

Kayak Your Way to Shallow Water Fish

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Maxx Kumiski sat motionless in his little boat, which was more or less stuck on the bottom. Redfish tailed and backed all around him, the water too shallow to cover them. He dropped his fly out in front of one, and the fish aggressively charged and inhaled it.

Advantage Kayak

Most fly fishers love to wade. It's very enjoyable. You can work an area very thoroughly. It's very effective- if there are fish around.

But if you choose the wrong spot, wading isn't very productive. The slowness of wading becomes a liability if you pick the wrong spot.

A kayak gives you more range. It helps you search more water, searching for that concentration of fish. Once you find them (and this being fishing there are no guarantees) you can either fish from the boat or wade. The boat gives you more flexibility. That in-the-water aesthetic is still there.

On a recent kayak charter on Florida's Mosquito Lagoon we paddled for well over an hour, looking for a concentration of redfish. We found one fish here, one fish there, but it wasn't until we spotted about 30 wading birds along a stretch of shoreline that I knew we had hit the right spot. We got about 15 redfish from that area in the next couple of hours.

That piece of shoreline was a couple of miles from the nearest road, completely inaccessible to anyone without a boat. Our kayaks allowed us to search for, and find, that particular place.

The water was too shallow to access a skiff. Even had it been deep enough, skiffs are more intrusive. We would not have gotten as many fish. Kayaks are stealthier craft, and work better for shallow water fish.

What a Kayak is Not

I own a skiff. It's my principal charter vessel. I see kayakers out on the water, fishing the same areas that I am. There's nothing wrong with this, but it doesn't play to the kayak's major strength- silently accessing areas that the skiffs cannot. A kayak is not a skiff.

The main strength of the kayak is accessing areas that skiffs cannot. This requires kayakers to do homework, searching for fishing areas that they previously had not considered.

Time spent researching on Google Earth will lead to some wild goose chases, but will also lead you to spots where the fish are not used to seeing fishermen, where they're happy and relaxed. If part of the enjoyment of fly fishing is the joy of discovery, a computer and a kayak can lead to plenty of it.

Folks ask me what I look for when I go kayaking. My response is always, "Water that's eight inches deep or less." This statement only partly true, but it's true often enough to have led to the generalization! No matter where you live there will be lightly fished areas accessible to a kayak where the competition simply can't follow.

The Learning Curve

You will find that learning to kayak fish effectively requires some dues paying. You won't just hop in and start catching fish. You must learn how to use the boat to its best advantage. You'll have to learn how to handle the boat, as well as how best to fish from it. Casting from a sitting position will require some practice.

Additionally, you'll have to handle the boat and fish, simultaneously. Both need to be completely second nature before you begin to have consistent success.

The Fishing Sequence

What's a "typical" sequence when kayak fishing? After launching the boat, paddle fairly briskly to the area where you hope to find the fish. Once you've fished an area a while you will learn where these are.

On arrival slow down. Strip a comfortable amount of line from the reel and cast it, then retrieve it and pile it carefully between your legs. Put the rod in a ready position, reel between your legs, fly near the rod's handle. Keep the rod ready for immediate use.

Now hunt for fish, moving slowly, covering water. We want eight inches of water or less because you simply cannot see fish in water much deeper than this while sitting. Shallow is good, for redfish, snook, and seatrout.

Once you start seeing fish slow down even more. When Lady Luck smiles, you see a fish that you want to stalk.

Most folks just get close enough to cast. Then they flail away. This is a mistake. Put the boat into a position so you can take a good, quality cast, or a series of quality casts. One will likely work.

Once you get the boat into that position, keep it there. I put my leg over the side and hold the boat in place with my foot, another reason to fish in shallow water. If it's really shallow the boat will literally be on the bottom. It's not likely to move much then!

Once the boat is in position and immobilized, then and only then does the casting commence. If you've picked the right position and the fish hasn't done anything weird, one or two casts will usually be enough to get a response from the fish one way or the other. Many times there is only a few feet of line out of the rod. I can often see the scales on the fish's back.

Making a good cast in this situation is easy, and you can see everything that the fish does in response to your presentation of the fly. There's no guesswork at all. It works extremely well.

Variations on the Theme

Of course the above assumes several conditions are met- shallow, fairly clean water, calm winds, and good visibility. It also assumes that we located some fish, which, fishing being fishing, won't always happen. Some trips just turn out to be a pleasant paddle through a beautiful area. If you've fished very long you already know that such days come with the territory. You learn to enjoy them. They make you appreciate the good days.

