

The Kayak Craze Continues...

Written by By Captain Greg Bowdish

A glimpse of what is new in yak fishing

“Have you noticed all the kayak racks on cars nowadays?” asked Captain Jason Le Valley as he pointed to another passing SUV with a fishing kayak on the roof. We were peering out the front window of a Cape Coral tackle shop that caters to kayak anglers. Both of us agree that this is one aspect to our sport that is a perfect fit for the South Florida lifestyle and one that is definitely here to stay!



As a professional inshore fishing guide, Jason has been at ground-zero for the explosion of saltwater kayak fishing. The angling community’s interest in kayaks has even crept into his other job, that of cameraman for *Chew On This*, a popular fishing television series. Jason mentioned, “We’ve already filmed a few episodes featuring kayaks, and a few more are already in the

works.”

What has been occurring in both the inshore angling and paddle sports world is similar to the old Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup commercial we all grew up with. Only instead of, “You’ve got your chocolate in my peanut butter,” it’s more like, “You’ve got your fishing rod in my kayak!”

The two industries have collided, leaving only a few companies with the knowledge and expertise to respond to this quickly growing and rapidly evolving market.

One company that has been here since the beginning is Ocean Kayak, the manufacturer credited with creating the first roto-molded, sit-on-top, modern-day fishing kayak. I asked Sara Knies, the Director of Marketing for Ocean Kayak, about this growing trend in the paddle industry. Sara said, “Kayak fishing continues to be our largest growing segment. We continue to see double digit growth and really don’t anticipate it slowing down anytime in the near future.”

Sara also commented about the addition of a number of make-sense kayak fishing specific accessories being added to the Carlisle line of paddling gear and, more notably, the cooperation between Humminbird and Ocean Kayak in creating the very first kayaks designed to be “fish-finder friendly” by way of a special, recessed, scupper-mounted transducer fitting. The new Prowler Big Game even comes with a battery tray, making it much easier for the kayak angler to power electronics, live wells and lights with small, 12- volt dry-cell batteries. This is big news for kayak anglers who, up until very recently, had to take a very makeshift approach to rigging their kayaks with electronics. With modern GPS/fish-finder units mounted on a slower moving kayak, an angler can find small patch reefs off the beach and mark the spot on the GPS for easy and accurate returns. Inshore, a GPS allows the kayak angler to mark potholes and troughs on the flats and small creek mouths along mangrove shorelines. A chart-plotter/GPS allows a kayak angler to wander far up meandering creeks without the risk of getting lost. The temperature gauge found on most of these units can really be helpful in finding warmer water coming out of creeks during the winter - helping anglers locate fish havens

when the temperature plummets.



Yak options:

The continuing kayak craze has also brought about a proliferation of new fishing kayaks on the market. For someone purchasing his or her first fishing kayak, selecting the right boat from all the new models out there can seem like a daunting task, but once you learn how the length, width and hull configuration of any given kayak determines what type of fishing and paddling it is best suited for, the decision process starts to become a little clearer. In order to simplify things a bit, you could break sit-on-top fishing kayaks down

into four categories based on dimensions and surface area. These would be as follows:

High Volume Kayaks Designed for Stability

Kayaks with a length of 12- to 15-feet and a width of 31 inches or greater offer the angler great stability, but are not very efficient to paddle. The largest of these boats are so stable that throwing a cast net or casting a fly rod while standing is easily accomplished. They are also the ideal choice for heavier anglers who need the higher volume to carry their body weight and the weight of all their gear. The aforementioned Prowler Big Game has a weight capacity of 600 lbs. - easily capable of handling the largest angler, several rods, a live well, fish finder and whatever other gear one could ever dream of bringing along on a kayak fishing trip. One thing to keep in mind about high volume boats is that although the stability may seem appealing, if you don't have the muscle mass to move the boat through the water, you may be somewhat limited in range. Then again, even a slow kayak is still more efficient than most canoes. Other notable 'high-stability' models are the Malibu X-Factor and the Heritage Redfish 14

High Volume Kayaks Designed for Speed

These kayaks usually have a length of 15- to 17-feet and a width of 31 inches or less. They still have a substantial amount of wetted surface area though are not as easy for smaller paddlers to get up to speed and maneuver. For the more experienced paddler, however, long, skinny kayaks designed for speed will really move! Kayak tournament competitors prefer longer boats for this very reason. While being the perfect choice for covering a lot of open water while carrying an ample supply of gear, long kayaks designed for speed, however, don't turn easily and are not well suited for paddling up winding mangrove creeks. The addition of a rudder can help out greatly, though. Prime examples are the Ocean Kayak Prowler 15 and the Wilderness System Tarpon 160.

