

## Get the Kayak Edge

Tricks of the trade for kayak flats fishing.

By John Kumiski

Kayaks have gotten lots of press as fishing craft over the past few years, and plenty of these wonderful little boats have been sold. No longer are they a novelty among inshore fishing boats. They no longer turn heads. On the other hand, plenty of used ones are available because their owners purchased them without realizing how best to use them. Mastering any learning curve offers ample opportunities for frustration. My experience guiding fly fishers from kayaks has made this point extremely obvious.



Where the bottom is especially soft, anglers with good "kayak legs" can cast while standing, or opt to sit while casting.

fish from a kayak, you'll probably wade quite a bit. In fact, some anglers only use the kayak to get to shallow water, and then bail out exclusively. Getting on and off of a sit-on-top is much easier (and quieter) than getting in and out of the cockpit of a sit-inside.

Kayaks are small, silent, hand-powered boats, originally developed by the Inuits for hunting seals. They excel at stalking shallow-water fish of all kinds. I own two canoes and a "no wave slap hull" flats skiff. None of those vessels comes close in terms of stealth.

There are two basic classifications of kayaks—the sit-insides and the sit-on-tops. While the choice of hull type is largely a personal choice, I much prefer the sit-on-top type for fishing and maneuvering. If you choose to

Choosing a kayak is somewhat like choosing a fishing rod—any given model is better for some applications and not so good for others. On the boat rack in my yard are two different kayak models. One is long and thin and paddles easily. It's wonderful for those times when I need to cover long distances. The other is shorter and wider. While it doesn't paddle nearly as well I prefer it as a fishing boat because I can easily stand up in it, something that's impossible in the other one. Ideally, also like fishing rods, you would have several kayaks to cover different situations. If owning two or more kayaks isn't practical, go with a model that is suited for what you do most of the time. And never,

ever buy one without water testing it first. Most dealers have water nearby where you can give a boat a spin.

To make fishing more pleasurable, there are all kinds of accessories for kayaks. Rod holders that handle spin or plug rods, paddle holders and livewells are a few examples. Fly fishers, however, (and dealers won't like my saying this) want none of this stuff. Line management is a primary concern of the fly caster and the more gadgets you have the more hangups there are for your fly line. Keep it clean and simple and you will be much happier.

I use my kayaks for fly fishing almost exclusively. In addition to my paddle, rod and a single fly box, I carry a loop of Bungee cord for securing the paddle to the boat when the paddle is not being used, a rope from the stern to my waist for towing the boat while wading, and a section of PVC pipe or wood dowel used for a pushpole or stakeout pole.

Most kayak fishing that I do is around Florida's Kennedy Space Center, Mosquito Lagoon and the Indian River and Banana River lagoons. I see many kayakers out there, and most are making a fundamental mistake—they are using their boats in the same places that I'm using my skiff. Sure, you can fish from a kayak in water of any depth, but if you do not venture into places too shallow for the typical skiff that draws eight inches to a foot or more, you're not taking full advantage of your kayak.

In spite of the claims of my skiff's manufacturer, I need 10 or 12 inches of water to float without scraping bottom. Usually I'm in water a little deeper. There are a few skiffs that float shallower than does mine, but I think it's safe to assume that any standard skiff is going to draw more water than any given kayak.



Silent stalking has its rewards.

To make the best use of a kayak you need to go where skiffs can't. It's that simple. Do this and the chances of finding happy, hungry, unpressured fish increase dramatically. No-motor zones are one obvious application, but large tracts of very shallow water (especially if there are lots of islands to break the wind) are another ideal place to sight fish from kayaks. If you fish where the pressure is light you have a distinct advantage. Sweat equity is an investment that pays huge dividends.

*from Shallow Water Angler*

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One disadvantage of kayaking is that your head is close to the water, making it hard to see. So how do you locate fish in time to make that cast?



A short PVC pushpole is essential where it's too shallow to paddle conventionally.

found via kayak. More importantly, once I'm in position to take a good shot it is easy to stay there.

Typically I'll get in water that's just deep enough to paddle in easily and cruise at a fair rate of speed, looking in shallower water for signs of fish—wakes, tails, backs, busts. In other words, I cover water fairly rapidly, looking for fish or clues that tell me fish are there. As soon as I see signs I stow the paddle, taking extreme care to be as silent as possible. Why do I stow my means of propulsion? Because it's time to wade, if the bottom is hard enough to support me. I can see better this way, I can hold the rod, and casting is much easier. I can silently stalk the fish I've

If the bottom is too soft to wade, but still deep enough to float the boat, I use a 4-foot-long pushpole to slowly maneuver the boat. Once I'm in casting position, I just poke the pole into the bottom and hold it. If the water gets too shallow to float the boat and you're scraping the bottom, then even the pole is ineffective. That's when I use the best tool of all, my fingers. Sink your fingers into the soft bottom (check for stingrays first) and pull or push the boat into position for a cast.

Going back to stowing your paddle, the paddle requires two hands to use. You can stop in the proper position once you reach it, but then you take time and risk making noise while putting the paddle down. You take more time picking up your rod. It's difficult to maintain your position if there is wind or current. If you lose your position you have to put the rod down, pick up the paddle, and go through the stalking sequence again. It simply doesn't work as well.

I will get on my knees and use my hands to pull the boat through mud, trying to get into a good casting position. If you're willing to do whatever it takes to quietly put the boat where it needs to be you will catch a lot of fish. You may be covered in mud at the end of the day, though.

All of the above assumes that you're sitting in your boat. What if you can stand? I used to use my paddle to push or paddle the boat as circumstances dictated while standing in my kayak, looking for fish. When I spotted a fish I would have to bend down, secure the

paddle, pick up the rod, straighten up, and try to find the fish again before I could cast. All this time the boat might be moving due to wind or current. It worked, but not particularly well.

One day I tried using a 6-foot-long piece of 3/4-inch PVC pipe as a pushpole. Oh yeah, that was better. I could pole the boat with my left hand while I held the spin or plug rod in my right (casting) hand. When I spotted a fish I could respond almost immediately. If the bottom was soft (and where I fish it usually is or I would be wading) I could just poke the pipe into the bottom. I could hold it to maintain my position, or let it go if needed. If I floated away from it I still had the paddle and could always go back and get it. Again, a dowel would work as well. It might work better, since a wooden dowel can't fill with mud. If you choose a PVC pipe, plug or cap it.

How close can you get to fish in your kayak? Assuming you are being quiet, your average cast on the flats will be around 30 feet, though I have often caught fish with a 5- to 10-foot toss. You'll be amazed at how close you can get in a kayak.

If you follow the advice given here you're going to hook fish, and some days you'll outfish skiff anglers, and, of course, get into places they only dream of accessing. While you're in the skinniest water, you usually won't hook giant fish. School reds, and small trout and snook will venture into surprisingly shallow stuff, and frequently the fish's back is out of the water and often you are so close to them you can almost see every single scale. The intimacy of the stalk is thrilling and is the main reason I find kayak fishing so appealing. Use the techniques described above and watch yourself rocket up the kayak learning curve. Then you'll understand what everyone is "yakkin'" about.

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