

Kayaks and Canoes for Freshwater Fishing Part III

I have a book simply called "The Canoe" that was published in 1946. My grandparents gave it to my Dad in 1951 and he gave it to me in the seventies when I was getting serious about paddling. The chapter entitled "Precautions" begins, "The seasoned wilderness traveler learns many precautions, recognizes signs of danger, and realizes the value of compromise and stealth as opposed to that of blind, bulldog fighting, while the novice continues unconcernedly, miraculously avoiding dangers which he does not see or recognize." As anglers we're generally pretty good at knowledge and preparation. It's part of our sport. Safety in a canoe or kayak is the same. If having the proper knowledge and preparation becomes a habit it never gets in the way of our enjoyment of the sport. I'm going to make observations and recommendations in this article based upon experience and research but don't want it to sound "preachy". I would never scold a fellow paddler for not wearing their PFD any more than I would a friend for not wearing their seatbelt. I figure if they're an adult, and know the possible dangers, they're free to make their own decisions. The only time I can recall ever intervening, except when I was teaching, was with a couple who had TIED their children into their canoe before going down a set of rapids. My paddling companions and I strongly expressed to them that we thought it was a REALLY BAD idea! Kayaking and Canoeing is a very safe sport but all of us who have spent time around boats of any kind have seen, and done, a lot of dumb things. Hopefully through knowledge and preparations we can, most of the time, be saved from ourselves.

Know before you go:

Never before has there been more information available to us about the waters we fish. The Internet, fishing guides, lake maps, topographical maps, GPS units, even our cell phones, can all provide vital information about the waters we fish and boat on. In fact, it's probably hard to find a public lake or river that is not documented somewhere. Looking at a map from a fishing perspective might be somewhat different than you would from a paddling perspective. Where is the best launch site? What's the weather look like? Where are the open areas where you might encounter the most wind and wave action? Is it a lake or river that has power boat traffic and are there speed, wake or motor size restrictions? If you're fishing a river, are there possible river hazards like fallen trees or maybe a low dam? Should I let others know where I'm going and expected back?

Let's look at more detail on these questions.

Where is the best launch site? Many public launches are marked on maps and local knowledge obtained from other anglers is a great source, however the places you want to fish may not be close to a ramp.

One of the great things about fishing from kayaks and canoes is the ability to get into the areas that other boats can't. It's not as much fun or safe if you have to paddle long distances or cross high traffic areas to get to the good spots. Gradual sloping banks are ideal and if you have a topographical map available of the lake, you can find those spots where the contours are far apart. Those indicate a gradual slope. If the contour lines are bunched up, it's a cliff! If you can find a sloping bank by a road, so much the better but also be aware of private property rights. Sand or gravel bottoms make the best launch areas with mud being my least favorite. Whether at a ramp or a bank, if you can walk your boat into at least ankle deep water, the better are your chances of being able to paddle away without having to push off with your paddle. Pushing off is sometimes necessary but can be hard on your paddle and the bottom of your boat. Entering a sit-inside is more challenging than a sit-on-top or hybrid and the best technique is to brace your paddle on the back of the cockpit edge and the shore then sit on the back cockpit edge and slide in. My favorite technique for a sit-on-top or hybrid is to simply sit down "side saddle" in the kayak then swing your legs in. In a canoe you should step into the center of the boat while you hold onto both sides of the boat then swing your other leg in and sit down. All three of these techniques accomplish the same thing in balancing most of your weight in the center of the boat while you get in. More capsizes probably happen during the launch than anywhere else. There are lots of illustrations and videos on the internet and paddling books showing these and other entry/exit techniques.

What's the weather looking like? Not much of an excuse there. We have more places to check weather than ever before and as anglers we're better at that than most. We know the dangers of storms and the possibility of lightning, while you're sitting out in the middle of the lake, is particularly dangerous.

Has there just been heavy rain that can produce flash floods or unsafe river conditions? Even the calmest stream can become a raging torrent at high water.

Where are the open areas where you might encounter the most wind and wave action? High winds can be a problem and make paddling difficult anywhere, but open areas also produce high waves and double the difficulties. More on this in part IV, when we talk about paddling techniques. If you're a new paddler I'd try to keep your first few trips in winds of 10mph or less, when in open waters. You can go in higher winds in protected areas.

