinds by allowing you to set up an angle to the wind, preferably with the aid of a compass.

Physical Conditioning

Loading, pulling and paddling fishing kayaks in all weather conditions is easier and more fun if you are in good physical condition. Kayak fishing taxes the upper body, stomach and thigh muscles.

Scott Null is a competitive kayak fisherman who fishes Texas bays. To stay in shape for kayak fishing tournaments Scott works out regularly at a gym, runs and paddles.

"There are a lot of days when I am not going to fish that I will take a kayak out and just put in some miles," says Null. "A lot of my fishing buddies can't understand it. I will hit Chocolate Bayou and not bring a rod and reel. But I found that if I bring a rod and reel, I am hunting for fish more than working out."

One of the best workouts for kayak fishing is taking your kayak out in the surf. "Pick a moderate day, not rough but not too smooth, and just get out there and paddle in the surf," says Null, with a surfer's enthusiasm. "I tell you what, after a couple hours of playing in the surf you are pretty well whooped. I took kayak surfing classes and that helped. I just love it! Once you have been tossed around in the surf you learn a whole lot about balance and paddle strokes."

Avoid Heat Exhaustion

To avoid heat exhaustion, drink plenty of water and avoid kayak fishing during the hottest part of a summer day. Winter conditions are much more challenging because you have to dress to keep warm, but be aware that paddling a kayak can greatly increase the body's heat production.

Several years ago I was paddling on a warm winter day and became exhausted, light headed and was sweating profusely. I got out of the kayak, removed my Neoprene waders, rested, drank water and finally recovered.

I found out later, when I talked with Richard Valdes, Assistant Athletic Trainer at Rice University in Houston, that I was suffering from heat exhaustion and I did the right things to cool down.

"The way your body gets rid of heat is through sweating and exhaling, so if you take the waders and heavy clothing off, your skin can begin the process of bringing the temperature down." Valdes went on to explain that the symptoms of heat exhaustion are profuse sweating, difficulty breathing, exhaustion, light sensitivity, severe headaches, lethargy and acting out of character—like maybe calling it a day when the fish are biting!

Now I use lightweight, breathable waders and layer beneath the waders with breathable-stretchy long underwear and fleece pants. On my upper body I wear long underwear, a breathable long-sleeved shirt, fleece jumper, and a breathable jacket. I keep a waterproof bag handy and remove or add layers as needed. Neoprene waders and wetsuits trap body heat so it is much better to wear lightweight, breathable waders and layer for additional warmth.

Kayak fishing looks easy, and is a great way to fish in places bigger boats can't go, and is deadly where fish are spooky. It is not, however, easy; and can discourage you in a hurry if it becomes a chore, or cause discomfort or real pain. Learn the proper form, get in shape, and avoid the pitfalls and you'll find that kayak fishing is arguably the most rewarding way to fish inshore.

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