

Paddle Fishing: An Introductory Guide



Paddle fishing is becoming increasingly popular among anglers in the coastal Carolinas. Photo: Nate Bacheler

Paddle fishing, or fishing from a kayak or canoe, is an enjoyable, healthy and economical way to explore North Carolina's vast coastline and acres of estuaries. The sport opens up areas inaccessible to powerboat or shore anglers, and also offers opportunities for bird watching and photography when the fish aren't biting.

This publication is an introductory resource to paddle fishing with a focus on kayaks. It will discuss the benefits of paddle fishing, provide information on what to look for when purchasing a kayak — such as construction and features, fishing tackle, and safety equipment — as well as an overview of the different habitats appropriate for paddle fishing, and ethical angling techniques.

Why a Kayak?

Except for the mild splash of a paddle, kayaks glide through the water silently. Their movements rarely spook fish, even in shallow depths. Kayaks also can be portaged over logs and other obstructions, transported on top of most vehicles, and launched single-handedly. All of these factors give the solo, budget-conscious angler a distinct advantage when it comes to accessing and catching more fish.

What to Look For

Boat Length and Design

When shopping for an angling kayak, look for one that is about 12 to 14 feet long. This size offers anglers the most versatility — longer boats can be difficult to maneuver when fighting a fish, and shorter boats will not track as well.

Your next decision is a composite versus plastic kayak. Composite boats tend to be lighter, making them easier to transport and paddle. This convenience comes at a premium, however, as composite kayaks are more expensive to manufacture. Plastic kayaks are cheaper and more durable but are heavier than composites.

Although most recreational kayaks will work for fishing, some kayak manufacturers are building boats specially suited for angling. These models typically include rod holders and storage areas for tackle, while some have a specially designed hull to make the kayak more stable and allow the angler to stand up and cast. If you have a regular recreational kayak and stability is a concern, you can add stabilizers or outrigger pontoons to the hull for a steadier fishing platform. In addition, a retractable rudder or skeg can help your boat track straighter and make steering easier.

Most kayaks designed specifically for fishing fall into one of two categories: “sit-on-top” or “sit-in” models.

Sit-on-top models are self-bailing and offer more above deck storage. Some feature areas large enough to accommodate a milk crate and a small cooler or bucket to store your tackle and catch. In contrast, sit-in models conceal more of your body from sun and water exposure while offering more storage below the deck. Those who fish throughout the winter or live in colder climates often opt for sit-in kayaks.

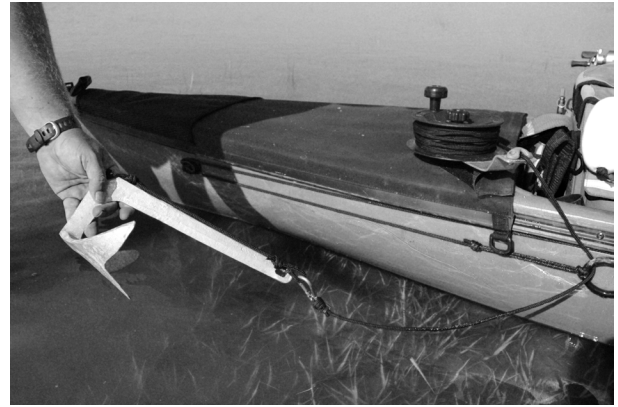
After purchase, some anglers modify their kayaks to include features such as live wells and anchor systems.



Kayak manufacturers are building boats specially suited for angling. Photo: Nate Bacheler

Anchor Systems

Almost any type of small lightweight anchor will work on a kayak. Small “grappling style” and “plow style” anchors are the most popular because of their lightweight and secure holding power.



An anchor “trolley” system loops around the kayak, allowing better placement of the anchor.

Photo: Nate Bacheler

An “anchor trolley” can be added to your boat to provide optimum positioning. The trolley is simply a line that loops around the kayak and allows you to position the anchor at the bow or the stern. The line runs through a clip and a pulley system. Once you have positioned the boat in the wind or current for optimum casting to a point or shoreline, just tie the line on a cleat to secure your position.

Safety

As with any boating hobby, certain precautions should be taken to ensure a safe and successful trip. A personal floatation device (PFD) is a critical safety component for paddle fishing. North Carolina law requires that you have a PFD for everyone onboard a canoe or kayak. Avid kayak anglers should choose a PFD specifically designed for paddling. Your outfitter can help you find the PFD that best suits your needs.

Other safety items to have on hand are a whistle, flares, flashlight and hand-held VHF radio. Carrying a mobile phone is an option, but be aware it may not always pick up a signal. The U.S. Coast Guard requires that all vessels have a sound producing device. For kayaks and canoes, a marine distress whistle attached to a PFD is appropriate. During periods of reduced visibility, such as at night or in fog, the U.S. Coast Guard requires all vessels to display navigation lights. For kayakers and canoeists, a flashlight in good working order is acceptable.

If you are traveling in an unfamiliar area or the backcountry, having up-to-date charts and a global positioning system (GPS) device on hand is a good idea. Also, be sure to bring plenty of drinking water — paddling can be strenuous exercise, and it is important to stay hydrated.

