

Kayaks and Canoes for Freshwater Fishing Part II

“SINKS”, “SOTS”, “Hybrids”... are we talking about boats?

Actually we are. “SINKS” and “SOTS” are acronyms for Sit-Inside-Kayaks and Sit-On-Top Kayaks the two major categories of kayaks.

Sit-inside-kayaks, as the name implies, have a top deck and a bottom and the paddler sits in a cockpit between the two. This is the traditional configuration of a kayak and not too much different from the skin and frame boats that the Inuit Eskimos invented and called “kayaks” or “hunters boat”. How appropriate that they’re used for hunting fish. Most of the sit-inside-kayaks that lend themselves to fishing are called “recreational” kayaks. These generally have larger cockpits and are a compromise between speed and stability. Sit-inside-kayaks, although not as popular as the sit-on-top kayaks for fishing, are still preferred by many anglers. Because you sit inside this kayak it is a dryer ride. This can be a nice feature in colder areas and in the early spring and late fall. Your movements are more restricted however and entry and exit is more difficult than a sit-on-top. Sit-insides are often less expensive, particularly in the smaller sizes, and are usually lighter weight than a similar sized SOT and often narrower. The weight and width generally makes them faster and easier to propel through the water but not as stable of a fishing platform. Hull design is the difference here, as we discussed in Part 1. Recreational SINKS will fill with water if capsized making self rescue very difficult. The water has to be bailed or pumped out or, more likely, swam to shore and dumped out. (More on rescues in part 3).

But that being said, if you’re looking for a less expensive or lighter boat or a boat that will be a recreational kayak first and a fishing kayak second, the SINKS deserve a good look.

Sit-inside-kayak examples: Many manufacturers, or owners, add rod holders or other accessories to their recreational kayaks to make them into fishing kayaks. Examples are the *Old Town Camden 120* or the *Wilderness Systems Pungo 120*. A SINK that has been designed primarily as a fishing kayak is the *Ascend FS12*.

Sit-On-Top kayaks are the most popular kayaks for fishing. They are the most versatile when it comes to adding fishing accessories, are generally stable platforms; many stable enough to stand and cast/retrieve, and allow great mobility in the seating positions and moving around the boat. Sitting “side saddle” in SOTS is a popular way to fish. Speaking of seating, no matter what kind of kayak you choose, be sure that it has a comfortable seat that fits you well. Nothing can ruin a fishing trip faster than being uncomfortable in your boat.

Since SOTS are one piece they offer an advantage for self rescue in the event of a capsize. You simply turn the boat upright and climb aboard, (well it’s not quite that easy but better than any other design). The hull has scuppers, (holes in the hull), where water drains, making them self bailing. This is also handy in rough conditions or in the many ways that water can come aboard. Because the paddler is exposed to the elements, they have often been thought of as warm water boats. However, proper clothing can make SOTS usable in most any weather and water conditions. SOT kayaks are almost the universal choice for open water kayak fishing where the ability to self rescue and drain water quickly can literally be a life saver.

The vast majority of SOT kayaks, (and most kayaks these days), are made of rotationally molded

polyethylene plastic. Roto-molding was first used to produce boats for whitewater use since the material is very tough and durable. The other molding process that is occasionally used is called Thermo-Molding. This produces a very smooth surface which, like fiber glass and some other materials, produces less water resistance. Thermo-mold boats are very light weight but not as impact resistant as the roto-molded. I owned a Hurricane, Phoenix 130 sit-on-top in thermo-mold which was a light and easily paddled boat but I was always concerned about its toughness as a fishing boat. It also had fewer places to attach accessories. I see Hurricane now has an SOT built for fishing, the Skimmer 128 which looks interesting. Most SOT kayaks and SINKS have adjustable foot pegs. Some SOTS have grooves molded into the hull where you put your feet. Either work to give you proper paddling leverage but my choice are adjustable pegs.

SIT-On-Top Kayak Examples: There are many examples of excellent sit-on-top kayaks for fishing that are designed to be used with a paddle,(more on this later), but here are some popular ones: *The Wilderness Systems Tarpon 120* and *Ocean Kayak's Trident series*. Also worth checking out is the new *Slayer 12* from *Native Watercraft*.

Hybrid Kayaks are thought of as somewhat of a cross between a kayak and a canoe. Hybrids have the open design of a canoe but lower sides which helps make them better handling in the wind. Otherwise, they retain most of the qualities of a Sit-On-Top kayak. They are easy to accessorize, very stable and stand-able with tunnel hulls and paddle very well. Hybrids also offer some of the most comfortable seats in the business. The seat in my *Native Watercraft Ultimate 12* is only surpassed by my recliner at home! The downside of this design is that unlike a Sit-On-Top, they are not self bailing, so that like a canoe or Sit-Inside kayak, they need to be bailed, pumped or swam to shore in the event of a capsized. My experience has been that this design does pretty well in waves and because of the higher seating, you don't get your butt wet even with some water on board. Hybrids are also not quite as easy to enter and exit as an SOT but easier than a SINK.

