



DISCOVER
**KAYAK
FISHING**

Andy Benham

A PRACTICAL MANUAL

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE FOR FISHING FROM YOUR SIT-ON-TOP KAYAK



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A PRACTICAL MANUAL



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Dedicated to Jack and Yiannis,
two people just starting out in
the world. I hope they will be
both better paddlers and better
anglers than I've ever been.



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THE AUTHOR

Andy Benham

Andy has been a sea angler for as long as he can remember, growing up on Brighton beach with a fishing rod in his hands and owning a variety of small boats through his teens.

He became a journalist, working on a number of magazines including *Angling Times*, *Sea Angler*, *Trout & Salmon*, *Boat Angler* and *Improve Your Coarse Fishing*. During his time working on the angling magazines he was able to fish with some of the UK's best anglers, and was lucky enough to fish in some amazing locations, including making a Nile Perch video with TV legend John Wilson. He then moved on to spend a spell at the BBC, and worked for magazines such as *BBC Wildlife* and *Countryfile*.

More recently Andy has quit the rat race and moved to a house overlooking the sea in South Devon, so he can spend more time afloat in his kayak and fishing from the shore. He can also paddle to his favourite pub, on the other side of the estuary. He became *Sea Angler's* regular kayak fishing correspondent in 2009 and has written a series of articles on the subject for the magazine. His latest project is Devonkayakfishing.com

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*All photos by Andy Benham
unless credited.*

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Finally, I would like to say a big thank you to Kate for putting up with me disappearing for days on end and typing this book in the only warm room in the house during one of the coldest winters I can remember.

FOREWORD

This book is primarily about sea fishing from a kayak, although it does take a look at some of the other waters you can fish. In the UK and Ireland the coast is never far away.

This book is not a compendium of knots, rigs and the craft of fishing. If you're new to fishing I'd recommend *The Sea Angler's Guide to Bait and Rigs*, edited by Mel Russ – very good step by step stuff.

Kayak angling is booming as more and more people take up the sport. A kayak is relatively cheap, completely transportable, and provides you with access to deep water fishing, previously the domain of boat owners or those prepared to go charter fishing. You even get a boat all to yourself.

It's not just the great fishing which is attractive - many are drawn by the activity itself. Anglers turn to kayaking to up their catch rates, but get hooked on the paddling as well as the fishing. It's a great way to get around, fantastic exercise, and immensely sociable. There's a thriving social scene and numerous clubs, meetings and shared fishing trips taking place every year.

You can paddle your kayak in places which can't be reached by larger boats, and your stealthy approach (beyond the reach of engines) lets you slip quietly past timid seals and seabirds. Sitting around, waiting for a fish to bite, surrounded by amazing scenery and wildlife, it's easy to see just why kayak fishing is becoming so popular.

A ROD AND A KAYAK

I started kayaking for one simple reason: I wanted to catch more fish. For years I fished an estuary in North Devon but had been pushed off my favourite sandbank by the rising tides. One day I met a man in the dunes, manhandling a bizarre plastic boat to the water's edge. That was my first contact with a kayak fisherman. He'd only been out a few times and had yet to catch a fish, but it sowed a seed in my mind. The seed sprouted and, a couple of weeks later, I made a few exploratory phone calls.

The river Torridge at Appledore, where I first saw someone fishing from a kayak.



I've tried to write this book in much the same way as I got involved with the sport. I certainly don't claim to be an expert; with around fifty trips under my belt so far I'm definitely still learning and will probably continue to do so for as long as I go kayaking (I've certainly found this to be the case fishing from dry land).

I'll freely admit to being rather nervous about the whole kayaking thing when I started looking at it for the first time. I've been an avid angler all my life and ended up moving down to Devon, as much for the bass fishing as anything else. The place I tended to fish was at the mouth of a river out near the bar. Every summer I'd have at least one close call as the tide came in threatening to cut me off just as the fishing was starting to get interesting. There had to be some way to stay out there longer, but it was very shallow and indeed very tranquil so a boat seemed a little over the top. After my chance encounter in the dunes, however, a kayak seemed like the ideal tool for the job.



FISHING SKILLS

Photo: emotionkayaks.com

Anchoring may well be the most dangerous part of the sport – when you are most likely to capsize, become tangled or fall off of your kayak. The golden rule of anchoring is that if you are in any doubt about the conditions, don't anchor. If the tide is ripping through, think long and hard about your level of skill and look for a less challenging spot to fish.

Once you have mastered paddling and anchoring, the other skills you're going to need to fish from a kayak are relatively few. The vast majority of your fishing will be done using just one technique: **downtiding** – running bait behind the kayak with the tide. You may also have heard of **uptiding** where the bait is cast uptide of the boat and a bow allowed to form in the line. This method isn't really relevant to kayak angling, as you are unlikely to anchor anywhere with enough tide for successful uptiding.

