

An Angler's Kayak



by Chris Gorsuch
photos by the author

One afternoon five years ago, while I was wading in a river, a man came by in a small kayak. He beached the craft on the point of an island that was always too deep for me to reach on foot, jumped out and pulled a spinning rod from the cockpit. He began to wade and fish a section that I had only seen fished by those in a guided drift boat. The ability to slip stealthily past my position and reach water other waders could not reach made a lasting impression. Kayaks were nothing new to me—I had used them several times. I just had never considered their value to anglers.

In the fall of that same year, I was talking with a friend who was bound for college in one of Canada's northern provinces. His kayak stood in the corner of the garage and I asked if he wouldn't mind my using it during his absence. That basic kayak provided some excellent angling opportunities during the next few years, both in and out of the kayak. The more I used the kayak, the more I enjoyed fishing from it. Unfortunately, drilling holes to accommodate rod holders, paddle locks and a few other gadgets was not something I could do with a borrowed kayak. The time had come to purchase one.

Today there are far more kayak offerings than ever before. Kayaks fall not only into a whole range of form, fit and function, but each class type has many choices. As with selecting any watercraft, the list can be narrowed several ways. A good place to start is by deciding how and where you will most often use the kayak. Some are combination crafts. Others fit a specific function. Will it be a solo craft or a tandem two-seat model? How will you haul and store the craft? The selection process begins to narrow as you answer each question. Once you have

outlined your basic needs, spend some time at a reputable kayak outfitter in your area. Many establishments offer classes and seminars, and some even run "demo days" so you can try a few different models.

My specific wants in a kayak led me to a design that was suited more for rivers than lakes. I wanted it light enough to carry anywhere, but durable enough for shallow, rocky water. Having been in several kayaks with small cockpits, I wanted one with a wide enough frame and cockpit to allow ample room for my legs. My selected size fell between 9.5 feet and 11 feet to fit the carry weight I sought. Discussions with outfitters had me choosing a model from a few different manufacturers with similar weight, size and features, and by shopping around I was able to find one at a modest price. Once I chose the kayak, I bought a few aftermarket accessories to make the craft more angler-friendly.

Rigging a kayak today is quite different from what it was for my father in his day. For him this meant it was time to remove the old canvas and replace it with the new. Even though these crafts were light enough, the kayaks of old were limited in function and delicate in structure. Rigging a fishing-worthy kayak would be quite different. I selected the following items for my new kayak: A set of paddle holders, pivoting rod holder, two recessed rod holders, and an anchor cleat and fairlead (holds the anchor line).

Even though I had a very good idea of the desired layout, spending a few days on the river with the new kayak before mounting anything is a smart move. The cleat, paddle lock and rod holders must be positioned so that they do not interfere with paddling the kayak. This

step is important: Angling accessories should enhance, not interfere with, the craft's use. To ensure the paddle range remains clear, use a grease pencil to mark your range of motion, and then mark where you think the accessories will best fit the craft when in use.

You need only basic tools. A Phillips-head screwdriver, drill, drill bits, a 3/8-inch and 7/16-inch wrench or socket set, and a rounded rasp file. If your plans involve any recessed accessories, you also need the correctly sized hole saw bit. Using a combination marine adhesive and sealant is also a good idea.

Paddle holders

You can choose from a few different types of paddle holders. Side-mounted, cross-cockpit and tether strap are a few. Each offers advantages. For my boat I chose rubber side-mounted holders.

Installing the rubber paddle holders is a snap. The first step is to fit the mount around the paddle bar and then position the paddle where it best fits on the kayak. The position needs to allow easy access and remain clear of any other accessories you plan to add. Because I was limited on where to store the paddle, the biggest choice was to attach them to the left or right side. Many kayak enthusiasts choose to reach their paddles from the right, but I chose to reach mine from the left. One reason for doing this was to have access to the anchor cleat (described later) with my right hand.

Mark the desired location and drill one hole for each holder. For this installation, and for fastening all kayak accessories, I used wide, pan-head stainless-steel machine screws with nylon washers and nylon lock nuts. With a nylon-centered locknut there is no need to over-tighten any of the fasteners. In fact, excessive torque will damage the kayak. Use a dab of marine sealant/adhesive over each hole before fastening.



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Pivoting rod holder

Pivoting rod holders can be mounted in various positions. I have seen them mounted on both the front and back decks with as few as one rod holder or as many as four. As with any accessory, placement location is a matter of personal choice. To add another level of choice, the bases are available in recessed or surface mounted. Before mounting, make sure you know the range of motion required to paddle. Pivoting rod holders can easily get in the way if they're positioned incorrectly.



Some items the author selected for his new kayak included a set of paddle holders (not pictured), pivoting rod holder, two recessed rod holders, and an anchor cleat and fairlead.

Spending ample time selecting the location will eliminate problems later.

