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'Yak It to the Max

Rigging tips for paddle-powered kayaks.

Sitting on your can inches above the water is not the most comfortable way to fish. Granted, you'll slip up on fish at some out-of-the-way backcountry bars, but for most of us, trekking long distances by paddle atop a kayak never enters our angling agenda. Too bad. Plenty of fishy opportunities, from plugging remote shallows to chasing nearshore tug-meisters such as tarpon and little tunny, await stealthy kayakers who rig their craft as a fishing boat.



This rig features a dry storage compartment, cooler with nav light, hand bilge pump for emergencies and PVC stakeout pole.

Recently, I took off with two experienced Northeast Florida fishing 'yakkers into the oyster-strewn flats of Flagler County. By the time we returned, Kurt Oswald and Michael Uleski had me convinced that the add-ons you rig onto a boat translate heavily into its fishability. We're fishermen who are used to gadgets; depthfinders and GPS are good examples. With some forethought, it's possible to tailor your 'yak to comfortably accommodate your fishing style.

Before delving too far into the kayak personalization program, first figure out where to carry the required items—your PFD and Coast Guard approved noise maker. If night trips are on your agenda, add a navigation light. Oswald uses a Scotty model that provides 2-mile visibility with an LED bulb and two AA batteries. Oswald and Uleski also recommend that new riggers do a dry equipment placement run before cutting mounting holes in the hull. Other basic gear includes a stakeout pole, folding anchor, drift sock and a leash that attaches the double-end paddle to the 'yak. Stranded up a creek with no paddle definitely takes the fun out of kayak fishing.

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You can keep your rigging spartan or go whole-hog with multiple rodholders, baitwells and electronics. Oswald and Uleski chose the latter approach because it best fit their individual fishing styles. A rundown of extra gear they added to their boats includes several important items. Since you'll spend most of your time sitting on your duff, shell out the bucks for a comfortable boat seat. Both rigged a Surf to Summit seat with an extra

seat cushion in their boats, stressing the importance of having a firm backrest for padding, especially for long days on the water.



Oswald also recommends that fishermen purchase a kayak with a rudder. He uses the foot-operated steering device to control and steer his boat along shorelines when he's plugging with the wind at his back. On days the breeze kicks up to over five mph, he deploys a drift sock on the anchor trolley that allows him to crawl down fishy shorelines. Forward and rear bungee systems increase storage capabilities; they're also good for keeping PFDs close at hand.

Rodholders are items that require some thought. How many you add is up to you, but several flush-mount holders add to the boat's versatility. Most savvy 'yakkers place one within easy forward reach and a couple more behind the seat. To benefit his flounder pursuits, Uleski also added two adjustable rodholders forward of the seat, one on each gunnel. He says he catches "beaucoup flounder" while trailing jigs behind the boat as he paddles across flats.

The 2-piece holders allow him to remove the vertical part on days he's not flounder bumping. You'll also see in the accompanying photos that Oswald and Uleski have the capability to carry up to eight or nine rods. Leave transporting that much tackle to the old 'yak salts. I can vouch from personal experience, and a sliced ankle and submerged camera gear that neophytes aren't ready to become the local backcountry supply boat. Raising the center of gravity with too many weighty add-ons is a recipe for disaster, as in flipping the boat. Trust me on this one. I was "baptized" on our adventure.

Gazing at their boats, I saw each had a GPS, compass and depthfinder. These instruments are just as useful for kayakers as they are for powerboaters. GPS units with plotters are great for traversing remote waterways and finding your way back home. All proficient boaters rely on a dependable compass for navigation and depthfinders help point out dropoffs, underwater structure and channels. Interestingly, Uleski utilizes a castable Humminbird Smartcast unit to probe waters for bottom details.

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