

Kayaks and Canoes for Freshwater Fishing Part I *by: Doug Abbott*

Kayak fishing is the fastest growing segment of the angling sports and even though fewer people fish from canoes these days, it's the way many of us got started in the sport and deserves a look as well. In this series of articles we'll explore different types of kayaks and canoes for freshwater fishing, (and the advantages/disadvantages of each), as well as the necessary equipment, fishing accessories, a few paddling techniques, safety concerns and along the way we'll highlight a few differences between fishing from the paddle craft and the big boats.

I love fishing from my big boat and do it a lot but there are times when my kayak and canoes are better choices and just a lot more fun. Stealth, simplicity and cost are just three of the reasons that attract anglers when it comes to fishing from a kayak or canoe. While banging a paddle against the side of an aluminum canoe may not be a stealthy technique certainly silently gliding along in a kayak will allow you to quietly move into position where the fish are and also allow you to get into small and thin waters where you would never attempt to take your big boat. This is particularly true in our part of the Midwest where some of the best fish are found in the smaller waters. Borrow pits, strip mine ponds, subdivision lakes, farm ponds, municipal and county lakes, rivers, and the back coves and fingers of our bigger lakes, all open up in a kayak or canoe. No ramp, no problem. No motors, no problem. This is where these craft shine.

Shore anglers benefit too by being able to get out onto the water.

It's all about getting to where the fish are!

While a fully tricked out fishing kayak may not seem very simple with storage for a dozen or more lure boxes, gear bags, anchors, a half dozen rods, fish finder, maybe even a live well, etc., etc., etc. The fact that these boats lend themselves so well to customization makes each one a fishing statement by the owner. They can be as simple or as complex as you want to make them. When I fish from my 12ft solo canoe, I go simple, one or two rods and a small gear bag. When I fish from my kayak I have a lot more gear, including a finder. Like any fishing it depends on what you're targeting and your intentions for the trip. I try to keep it as simple as possible and not take what I don't need. After all, when you're the motor, you'll have to pull that extra stuff around all day.

A fishing kayak can cost from a couple of hundred dollars to a couple of thousand dollars or more. Canoes can be pretty much in the same range but whichever you choose it stands to reason that the cost is most often going to be much lower than the cost of the big boats. Upkeep is lower too not to mention fuel, storage, registration and all. As someone who also owns three power boats I can give witness to the cost of power boat ownership.

So Canoe or Kayak? I have to tell you I'm a canoe paddler at heart. My first boating memory was at 4yrs old in my parents post-war 17ft Grumman, (fishing with my Dad), and I've loved canoes ever since. I've camped out of them, run some of the best whitewater in the eastern half of the US in them, taught canoeing, sailed them, enjoy the challenge and art of paddling solo and even took my future wife on a date/river trip on New Year's Day, 1980. Her parents were convinced we had eloped! Even though I love canoes, there are only about three areas where I think a canoe beats out a kayak when it comes to

fishing. One is as a family boat, especially with younger kids. It's hard to beat a canoe for spending some quality time with the kids on the water and catching a few fish. Do most of the paddling yourself and let the kids face you from the bow seat (front of the boat). Facing them is also a much better way to teach fishing and as most of us have experienced, a safer place to be on the novice's back cast. If paddling your canoe with a single blade paddle is too much try a double bladed kayak paddle. Get the longest one you can and try it, it works! The second area is for carrying capacity. In most of the family canoes out there you can load the spouse, kids, dog, a week's worth of camping equipment and still have room for your fishing tackle. The third area is the possibility of using a small outboard or electric motor on a canoe. Although an increasing number of kayaks have pedal and electric motor options, canoes still are more adaptable for motors with a simple motor bracket or, if you know that's the way your leaning, a square stern. I have a 14 ft Old Town Sportsman that works well with a 30lb thrust electric motor. A hint, if you intend to motor your canoe get a model with a keel, (a rail running lengthwise along the bottom of a boat). This will help minimize side slipping.

I love canoes but kayaks excel in most of the areas that make them better fishing machines. Some advantages:

1. Boat Control. Canoes have higher sides, are usually lighter for their size and consequently get blown around more. Kayaks are lower to the water and often have hull designs that aid in boat control.
2. Stability. Stability is more of a function of hull, (the bottom of the boat, the part in the water), design and paddler center of gravity, (more on this later), but kayaks, for the same width are usually more stable than canoes.
3. Paddling ease. Kayaks hulls are usually more efficient than the majority of canoes making them easier to paddle, maneuver and better tracking, (moving forward in a straight line). And unless you're a real hot shot with a single blade paddle, a double blade kayak paddle will beat you every time.
4. Adaptability. Kayaks for fishing generally are much more adaptable to mounting all of the rod holders, anchor controls, fish finders, gear bags, etc. that help us catch fish.

We mentioned kayak hull design a lot in the top 4 above so let's spend some time talking about it.

While most of us pay a lot of attention to the parts of the kayak above the water the part in the water, (the hull), mostly affects items 1-3 above.

There are too many design variations to permit a lot of detail so everything we discuss below are generalities but most are common sense and can also be applied to canoes or any boat.

Longer kayaks are faster than shorter ones.

Wider kayaks are more stable than narrow ones but slower.

Given the same width a longer kayak is more stable because of its larger footprint.

Shorter kayaks are more maneuverable than long ones.

Boats with a straight hull (less rocker) are faster and track better while boats with more rocker, (ends uplifted like the rockers on a rocking chair), are more maneuverable.

Boats with a keel or a skeg (molded in or portable appendage) track better but are less maneuverable. Also helps the kayak side slip less in windy conditions.

Rounded bottom or soft chined, (chine is where the top sides of the boat meet the bottom), hulls have less initial stability, (more tippy), but have more secondary stability, (less prone to going over in rough conditions).

Flat bottom or hard chined, (more of a boxy shape), hulls have more initial stability, (less tippy), but have less secondary stability. Because we need a more stable platform to fish from, most fishing kayaks tend towards the flat bottom design but would not be the best choice for whitewater or rough open water conditions.

Pontoon or tunnel hulls have great initial stability but sacrifice some speed. Most of the kayaks that are stable enough to stand in have pontoon hulls.

Sharp V hulls are very fast but not a stable platform for fishing. Most open water touring kayaks have sharp V hulls.

Rudders make a kayak easier to steer and track but it's another device on the boat to deal with and are prone to picking up weeds. Also helps the kayak side slip less in windy conditions.

Any kayak can be fished from but boats designed specifically for whitewater or open water touring, (the extremes of kayak designs), would not be good fishing kayaks.

Most modern recreational kayaks, including fishing ones, are compromises in hull design blending several of the design elements. Plastic hull molding helps make this possible.

In Part II we'll take a look at the "top side" of the boat and the different styles of kayaks, "sit inside", "sit on top" and "hybrid", as well as some more thoughts on canoes for fishing.

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

Doug Abbott is a lifelong resident of Central Illinois and a former canoeing and boating safety instructor for the American Canoe Association and the Red Cross. Whenever possible he can be found on the waters of Central Illinois or Northern Wisconsin. Doug can be reached other times at Doug@Champaignfaith.org.