

# Cold-Water Kayak Fishing

by *Chris Gorsuch*

*photos by the author*

When we think of a day out in a kayak, more often than not we picture a trip on a favorite stretch of water with a warm summer breeze. Imagine some of the odd looks I get kayaking during the winter when the weather is anything but balmy. However, the cold-water season is arguably one of the best times for trophy-sized fish. Add the convenience of reaching a few of my favorite holes with the stealth of a kayak, and you have a winning combination.

Planning a kayak outing during the cold-water season takes more effort than planning trips during the warm-water season. The primary difference is having the proper gear, some additional trip preparation, and knowledge of cold-water hazards. Perhaps no one knows this as well as Jeff Little, of Blue Ridge Kayak Fishing, LLC. Jeff is a kayak and safety instructor who provides paddlcraft classes for paddlers and anglers of all experience levels. He worked with me to cover some of the key aspects of winter kayaking.

Before jumping right into selecting the proper cold-water gear, it's important to define the suggested kayak type for cold-water paddling. Kayaks are often classified by their uses, such as whitewater, touring and recreational. Kayaks are also defined by their seating positions, the sit-on-top (SOT) kayak and the sit-in kayak (SINK). Because of the dangers of cold water, the rider needs the protection of being inside



the cockpit, so the sit-in kayak is the first choice and focus for winter kayaking.

## Gear

Gear includes items for the kayak and items for the kayaker. For the kayaker, gear starts with the first layer—what’s next to your skin. If the self-guided trips to the far outer limits of our neighbors to the north have taught me anything about the elements, it is the value of the first layer. The best outerwear money can buy is only as good as the first layer.

Polarweight or heavyweight thermal long underwear in polypropylene or wool blends works well. These products wick body moisture away and keep you dry. Jeff Little suggests wool socks and dressing in non-cotton layers to match the changing weather conditions during the trip. The outer layer is as simple as a pair of neoprene, or better yet, breathable waders and a good water-resistant jacket.

The middle layer should include pile (fleece) or wool garments. Pile or wool clothes work best because they keep you warm even when wet, and they wick moisture away from the body. Drysuits or waterproof pants and jackets for an outer layer are best to keep you dry and warm.

A wool watchcap is ideal, and neoprene gloves or waterproof glove shells also work well. Use wool gloves or insulated waterproof ones as backup. There are many to choose from, and choices will be different for everyone. A pair of wool fingerless gloves or just wearing no gloves helps retain good feel while fishing, but these choices are not as warm as other options.

Little suggests using duct tape to wrap the rod handle loosely where the reel is affixed to the rod. The loose space or air pockets offer more comfort than the ice-cold metal and hard plastic on the rod-and-reel harness. “If you can get beyond the way this looks, it will make fishing more comfortable,” Little says.



The most important item is the life jacket. Invest in a good, comfortable life vest, one that’s adjustable so that it will fit over winter outerwear. For cold-weather kayak fishing, a float coat is an even better choice. Your favorite summertime life jacket may be too small after you add all the winter layers, and comfort is key.

Regardless of skill, a life jacket is a must-wear piece of equipment. Do not climb into a kayak without it on and fastened properly. Your life may very well count on it. See the article “Life Jackets for Anglers,” by Dan Martin, in this issue on page 18.

Items for the kayak come down to two must-have accessories. The first is a properly fitted kayak skirt. The skirt is a cover that fits around the kayaker’s torso and then around the cockpit to form a cover. The skirt stretches around and locks into the cockpit rim, called the “coaming.”

There are several skirt types, and some are better than others for cold water. A full cockpit skirt is a must. Jeff Little recommends skirts made from neoprene instead of nylon. He says the neoprene protects the rider better than nylon. A skirt with an adjustable waist cinch or belt to provide further protection from the elements is also beneficial.

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The second item Little insists on is a dry bag. A dry bag is simply a durable marine-quality bag designed to keep dry items dry. They come in various sizes and can be stored in the kayak hatch or strapped on the deck rigging. Dry bags can be purchased at most sporting goods stores. They range in price from \$15 and up, and will provide years of use.

## Preparation

Starting with items for the dry bag, pack a second set of clothes. In an emergency, quick access to dry clothes is critical. Roll together a pair of pile or wool pants and a pullover pile jacket and place them in a vacuum sealer. It is a second shield from water, and the powerful vacuum shrinks the size. I also tuck a pair of wool socks into old sneakers and seal them as well.

Little also packs the tools to get a quick fire going, and I always pack a folding knife, air-activated pocket warmers and a first aid kit. These items are the dry bag essentials.



*The cold-water season is arguably one of the best times to catch trophy-sized fish. However, plan cold-weather trips carefully, dress in layers, wear your life jacket, know your skill level and don't exceed it, and never boat alone on cold water.*

# Cold-Water Kayak Fishing

Consider also packing some energy bars, trail mix and even a thermos containing a hot beverage. In cold weather, these items offer a welcome shoreline break during the outing. They also provide the additional energy your body will likely need. Dehydration is often considered a warm-weather issue, but it is just as prevalent during cold-weather activities.

Smart preparation also includes planning the trip. Knowledge gained during the warm-water season on any given flow can be applied to planning a winter trip. It's wise to select floats that

are familiar, and avoid stretches with class II or greater water and where getting doused with ice-cold water is inevitable. It is important to know your skill level because a winter outing is no place for a maiden kayak voyage.

Never boat alone on cold water. Kayak floats on rivers in cold water require at least two people. Two or more also aid in having both a put-in and a drop-off vehicle, and the buddy system is just a safe way to plan a winter float.