General Purpose Fishing Kayaks

I dislike using the generic term of “general purpose,” as this class of fishing kayak represents the workhorse paddle-fishing machine that is well suited for just about every type angler and angling scenario. General purpose kayaks measure 12 to 14-feet in length and 28- to 31-inches in width. They provide enough speed to cover as much water as you could want in a day’s fishing, enough stability so that nimble anglers can stand and enough maneuverability to make trips up narrow, winding creeks with ease. This class of boat also has the range of wetted surface area that makes them the perfect choice for paddlers of all sizes and skill levels. Among the most highly regarded models on the market are the Ocean Kayak Prowler 13 and the Wilderness Systems Tarpon 140.

Pocket Boats

This is a fast growing segment of the kayak-fishing industry. These somewhat mini-yaks have a major place here in Florida where tiny, skinny waterways abound. Pocket boats are generally sit-on-top kayaks under 12 feet in length and are usually somewhat wider than general purpose boats. The reason for this is simple - you need a certain amount of hull volume to float a grown adult. It is generally understood that with a shorter, wider boat, you give up tracking and speed for maneuverability, but there is a caveat to this - if you are a very skilled paddler and can keep one of these little boats headed in a straight line, they can actually be quite fast. The advantages of a small, pocket boat are that you can throw them into the back of an SUV or pick up without a rack and can easily get them to and from the water. If you mainly fish canals, ponds, or creeks, then a pocket boat is for you. Check out Ocean Kayak’s Big Yak and Malibu Kayak’s Mini-X.

Something to keep in mind when purchasing a new kayak using the criteria set forth above is that hull design plays a major role in how the yak will perform. Flat bottom boats tend to be slower and wetter, but offer slightly better stability, while deeper hulled boats with more rocker tend to be more fun to paddle and are much safer in the surf - something important to keep in mind if you are headed off the beach. Another consideration is that not everyone fits every boat. Some cockpit designs just don’t suit some people, so make

sure you sea trial any boat you are considering purchasing. It is the best way to make sure the kayak fits you and accomplishes your needs.



Gear & Gadgets:

Up until the last few years, equipment and accessories available to kayak anglers had been primarily designed by West Coast anglers, meaning California. Tricked-out fishing kayaks typically sported milk crates, make-shift live wells and vertical rod holders. But the influence of Florida style backcountry fishing is really starting to take hold. Serious anglers are installing rod holders manufactured by Scotty and Ram that allow their rods to remain horizontal to the kayak hull. This makes casting and maneuvering around mangroves much easier and safer on your equipment. Furthermore, anglers are discovering the importance of a foot-operated rudder when fishing shallow flats and mangrove shorelines. Having the ability to steer your kayak as the wind pushes you across a redfish or bonefish flat while your hands are left free for fishing is absolutely the ultimate in stealthy approaches. Another advantage of a kayak rudder is that they function in water that is too skinny to paddle in.

For extremely shallow angling, the best way to move your kayak is by a short pole. Well-known Stiffy Push Poles now makes a five and a half foot push-pole

model specifically for kayak fishermen. This is an ideal tool for fishing softer bottom waterways such as Pine Island Sound or the Everglades. These Florida specific tactics are actually beginning to take foothold in other Gulf Coast states as well like Texas and Louisiana where kayak fishing is reaching the same fever pitch.

“Kayak fishing is such a great way to spend a few hours or the whole day out on the water,” says Curt Peer, proprietor of The Sun and Moon Inn in Matlacha, a B&B style fishing resort that caters exclusively to kayak anglers. The Inn is even playing host to a weekend getaway kayak fishing school designed to help newcomers gain confidence and learn the skills necessary for the sport of kayak fishing. With the Calusa Blueway Paddle Trail and some of the best kayak fishing right in his own backyard, Curt has become an avid kayak fisherman himself. He finished off our conversation by adding, “Kayak fishing is stealthy and serene, and provides such a great way to sneak up on fish. No wonder the sport is growing in leaps and bounds.”

While kayak fishing isn't for everyone, if you have never tried it, you really should give it a shot. Grab a spinning rod, an assortment of soft baits and rent a yak for a few hours. Paddle out into the backcountry and enjoy yourself. By the time the morning is over, you will know for sure if this sort of athletic fishing is for you. Between the peace, quiet and surrounding natural beauty, my money says it is!

Yak attack on the web

- Kayak fishing with Capt. Jason Le Valley - www.KayakFishingSouthwestFlorida.com
- Ocean Kayak - www.OceanKayak.com
- Wilderness Systems Kayaks - www.WildernessSystems.com
- Malibu Kayaks. www.MalibuKayaks.com
- Heritage Kayaks www.HeritageKayaks.com
- The Sun and Moon Inn kayak fishing resort. www.SunAndMoon.net

- Sol y Luna Kayak Fishing School. www.Kayak-Fishing-Schools.com
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