

## A beginner forays into kayak fishing

*While it greatly expands the range of a landlocked fisherman, kayak fishing has its share of pitfalls.*

By **Barry Stringfellow** - August 23, 2017



*Lobsterville Beach, ready to launch. —Barry Stringfellow*

Many surf fisherman know the frustration of helplessly watching diving birds and water frothing with feeding fish, just out of casting range.

A kayak changes all that.

It allows fishermen to track their quarry well offshore. Some kayakers off Cape Cod have even landed 400-pound tuna.

I have nowhere near the kayaking experience to attempt such madness.

Most of my kayak fishing was done on a memorable half-summer on Dogfish Bar in Aquinnah, a little over 10 years ago. I never ventured far, but went much farther than I could ever cast from shore. It was a game changer. Catching dinner was almost like going to the store.

As a service to our readers, I decided at the beginning of the summer to get back into a pointy row-boat and actually learn what the hell I was doing from an experienced kayak fisherman, and to share that knowledge, assuming I survived the trip. It was an easy excursion to put off. Kayak fishing has its benefits, but it's a lot more work than grabbing a rod and a plug bag and heading out. For the novice, it probably means tracking down a boat, somehow mounting it on your vehicle, unloading it without crushing any fingers or toes, carrying it to the water, pushing off without breaking any guides on the rod, and then doing the reverse, after hours of paddling.

When The Times inherited two kayaks last week, it was clearly a sign to take to the water. I called Chilmarker Jim Feiner, who has the experience and the patience to teach the finer points of kayak fishing, or at least tolerate a novice for an evening.

Jim often kayak fishes alone, at night, off the rocky North Shore.

The kayak wouldn't fit on the roof of my Chevy pickup, so I angled it from the truck bed, over the roof, giving my truck the look of a battering ram ready to storm the castle gates as I charged up-Island.

The night got off to a fantastic start — a coveted non-resident parking spot at Lobsterville Beach opened up just as I arrived.

It clearly was going to be a good night.

Jim wasn't confident that my company kayak and my 6'2", 225-pound frame were a good match. Fortunately the conditions were benign, hardly a wisp of wind and the water was mill pond still.

Jim said one of the most important pieces of equipment in kayak fishing, besides a well-fitting life vest, is a rod holder. They don't cost much and they're easy to install — drill a few holes (on the top of the boat, please), and drill screws into a block of wood on the underside. No more juggling paddle and gear while trying to reel in a fish, and no more hugging the rod between your legs while trying not to lose your paddle so you can change lures. Also, with a rod holder, you can troll while you paddle.

"I also put a leash on my paddle," he said. "It won't cost much and it can save you a lot of trouble."

Fellow novices take note — you don't want to be dragged by a big fish only to later realize that your paddle is somewhere between you and Nashawena. A lost paddle on a moonless night is extremely hard to find, especially if you don't have a paddle to help you search.

Jim recommended a few other essentials — a small Tupperware tub with a handful of lures, a headlamp, pliers, also on a tether, a rope to bring home a keeper should you be so inclined, and a cut-up yoga mat for cushioning.

As we began to put in, several fish broke 10 yards off shore.

Clearly, it was going to be a good night.

"I like the soft baits, small sluggos work really well," Jim said. "You can bump them along the bottom and with the single hook, you rarely get snagged." Another bonus of single hooks is it makes releasing the fish much easier, on the fisherman and on the fish.

Even on this calm night, keeping my balance was tricky at first. I came close to dumping several times, trying to change lures or just forgetting the fact that I had to balance in a kayak.

"I've flipped many times, but always on the way in," Jim said. Other hazards include fog banks, getting blown out to sea and — unique to kayak fishing — getting towed out to sea.

"My most memorable catch was off the South Shore when I hooked into a big one with an eel," Jim said. "It was pitch black with 4-foot swells, and after about 15 minutes of being towed all over the place I got the fish close enough to see the eye of a large shark, so I cut the line. Once I had one of those large horse-headed gray seals come up next to me in the dark and it scared the dickens out of me. I was in sketchy water to begin with, and this was a real adrenaline booster. Albies and bonito also give you a good ride."

Trolling a small sluggo, Jim hooked up almost immediately, and landed a small striper. Over the course of the next four hours, which seemed like 40 minutes, he caught a few more schoolies. We heard an occasional slap on the water, but not the unmistakable slapping sounds of big, hungry bass.

The most memorable part of the night was the different lights that pierced the darkness.

The steady rotation of the red and white beacon from the Gay Head Lighthouse.

The water glowing with green bioluminescence, thousands of micro-organisms, swirling in my wake like radioactive dust motes.

Mid-August is the very end of the Perseid meteor shower. Several meteors streaked across the sky, looking so close, you swear you can hear them.

“This sure beats sitting at home in front of the TV,” Jim said. “Catching fish is just a bonus. Being out here at night, gliding in the water, and all these stars above you, it’s a spiritual experience. I know that term gets used a lot, but there’s no other way to put it.”

“The Compleat Angler,” by Izaak Walton, first published in 1653, also extolls the spiritual nature of fishing (with tips and recipes mixed in).

“God did never make a more calm, quiet, innocent recreation than angling,” Walton wrote.

His message has resonated through the ages. “The Compleat Angler” is second only to the Holy Bible as the most reprinted book in the English language.

Speaking to the Izaak Walton League of America, a conservation group begun in 1922 by 52 “concerned sportsmen,” Professor Marjorie Swann, editor of the most recent edition published in 2014 said, “What sets *The Compleat Angler* apart from these previous how-to books is Walton’s insistence that there’s so much more to being an angler than a technical knowledge of bait and tackle. For Walton, fishing is at once an environmental, social, and spiritual experience. . . . Walton’s anglers thus not only develop a detailed knowledge of natural history and ecology, they also advocate for conservation and practice environmental justice. Walton reminds us that bold visionaries not only can but should put the environment front and center during tough times.”

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