Is it a lake or river that has power boat traffic and are there speed, wake or motor size restrictions?

I'm also a power boater and know that kayaks in the water can sometimes be difficult to see. A study called "Visibility Factors in Small Boat Collisions" was presented at the 2012 International Marine Forensics Symposium. The study primarily focused on power boats and kayaks. Researchers found that kayaks are not likely to be spotted by a power boat until they're a quarter mile away, which can quickly lead to an "extremis condition". The sooner a small boat is spotted, the better.

Seventy-five percent of the power boat operators first reported seeing "paddle flash" when they saw the boat. A white or light colored paddle blade was much easier to see than a dark blade. The remaining saw the bright clothing that was being worn by the kayakers.

Among their recommendations to kayakers-

1. Carry an audible device
2. Wear a fluorescent or brightly colored life vest or shirt.
3. Use paddles with white or light colored blades.
4. Avoid kayaking in areas of high boat traffic.
5. Use flags that can be mounted on kayaks.

You'll notice that kayak color was not present in the recommendations. Fish can see color but does the color of your canoe or kayak make any difference to your fishing? I don't know, the debate rages among kayak anglers. From the study and from my own experience in a power boat I think the color of what you're wearing and the paddle blades is more important than the color of your canoe or kayak. Flags that mount on a pole in your kayak or canoe will also help your visibility in high traffic areas. Most people would also recognize that fishing in the middle of a large lake on Memorial Day weekend is probably a bad idea in any boat, let alone a small one. Lakes that have no wake areas or motor size restrictions are safer but accidents can still happen. If you do see a power boat coming towards you that you doubt has seen you, wave your paddle, make noise, or anything to help them see you. Large commercial craft such as barges are in a whole other category as they can produce huge waves and because of the amount of water they displace, suck in small boats that get too close. Avoid these craft at all cost! Staying alert and close to shore whenever possible will help keep you safe in high traffic areas.

If you're fishing a river, are there possible river hazards like fallen trees or maybe a low dam?

Find out all you can about the river you're going to fish on. Two hazards that really stand out as potential killers are fallen trees and low-head dams. Most of the time on slow moving streams fallen trees are not too hard to avoid but where the current is strong and the river gets "pushy" a canoe or kayak can be swept into the tree and the tree branches or other logs below the surface act like a strainer that can trap boats and people. The other big danger is low-head dams. Paddlers either go over these by mistake-not seeing them until it's too late- or because the dams often don't look very dangerous. The danger is that the water drops over a relatively smooth surface and develops a

back roller or “keeper” at the base. Water there is flowing back upstream and it’s very difficult to paddle out of. It will usually turn a boat sideways and then capsize leaving the paddler in a “washing machine” . Take a look at the base of most dams and you’ll see debris re-circulating in the current. Many low-head dams are now being removed because of the possible dangers. Except for the two circumstances I illustrated- where your best bet is often to attempt to swim parallel to the obstruction- if you capsize in moving water, do not try to stand up! Your foot may become trapped. Float on your back with your feet up and pointed downstream. Use your hands as paddles to slow and angle yourself and the moving water will help “ferry” you to shore. You can use this same technique in a canoe or kayak to move from side to side in a fast moving stream.

In your research on a river you might see that a river is rated. The rating system was developed to give degrees of difficulty to river rapids. Rivers or sections of rivers are rated from class I to class VI. Class I is moving water that is calm or with small disturbances and a few small waves. On the other end of the scale, Class VI is only for a team of experts with great preparation. For the purposes of fishing, unless you know what you’re doing in whitewater, avoid rapids over class II. I would suggest however that, if the river is rated, beginning paddlers stick to class I. Anchoring in moving water can also be dangerous as water piles up in front of stationary objects and can capsize you. It bears repeating; if a normally calm river is moving fast after a rain, is “bank full” or in flood stage, fish from shore that day or go to the lake!

Should I let other know where I’m going and expected back? This is an obvious question. It’s always a good idea to let someone know where you are going to fish, where you’ll launch from and what time you expect to be home. This is true even if you’re fishing with a partner. It can be posted on the refrigerator or emailed or sent by text. Be sure to let them know if you change locations or are staying later for that “last cast”.