Anchoring

Although it's perfectly possible to fish from a drifting kayak, and this is by far the best way to fish for some species, there will come a time when you decide you want to stop somewhere and

fish a particular area. You then have a couple of choices: either find something like a pot buoy to which you can secure your kayak or attach yourself to a fixed point on the seabed using an anchor.

The carabiner and anchor trolley allows the kayak to be safely anchored by the stern.



Some kayaks come with an anchor and warp, and some even have a cleat to attach the anchor warp to the kayak. Before you try to anchor for the first time, it's worth having a think about what you are trying to do. If you were anchoring a boat, you would have access to the bow and be able to retrieve an anchor from the front as well as anchor the boat with the bow into the wind or tide. The problem with a kayak is that you haven't got access to the bow, either to tie off the anchor or to retrieve it once it's down.

If you just chuck an anchor over the side and hang onto the rope it will pull your kayak side-on to the tide. This is a position you really don't want to be in as it can lead to water coming over the gunwhale. If the rope gets under the boat, it can generate quite a strong tipping action and you may end up going for a swim. This can turn into a bigger problem if you are not attached to the kayak, as you will quickly drift away from it. When anchoring in any kind of tide, a safety leash is strongly recommended to keep you attached to the kayak should the worst happen.

Anchor trolley

An anchor trolley is a device to enable you to move the anchor warp from your side, where you can reach it, to either the bow or the stern of the kayak for retrieval and anchoring. It takes the form of a pair of pulleys, one at either end of the trolley, attached either directly to the kayak or by a short length of bungee cord. The trolley can either run the full length of the kayak from bow to stern, or some people prefer a half-trolley either at the bow or stern.

The advantage of a half-trolley is that the anchor trolley lines don't cross the cockpit of the boat, which can be a problem with some designs of kayak. Some anglers go as far as to fit two half-trolleys, one at the stern and one at the bow. I've even seen some anglers with a full-length anchor trolley down both sides of the boat. This gives a massive degree of flexibility but does load your kayak up with a lot of gear.

When rigging an anchor trolley it's important to get it as close to the stern as possible.



The stability of the kayak at anchor increases as the anchor trolley's point of attachment approaches either the stern or bow. Some illustrations of US anchor trolleys show the trolley attached quite a long way from the bow or stern. While this is ok for anchoring in very sheltered waters, you want the trolley as far forward/aft as possible when anchoring in any degree of tide. Many anglers, if fishing in a kayak without a rudder, use the rudder mounting fittings that are moulded into most kayaks to attach the trolley.

Some even go as far as to create custom brackets to attach the anchor trolley.

The trolley itself consists of a loop of cord running between the two pulleys and a carabiner to attach the anchor warp. The carabiner can simply be used to connect one end of the loop to the other. However, it is better to tie one end of your anchor trolley to a stainless steel ring and the other to the carabiner, and then clip the carabiner to the ring. If the ring is fitted to the rear-facing end of the trolley and the carabiner to the forward-facing end, you can then unclip the trolley and use the carabiner as a tow line or to pull your kayak behind you if wading in shallow water. The ring will then jam in the rear block and you will have a kayak's length of line by which to tow the kayak.

A short length of bungee cord can act as a shock absorber.



Most of my fishing is done with the kayak anchored by the stern, as I like to look where I'm fishing and because my kayak sits very well when anchored this way. If you are going to be doing a lot of uptiding or your kayak is skittish when anchored by the stern, you may also wish to anchor by the bow. I prefer to recover my anchor over the bow, as my kayak has more buoyancy at that end. I use a full-length trolley so that I can transfer the anchoring point from stern to bow when it is time to pick up the anchor.

One problem that can occur with anchor trolleys is that, because they run through a couple of pulleys, they can slip. When I started out there were a couple of times when I was anchored from the stern and felt the motion of the kayak becoming more violent. When looking behind me, I noticed that the anchor trolley carabiner had moved a couple of feet back from the stern, which was enough to make the kayak quite unstable.

The answer is to fit some means of locking off the trolley. I ended up riveting a clam cleat to the side of the kayak. When I wanted to lock off the trolley I simply dropped the trolley rope into the clam cleat, which holds it fast. It's worth noting that there are both port and starboard clam cleats, so make sure you buy the right one. They only hold the rope when pulled in the right direction (pulling in the other direction will release the rope). I use the fine line versions for lines of 6mm or smaller. These are known as CL214 or CL213 cleats, depending on which side of the boat they are intended for.

This type of cleat is useful for making sure that the anchor trolley doesn't creep back towards the centre of the kayak. They are easy to rivet to the hull.