Many agencies offer information regarding up-to-the-minute flow conditions. Even though most offer this

service by providing web sites, a few have a phone number or bulletin board service. **Visit the following web sites for flow details:**

[www.erh.noaa.gov/er/marfc/Stages](http://www.erh.noaa.gov/er/marfc/Stages), and <http://pa.waterdata.usgs.gov/nwis/current?type=flow>.

Checking the weather is also part of planning a trip. Be aware of frontal systems and how fast they can move in. Wind is also a factor from late fall through early spring. The bite of a cold, brisk headwind can make a trip miserable.

## Hazards

All activities on or around cold water require heightened alert and solid preparation. Firsthand knowledge of strainers, strong current areas, submerged objects and dams of all types is

often the primary focus, and it's part of planning a trip. In cold water, the major focus is on sudden immersion into cold water and hypothermia.

Sudden immersion into cold water places a severe strain on bodily systems that can lead to cardiac arrest. Among the physiological reactions to sudden immersion into cold water is immediate, involuntary inhalation. Anyone falling into cold water should immediately cover the mouth and nose with the hands to prevent inhaling water. This action reduces the body's physiological shock.

Once plunged into cold water, the shock to the system may not let the victim think or act clearly. Cold water can also quickly numb the extremities. Cold hands may be unable to fasten the straps of a life jacket, grasp a rescue line, or hold on to an overturned boat. Wearing a life jacket while on the water is always recommended. But wearing a life jacket at all times on cold water is especially critical. The buoyancy of a life jacket can keep you afloat, increasing the odds of rescue and survival.

In addition, before heading out into the elements, know the telltale signs associated with hypothermia. First, you don't have to flip your kayak for hypothermia to set in. Spray from the water or clothing that does not wick moisture away from the body will cause heat loss. Even a small drop in body temperature can trigger danger signs. While shivering may occur, the signs I look for are:

- **Tense, numb or weak muscles.**
- **Feeling fatigued or exhausted.**
- **Uncontrollable shivering.**
- **Slurred speech or blurred vision.**

The National Institutes of Health has a clever suggestion for recognizing the signs. Look for the "umbles"—the stumbles, the mumbles, the fumbles and the grumbles. Many people ignore the signs and will even argue about having them. The buddy system works well in this regard. If you notice any of these symptoms with your partner, don't argue. Instead, suggest that you're cold and wish to take a short break, perhaps to start a small fire.

If you roll or become submerged, get to shore as soon as possible. Your dry bag contains dry clothes and will allow your body to keep heat. Remove all wet clothes and get the dry gear on as quickly as possible. Your fire starter kit should contain a fire-starting gel or similar propellant, so even while fatigued, a small fire can be made to gain back body temperature.

Do not use an anchor with these kinds of boats in the cold-weather season.

## Waterway suggestions

When fishing, I am very fond of big rivers such as the Susquehanna River. However, during the cold-water season, I prefer small to medium rivers. The primary reason is to shorten the distance from my craft to the shoreline in

case of an emergency. Being a half-mile offshore is just too far in my opinion. Flows such as the Clarion, Juniata, Lehigh and even parts of the Delaware are perfect for a winter outing when conditions allow. The Lehigh, Clarion, and sections of the upper Delaware offer superb trout and smallmouth bass angling throughout the cold-water season. Similarly, the Juniata and sections of the middle Delaware offer days full of walleye and smallmouth bass angling. Also consider tributaries of your favorite streams during the summer flow. Remember to do your reconnaissance and exploration during the fair weather before planning a winter trip.

When winter grips the outdoors and you feel like a shut-in, open yourself to the resources winter kayaking has to offer. ☐

## Cold-Water Fishing Tips

**Species:** Smallmouth bass, walleyes.

**Tackle:** Tubes, grubs, hair jigs, suspending stickbaits, salted sinking baits.

**Presentation:** Allow to fall to the bottom and move bait as slowly as possible. Hair jigs can be tipped with half a nightcrawler. Drive bait to depth, twitch, then allow a long pause and repeat. Allow to drop, leave on the bottom for a period and watch the line for movement. Usually bass are not in heavy current this time of year. Try protected eddies and pools.

**What to look for:** If sun is high, seek edges of rip-rap and semi-shallow hard rock points like the slack side of a gravel eddy. Look for a slow to moderate water flow and work baits in a similar presentation.

**Species:** Trout.

**Tackle:** Spinners, spoons, stickbaits, slider worms.

**Presentation:** Use as slow a retrieve as you can get away with. Spoons can actually be bounced. Twitch and reel; twitch and reel, vary, pause. Allow to drop and float along the bottom.

**What to look for:** If the water is on a warming trend, trout like to chase prey. Select bait to match trend. Seek light current and slick areas just below current but close to cover. Work riverbank cuts and pools above and below fast water.

## Kayak Manufacturers

There are many kayak manufacturers, and paddle shops often carry several brands. *Here are a few suggestions if you're looking to buy.*

<b>Dagger Kayaks</b>	(800) 433-1969	<a href="http://www.dagger.com">www.dagger.com</a>
<b>Liquid Logic Kayaks</b>	(828) 698-5778	<a href="http://www.liquidlogickayaks.com">www.liquidlogickayaks.com</a>
<b>Old Town Kayaks</b>	(207) 827-5514	<a href="http://www.otcanoe.com">www.otcanoe.com</a>
<b>Necky Kayaks</b>	(866) 632-5987	<a href="http://www.necky.com">www.necky.com</a>
<b>Perception Kayaks</b>	(800) 595-2925	<a href="http://www.kayaker.com">www.kayaker.com</a>
<b>Walden Kayaks</b>	(978) 772-0110	<a href="http://www.waldensports.com">www.waldensports.com</a>
<b>Wilderness Kayaks</b>	(336) 434-7470	<a href="http://www.wildernesssystems.com">www.wildernesssystems.com</a>