What if it's windy? What if the water is too deep, or too dirty? Your basic approach remains the same, but you'll need variations on the theme.

In some boats you can improve your ability to see by standing up. Whether you can do this or not depends on your sense of balance, size, and the design of your boat. If the ability to stand is important to you, you should get a boat that lets you do it.

If standing in the boat won't work for you, use the boat to get to the fishing spot and then wade once you get there. If you work into the wind you can tie the boat's painter around your waist and tow it behind you. If you go downwind this won't work, since the boat will be in your way. Then you'll have to anchor or stake it out, and come back and get it afterwards.

Another effective variation is to use a skiff to get the kayak to an area too distant to paddle to. Many kayaks tow well, and most are small enough you can just pull them into the skiff if necessary.

The fact is most of us will figure out what we need to do for any given situation. There are more variations than we have space for here.

Kayaking Tackle

Look at kayak fishing as an exercise in minimalism. One outfit with a floating line, a small box of flies, some extra leader materials, some food and water, and the required boating and safety gear, and you're good to go.

What size outfit you bring depends on where you fish and what you fish for, as well as the weather and your skill level as a caster. If you expect to run into 20 pound fish you'd better be tackled up appropriately. For fishing for "slot" sized redbfish, typically around five to eight pounds, use a smaller rod.

Kayaking Accessories

Not everyone takes my minimalist approach, and there are lots of accessories for kayak anglers. We are discussing only bare essentials here.

You need to transport the boat, and most folks will need racks for their vehicle. Thule (www.thuleracks.com) makes good kayak racks, as does Spring Creek Outfitters (www.canoegear.com).

You need a seat. It is the single most important comfort component after the hull. It must have good back support, and a cushy seat is real nice, especially after a few hours. Some seats are inflatable, a very, very nice feature.

You will need a paddle, and if you tend toward klutziness a way to secure it to the boat (A leash is used for this). Again, a paddle is an important comfort item. Light weight is good. You'll be taking thousands of strokes with it, and if it's heavy you'll soon hate it. You'll find a ferruled paddle much easier to transport.

A stake out pole was mentioned above. There are special stake out poles made for kayakers, but a dowel rod with a point whittled onto one end works well and is inexpensive. I've used PVC pipe, golf club shafts, dowels, and a hiker's staff. All work.

You need an anchor. Kayak anchors only weigh a few pounds. A brick will work.

Some folks like rod holders, built in tackle storage systems, mounted GPS units, etc. Fly fishers need less stuff rather than more. All those gadgets make very effective line tangles.

Wrapping It Up

Because of their stealth, kayaks make superior vessels for stalking shallow water gamefish. Take the time to learn how best to use one, and you will find yourself catching fish in places you never knew existed.

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Kayaking Safety

The Coast Guard requires certain safety equipment. A Personal Floatation Device (PFD) is required. Get one that's comfortable, one that will let you paddle should you need to wear it.

You must carry a sound producing device. A plastic whistle is sufficient.

If you're out between sunset and sunrise you must carry a white light visible from 360 degrees. A flashlight is not sufficient.

Carrying a cell phone and a VHF radio, while not required, is a very good idea. You'll need a waterproof bag to carry them in. The Simms Dry Creek backpack is a great product, and will let you carry these items (and a camera) safely even while wading.

Carry a first aid kit in a waterproof bag.

Your two main safety issues while kayaking are drowning and getting hit by a motor boat. If you followed the advice in this piece neither of those will be much of an issue most of the time.

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How to Choose a Kayak

Sit on top (SOT), or sit inside (SI)? That depends both on your fishing style as well as where you fish. I like SOTs because hanging my foot over the side is easy, because getting off to wade is easy. Getting into and out of SIs is harder. But SOTs are wet, and during the winter or in cold water you must wear chest waders.

A few weeks ago I used a Perception Sunrise, a SI. I sat on top of the hull, behind the cockpit, putting only my feet inside. The boat handled well, and I caught several fish from it.

Short, wide boat allow some folks to stand. They don't paddle very easily (compared to other kayaks). Long thin boats paddle more easily, but are harder to turn. There's no way you'll stand in one, either.

Boat weight is important if you have to lift it to the roof of your car.

Recommendations from friends, from the salesman, are not that much help. They are not you, and do not have your unique needs. Before you buy a boat water test it, by renting one if necessary. Only by doing this will you find the best boat for you and the way you like to fish.

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