



Kayaking Safety Essentials

Don't let a small mishap become a serious problem

STORY BY MATT HEID

GLIDING THROUGH OPEN WATER in a kayak can be a blissful experience, an exhilarating adventure far from the confines of the terrestrial world. But that same waterscape also presents unique risks that paddlers must be prepared to deal with. Understanding common scenarios of potential danger, and carrying the essential gear to deal with it, will make every kayaking excursion a safer, more enjoyable experience.

IF YOU FALL OUT OF YOUR KAYAK... You should absolutely (as in always, always, and always) be wearing a personal flotation device (PFD) to keep you afloat. A properly fitting PFD, or life jacket, should wrap snugly around your torso and not shift or move in any direction. In particular, it should not slide upward toward your chin while you're in the water. When trying on a PFD, first loosen all the straps, then begin tightening at the waist and work your way upward, focusing last on the shoulder straps. Have a friend lift up the PFD from the shoulder straps or grab it from behind and shake you. It should not move. If it does, tighten the straps or move on to another size or style. Once properly adjusted, a PFD (\$50 to \$100-plus, depending on features) should feel snug but not restrictive, and the arm and neck holes should provide a full range of paddling motion.

IF YOUR KAYAK FILLS WITH WATER... You should have a bilge pump and sponge to get it out as quickly as possible. A flooded kayak is less stable and maneuverable, sits lower in the water, and is more likely to swamp further, especially in rough

conditions. A basic hand-operated pump is inexpensive (\$15 to \$25), yet can drain a kayak quickly and efficiently. A sponge is essential for dealing with residual sogginess and mopping up the small amounts of water that can make it into your boat over the course of a paddling excursion. Both should be kept readily accessible at all times.

IF YOU LOSE YOUR PADDLE... You won't be going anywhere under your own power and will be at the mercy of wind, waves, and currents. To deal with this situation, you—or someone in your group—should always have an extra paddle. An inexpensive, two-piece paddle (\$30 to \$70) can readily serve as a spare and prevent a worst-case, pushed-out-to-sea scenario. A paddle leash (\$20 to \$30) will tether the paddle shaft directly to the kayak and reduce the odds of losing your primary paddle in the first place.

IF YOU HAVE TO GET BACK IN YOUR KAYAK WITHOUT ASSISTANCE... As a general rule, you should always paddle with at least one other person, if not a larger group, and you and your fellow kayakers should have the skills and knowledge to assist a swimming paddler back into the boat—a non-trivial task that requires some practice to do efficiently. It is possible to re-enter a kayak on your own with the help of a paddle float, which attaches to the end of the paddle and keeps it afloat while you gymnastically re-enter the boat using the paddle shaft as your platform. Carrying a paddle float (\$30 to \$50) is recommended, though you'll need to know how to use it properly; practice the technique periodically.

IF YOU ARE FULLY PREPARED... You will need more than just the gear highlighted above. Though these items are crucial for safety, they represent only a small, core part of a prepared kayaker's gear. You'll also want to paddle with many of the same safety essentials you would carry on a hike, including map or chart, compass, sun protection, extra clothing, first aid kit, knife, extra water and food, headlamp or flashlight, and whistle.

Also consider bringing other kayaking-specific safety gear—especially on a longer paddling excursion—including a tow rope, emergency strobe, signaling mirror, kayak repair kit, weather radio (to keep tabs on conditions), and two-way radio (to communicate with other paddlers in your group). In rough or cold conditions, use a spray skirt to seal the kayak's cockpit and prevent water from entering. Lastly, you'll need to dress appropriately and comfortably for conditions, with a water- and wind-proof outer layer and sufficiently warm insulating layers underneath. ●

→ DID YOU KNOW?

According to the U.S. Coast Guard, 83 kayak and canoe paddlers drowned in the U.S. in 2012. Two-thirds of them were not wearing a PFD.

 **blog** EQUIPPED Matt Heid blogs about gear trends at outdoors.org/blogs.