Location often depends on the kayak you're fitting. One with a semi-flat front deck will make selecting a good position a breeze. I marked the holes, drilled, and fastened the base in place. The fastening process included my using stainless steel bolts, nylon washers and nylon-centered lock nuts with a dab of marine sealant placed over each hole.

My kayak has a long cockpit and limited deck space, so I had to modify how I mounted the rod holder. Because of the fairly large cockpit and how far the front deck was from the seat, I was not comfortable with the long reach required for deck-mounting the pivoting rod holder. After some planning, I did some minor modifications to the mount base to allow for a solid mount just off the coaming base (lip that forms the edge of the cockpit).

With a quarter-round rasp file, I followed the groove on the mount's bottom and removed an additional eighth-inch to quarter-inch of the center groove. This allowed the base to sit nearly flush along the shaped line just outside the cockpit coaming. I was able to set it close enough to reach while allowing ample range for paddling and room for placing the spray skirt around the cockpit.

Anchor system

Even though there are many variations when it comes to anchor systems, the goal is to keep this simple and functional. A bow-mounted system lets you fish facing



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upstream, a vital safety consideration, especially in moving water.

Positioning the cleat is simple. Place it on the opposite side of the paddle mounts and align it with the hip of the kayak seat. The cleat is easy to reach and low enough to allow unobstructed paddling. As with nearly every accessory, time spent on the water with your kayak will help you best define proper location. The position of the fairlead (holds the anchor line) should be close to the bow and should be high enough to keep the anchor above the waterline.

It is important to discuss some basic anchors many are using. The one-pound folding grapple anchor that comes with many kits may not be the best type to use. They often grab so well that they make retrieval nearly impossible. Two inexpensive options are using a 3-pound coated dumbbell. A dumbbell is quiet and less likely to hang up or cause damage to your hull. Another option I use is to melt 3 pounds of lead and pour it in an old steel cup with a u-bolt or eyebolt inside, to which you tie the anchor line. These options are both easy and inexpensive.

Note: Never anchor your kayak in rapids or swift water.

Recessed rod holders

Cutting a 2-inch hole in your brand new kayak is a gut-wrenching experience. Before cutting the recess hole, spend some time figuring where the holder fits best. My decision to place the pair right behind the seat was to keep them within reach, and to keep the recess tube out of the way. Note that the position must allow ample room for the recess tube.

After marking the location, use the hole saw to cut the rough opening. Take time to measure twice and cut once: It just doesn't feel natural cutting a large hole into a perfectly good kayak!

To fit the holder properly into the hole, use a half-round rasp or large rat-tail file. To fit flush, the 2-inch circle should resemble more of an oval by reshaping the top and bottom by at least a quarter-inch. Check the fit often, and once it is flush, mark and drill the three bolt holes. As usual, I used stainless steel bolts, nylon washers and nylon-centered lock nuts. Before securing the mount in place, use a marine adhesive/sealant on the underside of the mount to eliminate water getting in. Repeat these steps for as many recessed rod holders as you have planned to include.

Rigging a kayak to meet your specific angling needs is a rewarding experience. Having a light, very functional, go-anywhere craft at a modest price is also hard to beat. The overall availability and ease of renting several different styles before you buy is a draw to why kayaks are becoming so popular. The experience has extended my angling range and presented fishing opportunities that otherwise would not have been possible. ☐

Hazards on the water

Dams. Water going over a dam creates a back current, or undertow, that can pull a boat into the turbulence and capsize it. This hydraulic can trap and hold a person or a boat. Hazards include the areas above and below the dam. Paddlers can spot dams by looking downriver for a horizontal line across the water.

Strainers. Trees are typical strainers that can trap and flood boats. Water flows through these obstructions, but solid objects do not. Strainers can "pin" victims underwater.

Current. Never underestimate the power of moving water. Boaters who are not sure that their boats or their abilities can meet prevailing conditions should stay off the water.

Cold water/sudden immersion. Sudden immersion in cold water can lead to cardiac arrest or can cause a person to inhale water. If you fall into cold water, immediately cover your mouth and nose with your hands. Dress properly for the cold by wearing a hat, several layers of clothing and warm boots. Wool, pile and polypropylene provide warmth even when wet. Avoid cotton fabrics.

Hypothermia. Hypothermia is the lowering of the body's core temperature. It begins with shivering. Judgment then becomes clouded, and unconsciousness sets in. Death can occur if hypothermia is not treated. Remove a hypothermic person from the water and replace wet clothes with warm, dry clothing and/or a blanket. Do not massage the extremities or give the victim alcohol or caffeine.

Heat exhaustion/sunburn. When it is hot, wear sunglasses, a hat, and lightweight and light-colored clothing. Apply sun block and drink lots of fluids.

Other boaters. Be aware of other boaters. Keep a sharp lookout to prevent collisions and conflicts.