

# COLDWATER KAYAKING

by *Chris Gorsuch*

*photos by the author*



The lights in the convenience store shined like a beacon on this dark November morning. That was where I was meeting my fishing partners. Being the first to arrive, all I could think about was a hot cup of coffee. A cold blast of air met me as I stepped out of my truck. The stranger at the store entrance glanced at me, then at my kayak, then at me again and asked, "You're not really going out on the water today in that are you?" I chuckled and replied, "Sure am, want to join me?"

I seem to get that response quite often. In his defense, most people associate kayaking with warm summer weather and not an activity for frosty late fall mornings.

The change of seasons will turn most northern gamefish into voracious eating machines. Conditions may not seem favorable for paddling, but with the proper gear and planning, coldwater paddling can spell success for bass, walleyes, muskies and trout.

The combination of declining daylight and dropping water temperature, trigger the fish to feed to prepare for the long winter. They will eat all winter long but take advantage of the months leading up to ice cold water to gain as much food mass as possible. The urge to feed draws bass to specific areas and can bring them out into the open where they can be easier to target.

That said, there is a reason they've lived long enough to become trophies. The best ones always seem to be more elusive. You can bet they are still quite aware of their surroundings. On rivers, gamefish will move into ambush points where they have first access to unsuspecting forage.

When coldwater kayaking, consider packing a small survival kit. In the survival kit, toss an all-weather lighter, a small tube of fire starting gel, air activated hand warmers, energy bars, first aid kit and, in a small waterproof bag, a cell phone. In large rivers or remote areas, the ability to build a small fire to warm up quickly can make all the difference.

Ambush points will vary, the front edge of an eddy, the side of an exposed rock or ledge or pinched current flows where baitfish are swept down river as if on a conveyer belt. Getting to these spots quietly and undetected is an excellent match for success. Stealth when approaching such an area can be a great benefit to anglers.

Bottom lures such as tubes, worm jigs, creatures and hair jigs are perfect for cold water situations where fish are feeding on crayfish, sculpin minnows or insects. Work these baits slowly. The colder the water, the slower you work the baits. Dragging verses hopping bottom lures can often result in strikes.

Crankbaits, suspending jerkbaits and spinnerbaits are fantastic for covering water when the forage is minnows or creek chubs. Let the fish dictate the cadence and speed of these lures. If you are experiencing short strikes, consider changing the color or size of the lure. When fish are dialed into a particular baitfish, matching size and color will help them commit on the strike.

Understanding why bass are feeding, where they'll be feeding and what type of lure to use is only part of unlocking the key to your coldwater trophy. We've all heard the term dress for success. The same applies with coldwater kayaking. Exposure is always a risk in cold weather, even more when on the water. Paddlers are more prone to the effects of wind. Since the kayak sits on the water's surface, there is little separating the angler from the cold. If an angler is not warm and comfortable, they will focus on the cold and not the fishing. Put the odds in your favor.

Dress in layers and avoid cotton. There is a saying among cold weather enthusiasts, "Cotton kills." Cotton fabrics hold a great deal of moisture and do not keep moisture away from your body. This will draw body heat down to dangerous levels that can lead to hypothermia. Many make the mistake in using cotton as part of their first layer. That is a mistake and can limit the thermal qualities of the other layers.

Instead, select fabrics with excellent wicking properties. Thermal underwear made from a polypropylene blend fabric creates a base layer that is both breathable and comfortable with excellent wicking properties. Sporting goods and outdoor shops offer a variety of thermal underwear brands and thermal ranges.



## Mandatory cold weather life jacket wear

Beginning November 1, 2012, boaters must wear a life jacket on boats less than 16 feet in length or any canoe or kayak during the cold weather months from November 1st through April 30th. Recreational boating fatalities that occur in Pennsylvania from November through April are primarily due to the effects of cold water immersion. When water temperatures are less than 70 degrees F, cold water shock is a major factor in boating fatalities. Victims who wear a life jacket when exposed to cold water have potentially life-saving advantages such as insulation from the cold, buoyancy for victims who are unable to tread water and reduced risk of aspiration of water. In an effort to reduce the number of fatalities related to cold water immersion, the Commission has amended regulations to require life jackets to be worn on small and unstable boats during the period most noted for cold water temperatures.

The middle layer is your thermal layer. Fleece or wool garments work best, because they hold their thermal properties even when wet. They also come in various thicknesses to match the expected weather conditions.

With base and thermal layers set, the final piece is the shield layer. The shield is there to block elements such as wind, rain, snow and even splashes from the paddle or rapids. This is where the variety of choices can really take over. Gortex rain gear is a good start. It shields and protects from the elements and adds breathability to the final layer.

Paddle suits come in one or two piece and are quite expensive. Paddle pants are very similar to lightweight wading pants or bibs. For this reason, you can use a quality pair of breathable waders and a wading jacket to produce a similar effect. In order to work properly, the bibs need a belt or cinch at the waist to keep out water. Those with an adjustable neoprene waist work best in that regard. They are not waterproof. However, in the event of capsizing the kayak, they will actually act as a secondary flotation.

I've had many anglers question waders. Trust me when I say we have tested this in controlled conditions with water rescue teams. A set of fitted breathable waders double as great pair of paddle pants.

Hats, neck gear and gloves are really an individual choice. I prefer a fleece hat and that is about it. There are many others who prefer wool or fleece gloves. Fleece neck hoops and facemasks are warm and comfortable for those extremely cold days.

Consider a larger life jacket to fit over the extra clothing, but make sure it properly fits. Life jackets designed for kayakers have padding on the upper back but not in the lumbar area. These are designed to be comfortable while sitting in or on the kayak. Wearing your life jacket also doubles as a thermal layer. It will save your life. Always wear your life jacket.

Paddle skirts fit over the combing edge of the cockpit and will keep water out of the kayak. I prefer the comfort of a SOT (Sit On Top) kayak, but dry wear is an absolute must in cold water.

To add to the paddle gear, consider packing a change of clothes and a small survival kit. The change of clothes is just in case of submersion. The ability to change into dry clothes can keep the risk of hypothermia to a minimum. In the survival kit, I toss an all-weather lighter, a small tube of fire starting gel, air activated hand warmers, energy bars, first aid kit and, in a small waterproof bag, my cell phone. In large rivers or remote areas, the ability to build a small fire to warm up quickly can make all the difference.



With hypothermia, early detection can save lives. Signs are numb or weak limbs, fatigue, exhaustion, uncontrolled shivering or slurred speech. The National Institute of Health has a clever catch phrase for recognizing the signs. Look for the “UMBLES”—the stumbles, the mumbles and the fumbles. Don't ignore the signs.

For nutrition during the trip, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches are easy to pack and full of energy. I always pack more than I plan to eat.

When surrounded by water, dehydration is something most paddlers never consider, especially in cold weather. However, it is a situation that can catch paddlers by surprise. Bottled water is easy to pack and in cold weather doesn't require a cooler. It can be stored in or on the craft for easy access.

As a cold water rule, never paddle alone. In the event of an emergency, having a second paddler or two paddlers to assist can save the day. If the emergency is severe enough, one person can stay behind to assist while the third goes for help. ☐