In addition to proper safety equipment, preparation is key to a successful paddle fishing excursion. When planning your trip, always let someone know where you plan to go and when you plan to return. Be sure to take tide changes and wind into consideration, as these elements can have a major effect on the current. Take note of the weather forecasts — notably the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) marine weather forecasts — and dress appropriately. Consider a dry top and neoprene gloves in colder weather and chilly water temperatures. For warmer weather, consider fabrics that wick away moisture from the body to avoid overheating. No matter the temperature, always use sunscreen on exposed skin to avoid harmful UV rays.

Finally, novice kayak anglers should consider fishing with more experienced paddlers or in protected waters. Many kayak shops offer clinics on paddle fishing safety, and can connect you with other kayak anglers in your area.

Where to Go

Brackish Waters

Kayaks are well suited for fishing in coastal brackish waters. Blackwater rivers often are filled with stumps, fallen trees and low hanging branches, making these areas perfect for a kayak's maneuverability and versatility. Typically low in salinity, blackwater rivers provide habitat for a wide range of species including large-mouth bass, striped bass, red drum, speckled trout, and flounder. When fishing in these areas, be aware of the inland/coastal boundary line and have the appropriate fishing license. Descriptive boundaries for these areas can be found on the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) Web site, www.ncfisheries.net. Follow the links to "maps."

Coastal Waters and Sight Fishing

Coastal waters and marshes offer great habitat for kayak fishing and exploring. Look for speckled trout and flounder around the creek points and along edges of oyster reefs. Sometimes it helps to scout



Many kayaks designed for paddle fishing are very stable, allowing the angler to paddle or cast while standing up.

Photo: Nate Bacheler

out areas during low tide and make note of these spots.

Sight fishing for red drum, North Carolina's state saltwater fish, is an exciting and challenging sport. Similar to bone fishing in the Caribbean, sight fishing involves taking your boat into shallow waters to visually spot fish and cast your line. Kayaks allow you access to extremely shallow waters in coastal sounds and creeks, which are optimal areas for sight fishing.

During low tides, red drum feed on fish, shrimp and crabs, and large schools of drum are commonly cruising along mud flats in search of prey. As the tide rises, drum push into the nearby spartina grass to feed, sometimes in as little as 6 to 18 inches of water. Spotting them in the grass is easy — just look for their tails.

Finally, a "push pole," or a pole used for propulsion, can be useful for sight fishing, as it allows an even more stealthy approach.

Surf Fishing

Surf fishing from a kayak allows an angler many benefits, including access to areas beyond the reach of casting surf fishermen and avoiding the long distances powerboats must travel to reach navigable inlets. Schools of hungry stripers, bluefish or false albacore are easily within reach when you surf launch a fishing kayak.

Worried about getting your gear wet? Some fishing kayaks feature dry storage where tackle and rods may be stored while paddling through the surf. As with any paddle fishing excursion, safety is key. When launching from the surf, it is always safer to have a fishing partner. Know your limits, be aware of current and forecasted surf conditions, and don't go if the surf appears too large or unsafe.

What to Know

Ethical Angling

As the number of coastal recreational fishermen increases, ethical angling and catch-and-release principles are vital to future healthy fish stocks. Research shows that using circle hooks increases survivability of released fish by decreasing the chances of deep or gut hooking.

Circle hooks are ideal for natural bait. Always remember to bend your hook barbs down. If you'd like to practice ethical angling but prefer artificial bait, replace treble hooks with single hooks.



Catch-and-release techniques are easy to use and beneficial for fish stocks. Photo: Michael Spencer

Finally, dehooking devices and lip grippers help decrease handling. Too much human contact can remove the protective slime coat and cause increased stress on a fish. When releasing a fish, try to remove the hook without lifting the fish from the water. Also, avoid any contact with the gills.

Size and Catch Limits

Bag and size limits along with the DMF Saltwater Fishing Tournament Release Citation Program can be found on the DMF Web site: www.ncfisheries.net.

Littering is a Crime

Federal law prohibits disposing of plastic in waterways, as it can harm wildlife. Secure any plastic bottles or bags in your kayak and don't allow trash to blow overboard. Keep a "litter bag" on your boat to collect any floating debris you may encounter, and then dispose of it on shore.

Get Out There!

Paddle fishing is rapidly growing in popularity as more anglers realize the advantages and excitement of the sport. As the pastime evolves, more innovative gear and techniques will be introduced, such as kayak-specific fishing rods, downriggers and coolers. Visit your local paddling shop to find the perfect angling setup for you and get out there!

Additional Resources

North Carolina Kayak Access Guides and Maps

- N.C. Paddle Trails Maps
www.ncpaddletrails.info
- N.C. Boating Access Area Index Map
Visit www.ncwildlife.org and click on "Boating/Waterways."
- N.C. DOT Coastal Boating Guide
Visit www.ncdot.org/it/img and click on "Coastal Boating Guide" under "Popular Links."

Fisheries Regulations, Weather and Marine Rescue

- N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries
www.ncfisheries.net
- N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission
www.ncwildlife.org
- U.S. Coast Guard
www.uscg.mil
- NOAA's National Weather Service
www.weather.gov

For more information about paddle fishing in the Carolinas, contact Brian Efland at 252/222-6314 or brian_efland@ncsu.edu.