Safety On The Water:

Keep your head in the boat, both literally and figuratively! *Figuratively*, as in any boating, you need to be alert to your environment and what’s going on around you. *Literally*, by keeping your head within the width of the boat! By doing so you are better balanced and have little possibility of capsize. The more you paddle the more instinctive this will become. Part of keeping your head in the boat is knowing where to put your butt in the boat. In a canoe or kayak the paddlers and passengers are the ballast, the heaviest things in the boat. Because of this your position in the boat is critical to how stable your boat is. One reason kayaks are generally more stable than canoes is that the center of gravity is lower when you’re sitting closer to the bottom of the boat. Canoe seats are generally higher. In rough water canoeists should kneel in the bottom of the canoe, bracing their butt against the seats. This lowers the center of gravity and increases stability. Obviously, standing in a canoe or kayak raises the center of gravity and requires better balance.

Capsizing and rescue. What if you don’t keep your head in the boat or maybe are capsized by large waves? We’ll assume you’re wearing a Personal Floatation Device, (PFD), which we’ll talk about shortly and that the water is not so cold that it takes your breath away, which we’ll also talk about shortly. We’ll also assume for the minute that you are paddling by yourself and will need to do a self-rescue. Try to remain calm and quickly asses your situation. Where is your gear? Was it properly secured in your boat or does the scene look like the debris field from the Titanic? Are you entangled in any lines? Many paddlers have a knife attached to their PFD so that they can cut away any lines or other gear. It’s a good reason to keep the area around your seat as clean and line free as possible. All modern canoes and kayaks have floatation built into them so that they will float when full of water. Is your boat floating right side up or upside down? If upside down grab an end and rotate the boat so that it’s upright. Gather any gear that is floating and put it back in your boat. Especially secure your paddle! If you have a sit-on-top kayak with scupper holes, the water is draining out so you can re-enter. For sit-insides, hybrids and canoes, If you are close to shore, you may find that it’s easier to swim your boat to shore to empty it. Most boats will also hold a paddler when full of water, so if necessary, you can enter your boat and begin pumping or bailing. However, it’s best

to get as much water out as possible before climbing in. For these boats a kayak pump or a bailer is a good idea. A bailer can be as simple as a bleach bottle or milk jug with the bottom cut out. Be sure it's tied in the boat or will be easily blown away. The best method to re-enter your kayak or canoe is to grasp your boat across it and float with your legs on the surface. Give a strong kick and pull yourself on board. There are great videos on line that show this procedure as well as on other websites and in books. Of course the time to practice self-rescue is not when you need it. It's a good practice to take your boat close to shore on a warm day and capsize it, (you may be surprised how hard this is). Practice the self-rescue procedure and dumping the water on shore.

Having a partner on the water is always helpful, if they're not so busy fishing that they don't come to your rescue. You should stay with your boat unless conditions are particularly bad. Have them first help to gather any floating gear then aid in the rescue. One of the most effective two boat rescues is called a "T" rescue. The rescue boat is brought perpendicular to the swamped boat. The end of the swamped boat is then lifted onto the rescue boat and when pulled far enough inboard, is turned over to get rid of most of the water. The swamped boat can then be turned parallel and the rescue paddler can help stabilize while you climb in. Videos and illustrations of this technique and others are also online and in numerous books. As in the self-rescue, try it before you need it!

Hypothermia and Clothing. As anglers we all need to know about hypothermia. Hypothermia is a condition when the body's temperature drops to 95 degrees or colder. The victim may become disoriented, unconscious and if the body is not warmed, death can occur. When we hear of someone dying of "exposure" in cold weather, that is hypothermia. It's not only boaters; people fishing from shore can fall into the water or become wet and cold from rain. Winter, early spring and late fall is when the water is the coldest and the danger the highest. When kayaking and canoeing, if the combined air and water temperature is below 120 degrees, you should be wearing protective clothing. If the water temperature is 50 and the air is 60, (not a bad spring day), you might only have 30-60 minutes of being wet before hypothermia sets in. If you go into cold water without protective clothing, don't worry about your boat or your gear, save yourself! Water tight jackets and pants with polyester fleece or wool under give pretty good protection since polyester fleece and wool will keep you warm when it's wet. Many serious kayak anglers wear breathable waders, (with a belt), over polyester fleece and a waterproof jacket on top. Some paddlers feel however that waders, (even belted), can be dangerous in water over waist high. Water inside the waders could possibly weight you down and impair your ability to get back into your boat. If you want to wear waders in your canoe or kayak, look at all the evidence- or try it in a safe environment- and decide for yourself. Wet suits and dry suits offer much greater protection but are not often as practical for fishing. A wool or fleece stocking cap is also good since much of your body heat is lost through the top of your head and waterproof gloves are more comfortable in cold water conditions.

