

Kayak Fly Fishing

By: Richard Griggs from Carolina Mountain Sports



Bio: Richard Griggs....native of Statesville, NC....graduated from Western Carolina University....spent 20 years in the U.S. Coast Guard....worked for the Boy Scouts....got into outdoor retail in '96 and opened Carolina Mountain Sports in '98.... have been paddling canoes and kayaks since 1965 on local lakes, rivers and ocean from Canada and New England to Missouri waterways and most recently on the New River and its forks in NC and VA.

Kayaking and fly fishing...

So, you're thinking about a kayak for fly fishing. That's an excellent idea. But like so many purchases, a little research can go a long way...getting the most bang for your buck...with minimal frustration and back ache. Books are written about kayak fishing so this post, instead of a CFFC presentation this month, only scratches the surface. Feel free to ask questions here or contact me at Carolina Mountain Sports.

My first kayaking adventure was about 56 years ago. It was an experience... Since then, I've been paddling and selling canoes and kayaks in a bunch of different locations from Canada to Florida, freshwater and ocean. It has been a great learning experience, and the education never ends.

Picking a boat...

No question, the sit on top (SOT) kayaks are the bestselling boats these days. There is not one that does it all. All kayaks are a compromise if you are using them in different locations...lakes, rivers, and saltwater. A great kayak in a lake may not be the best choice for a shallow, rocky river. Consider your weight and age; how you will transport the kayak; and where you will use it most of the time.

Most fishing kayaks are heavy (and you are not as young and strong as you would like to believe). The majority of my fishing customers are buying 10 and 11 foot SOT kayaks that weigh 60-70 pounds...that's a long, bulky, awkward 60+ pounds. (assuming factory specs are not too optimistic) Many are sliding them into pickups or on trailers. Pretty easy. A few are carrying kayaks on top of their vehicle. For some folks, that can be quite the challenge. The proper techniques for cartopping justifies more research; the correct straps and tie downs.... and a separate article....

Plan to get wet...at least your feet...

Make sure your kayak is floating in the water before getting on board. It is more stable floating, than when resting on the bottom and it is much less damaging to the hull. For the same reason, don't try to "drive" you kayak up onto the beach when coming ashore. Put the boat parallel to the bank in water about shin deep and stand up. More stable, and no abrasion to the bow and stern areas of the keel.

On your first trip or two, anticipate there is a very real possibility you will "turn turtle." Wear a quality, well fitting lifejacket/PFD....yes, even if you are an excellent swimmer. Plan for a capsized and don't bring a bunch of gear until you get familiar with your kayak's characteristics. Always make sure that keys, phones, wallet are in waterproof, flotation bags or boxes....totally 100% secure. (a spare car

key can make a bad day much more tolerable...don't ask how I know)

Prepping your kayak for fishing...

The best advice for a person starting out is to follow the KISS principle....”Keep it simple skipper.” You see kayaks rigged with rod holders, milk crates, fish finders, anchor systems, stake out poles, landing nets etc. KISS Otherwise your new watercraft will wind up looking like the sophisticated antenna array on a Soviet spy ship. You will find it to be a real “pain in the rudder” when you are first starting. Remember, you still have to swing a long, double-bladed kayak paddle around.

A simple, light anchor may be a good idea. Use something simple like a window sash weight; 5lb barbell plate or cheap, light dumbbell; or a plastic bottle filled with sand and fishing sinkers. If it gets hung on the bottom and you have to sacrifice it....you haven't lost much money. Even with an anchor, your craft will likely get blown around more than you can imagine. Anchoring in current, tidal or river, can be a real hazard. Don't....until you know and understand more about anchoring...

Casting your fly rod in a kayak...

Unless your kayak seat causes you to recline too much...casting from a yak is about like casting standing thigh-deep in a stream. Your torso is just as low to the water. However, if your casting technique needs work; and you are casting a wimpy, weak back cast; and you are casting up and down (not back and forth...) with excessive arc in your rod movement....don't blame the kayak or the fact that you are seated. The solution is not a longer fly rod, but better casting technique and an erect posture in your seat. If your casting technique is good, and you can shoot the line for distance (and/or haul) so much the better. However, you may find that really long casts are not needed due to the additional stealth of being in a kayak.

Standing up in a kayak?..

Some boats are very stable. Others sacrifice some stability for speed, maneuverability and seaworthiness. If you are young, agile, flexible, not top heavy, and possess good balance....you may be okay in many kayaks on the market. Standing seems to be more of an individual's ability, and less about which kayak you are in. Nothing wrong with staying seated. Standing often sacrifices the stealth offered by the low silhouette of a kayak. And, if you are seated, it is much easier to safely land a fish and avoid that excessive lean or shift in balance that could mean a capsize. You have been warned.

Landing a fish...

Sitting in a yak makes it very easy to land fish - you are right at water level. Bass are easily “lipped.” Other species may dictate a small net. A small net is a really good idea, especially for fish that have teeth (flounder, sea trout, blue fish) but for any fish that is likely to flop around when brought to hand. In a yak, a fish on deck can flop just out of reach...and your effort to grab it may adversely compromise your stability...i.e. Turn Turtle. “Lip grippers” are also very popular, particularly for toothy species.

What about all that fly line?...

If you strip line in to land a fish, or if you have line stripped from your reel to shoot for a long cast, it can easily tangle around paddles, nets, grippers, hatch latches, feet etc. Some kayaks will allow you to coil or pile line on deck between your thighs without tangling. On others, you may want to drape a towel or mosquito netting in your lap to create a snagfree surface to keep line tangle free. Some collapsible stripping baskets may also be a good option.

Expand you knowledge...

There is more to kayaking efficiently and safely than just paddling alternately on the right and left sides of the craft. Learn about self rescue; loading and unloading; options for accessories; handling yaks in current and wind; and especially the various paddle strokes like sweep, draw, pry and sculling. **The more you know, the safer you go.**