Hybrid Kayak Examples: The *Native Watercraft Ultimate 12* and *Wilderness Systems Commander 120*.

Pedal and Motor driven Kayaks are becoming more popular and while *Native Watercraft Propel Series*, *Wilderness Systems* and others offer pedal or electric motor driven boats the primary mover and shaker in the pedal driven area is *Hobie* with their "MirageDrive" system. Matt from the Bloomington area wrote in response to our first article and said he was looking to move up from a sit-inside, had seen the *Hobies* and is wondering our opinion on them. He also asked if the price tag was worth having your hands free for fishing. I haven't paddled, (or pedaled), the *Hobies* but hope to soon. In the mean time I'll let others answer Matt's question.

I have a buddy, Josh Harvel who has *YakNitUp Guide Service* in Ft. Myers, Florida. He won a *Hobie* in a fishing tournament, fell in love with the hands free fishing that the pedal drive allows and has become a *Hobie Pro*. He now uses the *Hobie Revolution 13* exclusively for all of his guiding. With the wood, weeds and shallow water that we often fish, any appendage below the water line can become a problem but as *Jeff Heimsoth* from *Quest Watersports* in *Ottawa, IL* explained to me recently, the blades of the drive will fold flat against the bottom of the boat and the entire mechanism can be easily raised to clear any weeds, etc. The rudder can also be raised from the seating position. The *Hobie* kayaks can also

be paddled like any other Sit-on-top with the exception of their unique “Pro Angler” series which is not as easily driven with a paddle but it can be done.

Jeff offered some insight into the different Hobie MirageDrive models:

- Pro Angler 14 – ultimate in stability, storage, comfort & features for fishing, but also the heaviest. Made for comfort all day long whether sitting or standing. Not really practical to car top if that’s a concern, and of course more work to pedal over longer distances. Easy to load/transport with a pickup (with load extender in bed) or light trailer.
- Pro Angler 12 – lighter and slightly more nimble version of the 14’.
- Outback – “crossover” model that is light enough to car top, but retains enough stability for a rider to stand while casting & retrieving with some balance/practice.
- Revo 13’ or Revo 11’ – lightest/fastest/narrowest models that are typically used for fishing. Often used offshore where distance is a big factor...and where landing big fish in a small craft is a sport unto itself. Also tend to be attractive to experienced paddlers.

Jeff added: “In comparison to non-pedaled options, of course the biggest plus is being hands-free while pedaling. Another more subtle factor is that since the pedal system is SO much more efficient than paddling (leg power, constant stroke action), that having a sleek hull design is not such a dominant requirement. In other words, it becomes a little easier to trade sleek/fast characteristics for greater stability (and storage, etc.) when the pedals make moving the boat so much easier anyway.”

A final word on electrics. There are some kayaks designed to accommodate electric motors. The Torqeedo Ultralight motor from Germany can be used on most any kayak.

Inflatable Kayaks have a place in the kayak fishing cosmos. I have a Stearns inflatable kayak and while certainly not my favorite, the portability makes it handy on occasion when hauling a hard kayak or canoe is not possible. I’ve used the Stearns on large sail and power boats to have a small boat to paddle around or fish a little while we’re anchored. Obviously when fishing, puncturing an inflatable’s skin is a possibility but the newer fabrics are certainly tough and less prone to problems. Inflatables don’t paddle as well as a comparable “hard” boat but the better quality ones are not bad. I’d avoid the inexpensive brands like the plaque. I’d rather stay home than have to fish from one of those “pool toys”.

Inflatable examples: Two inflatables for fishing that have gotten good reviews are the *Hobie i12T*, (with the same Mirage peddle drive as above), and the *Advanced Elements StraitEdge Angler*.

Canoes are a traditional way to fish and the way many of us started. They may not be the most efficient for fishing but I still like them. I’ve said before that if I could only have one boat to “do it all” it would be a canoe. I have two canoes that are on both ends of the design spectrum. They are great fun to fish from but not “do it all” boats. One is my 12ft 33lb solo pack canoe and the other is my 14ft and extremely wide and stable Sportsman. The Sportsman has a trolling motor and is great for taking other people fishing on small to mid size lakes. Large square stern canoes are also a good option if using an electric or small gas motor. Most “family canoes” in the 15-17ft. range are great ways to get the family fishing and super “freighters” for that occasional camping trip. Although I don’t currently own one, I’m also a big wooden canoe fan and fishing from a beautiful wood boat is a special treat!

Canoe examples , **Solo:** *Old Town Pack Canoe*, **Family:** *Mad River Explorer*, **Square Stern:** *Old Town Predator*.