Cotton is by far the worst material to wear wet. Besides being heavy, wet cotton will actually wick heat from your body, making you even colder. You're better off not wearing anything at all! Jeans and a cotton sweatshirt would be the worst possible thing to wear in cold weather/water conditions, either canoeing or kayaking. In moderate to warm conditions, synthetic, fast drying materials like nylon are now the most popular but on those hot summer days; you can get by with almost anything. It's always a good idea to have a dry set of clothing available, either in your car for short trips or in a dry bag, in your boat, for longer excursions.

Other items. For anytime but especially in warm weather, you need to stay hydrated! A gallon a day is suggested for most adults. A hat to protect yourself from the sun and sunscreen should all be a part of your routine. Paddling a canoe or kayak, you are close to the water and reflections off of the water will add to the sun's rays. Sunglasses will also protect your eyes and help your fishing. One of those neoprene or other straps to hold your glasses on is a must have. Whenever I step into a boat I assume that I might get wet and try to plan accordingly. This brings us to your number one piece of safety gear, your personal flotation device or PFD.

Type III PFDs are the most common for paddling and the majority of what you'll see in the stores. There are PFDs, designed for fishing, that have multiple pockets, places to hang gear and some even have a loop for holding the butt of a fishing rod. Your arms also have great freedom of movement in these designs. My personal favorites are the ones that have a mesh lower back to accommodate the high back seats in many kayaks. Examples of these PFDs are the NRS Chinook and the MTI Solaris. Every major manufacturer is now making fishing PFDs, so find one that suits your needs and is comfortable. The natural color PFDs are nice but, like clothes, brighter colors are more visible to other boaters. Another option are the automatic or manually inflated PFDs. I have a manual version that I wear sometimes in my canoes or kayak when the weather is calm and mild and I'm not in danger of a possible blow to the head if I go in the water.

Even though PFDs are rarely referred to as "life jackets" or "life vests" anymore, the name is accurate. 90% of the people who drowned in boating or water related accidents were not wearing a PFD!

Other Safety Equipment. If you're fishing on your small pond or subdivision lake you probably don't need much else in the way of safety equipment but if you're not within a couple minutes of home a few extra items are a good idea. Because I move from boat to boat I keep a Plano 1312 orange, marine dry box for all of those small items that I want to have accessible if needed. The box is a reasonably priced, modern version of the old war surplus ammo boxes we used to use. It has a gasket, is "water resistant" and will float but is not submersible. In it I keep a basic first aid kit in three zip lock bags. The three bags give extra waterproofing and also come in handy for various uses on the water. I also have a small air horn as an audible warning device. An air horn is louder but a whistle will also work and is easy to attach to your PFD. In my Plano box is also a waterproof flashlight, a small multi-tool with scissors, a couple of granola bars, sunscreen, insect repellent and yes, a small roll of ductape. Any other non-fishing items I might want along for the day can also go in the box. I always keep the box secured in the boat and within arm's reach. Dry bags can be used in place of a box or the gear can be incorporated into your tackle system but whatever you choose, be sure you can open it quickly and easily. I prefer to keep my car keys, wallet and cell phone on my person, in waterproof containers, but some people put those in their dry box, (or bag), as well. Just be sure you can't lose them!

In a waterproof case or container your cell phone is a great tool on the water. Not only can it provide emergency communications, (in most areas), and be your camera but also, (in the smart phone versions), a GPS unit. If you have an Android or iPhone there is a great app called Scout Look Weather. It gives you a detailed weather report, weather radar, acts as a GPS unit and can record a picture of your catch along with the coordinates. Pretty cool! Like many small objects in your boat, however, cell phones don't float very well so handle with care! As mentioned earlier a kayak pump or bailer is a good idea for sit-inside and hybrid kayaks and canoes and certainly a kayak flag will help your visibility on larger, open waters. A 20ft-40ft section of line, rounds out the safety equipment needed on our inland lakes and rivers. If you'll be paddling on the great lakes or largest rivers you may want to add a waterproof VHF radio and a flair kit. After dark you need to display a round white light. There are special lights available for kayaks but your flashlight will also work for this purpose.

Paddles. You obviously need a paddle to go paddling, unless you pedal or power your kayak or canoe and then still need one for backup. Kayak paddles are available on the market from \$30 to over \$300 so how do you pick? At the low end most of the shafts are aluminum with plastic blades. These are adequate for a small kayak on small waters but if you've spent money on a quality boat, you should have a quality paddle. Better paddles have fiberglass or carbon fiber shafts and nylon composite or fiberglass blades. One of the latest trends in kayak paddles are bent shafts. If you're an experienced paddler covering long distances I think the bent shafts are great. They do add efficiency to your stroke. For most kayak anglers however, I think a straight shaft is best. Most kayak paddles are two piece and even the least expensive usually have three holes where the shafts attach together. This is so that you can offset, (feather), your blades. Feathered blades can have an advantage in the wind and that's how I paddle

because it's the way I learned. The middle hole is preferred for most anglers, to put the paddle blades in a straight line. The reason for straight blades and shafts for fishing is that many times you are making small course corrections for boat control, sometimes with one hand and often without looking at your blade in the water. If you don't have a good sense of where your paddle blade is, without looking, it can throw off your balance.

How long should my paddle be? Most kayak paddles for fishing are either 230cm or 240cm. That's a difference of about 4 inches. There are several different methods for figuring the right kayak paddle length and you can use any of them:

#1 If your height is 5'5" to 5'11" and your boat is 24"-28" wide then a 230cm might be best. If over 29" wide then 230cm or 240cm. If you're 6ft or taller and paddle a 24" to 28" boat then 230cm-240cm would work. For that height and a boat over 29", a 240cm paddle length is indicated. The wider the boat the longer the paddle.

#2. If you have a more vertical stroke from a higher angle the shorter paddle is preferred. If you have a more horizontal stroke from a lower angle the longer blade will be better. When using a double blade in my pack canoe I use a 230cm because my angle is higher in the canoe than in my kayak where I use a 240cm and my paddling angle is lower.

#3 Hold the kayak paddle over your head with your elbows bent at a 90 degree angle. Your hands should be about two thirds of the way down the shafts for a properly fitting paddle.

#4 If you have an opportunity to try out different paddles, it's a good way to decide and also the dealer where you bought your kayak can help.

There are a number of good paddles for fishing from the top manufacturers. A good example of a top manufacturer is a Wisconsin company, Bending Branches. I like the warmth and feel of wood paddles and have used their wood paddles for quite awhile. I also really like their Angler series of synthetic paddles that are available in a range of prices. The middle two models offer a tape measure on the shaft and a hook retriever built into the blade that's perfect for freeing those expensive crankbaits!

For canoe fishing I like a straight shaft wood paddle but there is nothing wrong with synthetic paddles either. Canoe paddle length has a lot to do with what canoe you paddle and personal preference but a good rule of thumb is to sit up straight in a chair and put the paddle grip between your legs. The throat of the paddle, (where the blade meets the shaft), should be at your forehead. Double bladed kayak paddles are popular with many solo canoeists when trying to cover water. When paddling a standard size canoe solo you may want to go as long as 260cm-280cm.

What about spare paddles? A good idea especially on extended trips or on very big waters. I usually think it's more important in a canoe because I can move my kayak short distances with my hands if necessary. There are also emergency and four piece paddles available.

Having the proper knowledge and preparation,(including equipment), will help keep you safe and comfortable on the water and let you concentrate of the fishing!

In the final part of our series we'll look at paddling techniques, resources for kayak and canoe fishing as well as anchors, rod holders, fish finders and other fishing equipment .

Drop me a line at the email below if you have any thoughts or questions about the articles.

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