Special Mention:

The “Stand Upon Paddling Board” craze is upon us and people are beginning to fish from them! Native Watercraft is even making a special board for that purpose, the *Versaboard Angler*.

As we’ve mentioned numerous times, stability in a kayak is key for fishing . The *Freedom Hawk* with it’s unique outrigger system as well as the *NuCanoe* hybrid boats provide two additional answers to the stability problem.

I’ve mentioned several manufactures above but there are many more who are producing quality kayaks and canoes and most of them here in the United States. Two manufacturers I haven’t mentioned are Jackson Kayaks and Perception, both of whom make great boats. I know there are others and I apologize for their omission. Local dealers are a great source of help and information when selecting a kayak or canoe and many have special demo days or places where you can try out the different types and models. A last thought about purchasing a canoe or kayak, like most things, you get what you pay for!

The Final Parts of the boat selection equation:

Ok guys, (and gals), Size Matters! Your size as the paddler, the size of the waters your fishing, the size of the boat you’re paddling on those waters and the size of the fish you’re targeting.

It’s pretty obvious that if you’re 6’4” and 300lbs you are probably not going to be very comfortable for very long or safe in a 9ft sit-inside kayak. Boat weight capacities are printed on every boat and available in the specifications published about that boat. They are there for a reason, you should pay attention to them and also remember that the capacity pertains to the total weight of everything on board. I like to have a total capacity at least 100 lbs. greater than my weight + all my gear and accessories. This allows the boat to paddle better and in the case of Sit-On-Tops will help keep the boat from sitting so low in the water that water comes up through the scuppers,(drain holes).

When you’re looking at a kayak, if at all possible, sit in it and adjust the seat and foot pedals. How does it feel? Do you feel cramped or at all uncomfortable? This is particularly important if purchasing a sit-inside kayak. If the boat is in the water, any boat may feel a little tippy at until you get used to it.

One other thought pertaining to the paddler’s size. How much boat can you lift onto your vehicle? When I was younger I could clean jerk a 78lb aluminum Grumman onto my shoulders then onto the racks of my full size van. I can’t do that anymore and that limits the size of kayak or canoe I’m taking out by myself on my vehicle’s racks. A partner to help is always good and there are also loading assistance devises available as well as small trailers.

Small boats for small waters, large boats for large waters. If you are going to paddle mostly on a farm pond , small subdivision lake, or maybe a small river, almost any size of boat will do and in some cases smaller is better because they are generally more maneuverable and easier to handle on shore. They will also fit more easily on a small car or in the back of a pickup truck. I generally think of boats in the 9

to 11ft. range as being acceptable for ponds and lakes up to 100 acres or for smaller rivers. That's not to say that the smaller boats can't be used on larger waters if conditions are right but if you're serious about fishing and trying to cover some water, a small boat can be a lot of work for even the most experienced paddler.

In most of the boat examples above I used 12ft. boats. That's because I think of 12-13ft. as being a good compromise size for lakes up to 1,000 acres and most of the lakes in our area fall into that range. Not that you're likely to cover all of a 1,000 acre lake in a single outing with a 12ft fishing kayak but it's a good compromise in speed and seaworthiness. Remember too that hull shape and width also helps determine boat speed. Wider boats are usually slower and stable while narrower boats are faster but tippier. The majority of 12ft boats are also maneuverable enough for most rivers.

For large lakes, big rivers and open water I think a 13ft or larger boat is a good choice. Certainly to fish protected areas of these big lakes and rivers the 12ft. size would do just fine but if you're going to tackle open water you'll want to have a boat with the speed and seaworthiness to do the job. We'll discuss seaworthiness in greater detail in the next article.

Do you like sight fishing? Do you use flipping and pitching presentations? Do you fly fish? If so you may want a kayak or canoe you can comfortably stand in. Do you have multiple targeted locations on your favorite lake? If so you may want more speed to cover that water more easily. Are you going after the big fish like large pike and musky? You may want a larger, heavier and more stable kayak or canoe to haul in the big guys.

Solo kayak fishing is by far the most common but tandem kayak fishing is a possibility and most manufacturers have one or more tandem kayaks in their product lines. You will not have as much individual room in a tandem as in a solo and tandem kayaks are normally heavier than a comparable sized canoe. If transportation is an issue, and you think you don't have the ability to transport two solo boats, most roof racks will accommodate two kayaks using "J" style carriers. If however your fishing partner won't or can't paddle their own boat or you would rather have a kayak over a canoe, a tandem kayak might be a good choice. Tandem kayaks are available in both Sit-on-top and Sit-inside models.

Think about how and where you fish. It will make a difference in which kayak or canoe you choose and help you avoid that all too common ailment, "buyers regret" .

In the next installment we'll look at paddles, PFD's and accessories for fishing as well as talk about safety on the water.

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

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