Types of anchor

Once you've got the anchor trolley rigged, it's time to look at the anchor itself. Most kayak anglers use a 1.5kg folding anchor, available quite cheaply from most chandlers. Although some like to use a lighter anchor, I prefer the 1.5kg as I've seen lighter anchors drag.



*(Left) a folding anchor is a lot easier to stow.
(Right) a drogue can be used to reduce your down wind drift.*

The other type of anchor you may come across is the sea anchor or drogue. This is basically a small parachute-type device which is used to slow the drift of the kayak, provided that the drift is being caused by the wind and not by the current. Drogues are deployed off the anchor trolley, and can be really useful for drift fishing.

Attaching the anchor

Although there are different opinions about this, I always attach my anchor to at least a metre of chain for a couple of reasons. The first is that warps fitted directly to the anchor can be damaged and even cut by sharp objects on the seabed. The other reason is to do with the angle at which the warp leaves the anchor. With a length of chain the warp lies flat along the seabed, and any force applied to the anchor will try to pull it along the seabed and will meet maximum resistance. With just rope, some of the force can lift the anchor which means it starts to drag. Dragging your anchor can be a good way of losing it, as it will eventually find something to become snagged on.

How you attach the chain to the anchor can also be important if you do get snagged up. When you buy the anchor, it will probably have an inviting shackle at one end which might look like the obvious place to attach the chain. However, you'll also see a loop at the nose and it is here that I attach my chain, moving the shackle and attaching it to the 'wrong' end. I then run the chain back up the shaft of the anchor, and attach it to the eye with a small cable

tie. This enables the anchor to hold properly but, if it gets stuck, a good pull on the rope will break the cable tie. The anchor can then be reversed out of the snag.

You may need to play around with different cable ties to find one which breaks out at the right force, or you can make a slight nick in one with a pair of pliers. I also carry a few spare cable ties with me so that, if I have to break out an anchor, I can reset the trip and go off and fish somewhere else.

An anchor with a bulbous stem is particularly good, as the locking collar is captive and can't be lost. Note the orange cable tie.



The other way of attaching an anchor is to use a bridle, which is just a relatively short loop of rope running from one end of the anchor to the other. You then run this rope through the bottom link of the chain. When anchored up, the chain will tend to go to the rear of the loop and the anchor will hold fast. When you want to break the anchor out, simply paddle up-tide of the anchor. The chain will run up the bridle when you pull it, and the anchor can be pulled out nose first. The only slight drawback with this method is that if you have anchored in a strong tide which has then dropped off, the bridle can self-trip.

Anchor warps

With the chain attached to the anchor, it's time to think about warps. Anchoring is not an exact science, but you should think

about using around three times the depth to anchor in fairly benign conditions. If the current is ripping through, you should use around five times the depth or more (although you should consider not anchoring if it's going to be really difficult to hold).

Most of the time I'll probably be anchoring in around 20m so, for most of my fishing, 100m of warp should be enough. I always go for the thinnest warp I can get away with, which means that most of my anchoring is done with 2mm thick warp. With a breaking strain of around 85kg, this type of warp should hold almost anything; the thinner the warp the less drag and the less weight. Paracord of 3mm thickness is also a popular choice and is available in long lengths at a reasonable cost. Make sure that what you buy is a single continuous length; sometimes you can end up with a couple of lengths loosely joined. You don't want to discover this by losing an anchor, so run it through your hands before you first use it.

Some ropes come on a card which can be used as a winder. If you are only going to anchor occasionally, in shallow water, then this might be all you need. However, the popular option is to use a divers' surface marker buoy (SMB) reel, commonly used to deploy a surface marker buoy above divers on the bottom. These make a very neat job of storing the warp, and most have stainless steel fittings so they won't rust. Some even come with 100m of 3mm warp, making them a very cost-effective solution.

A dive reel makes a good anchor reel; this one holds 100m of 3mm line.



Once the anchor and chain are safely on the bottom, the divers' reel is effectively anchored to the bottom. To anchor up, all you need to do is run the anchor warp through your carabiner, run the carabiner to either the bow or stern and attach the dive reel to the kayak. It's always worth leaving a few metres of rope on the dive reel. This will allow you to reposition your kayak if you are over a particularly rough bit of ground and will also to give you a bit of slack to let out when it's time to recover the anchor.

Quick-release system

Many people are quite happy to just clip the dive reel onto the kayak. There is another way of fitting an anchor, however, which gives you a little more flexibility. This involves attaching a small buoy and a further length of rope, which together make a quick-release system. By having a small buoy running freely along the anchor warp (before the dive reel), you can put the anchor down and then have the dive reel floating at the surface, held up by the buoy.

You can then have 3–4m of floating rope attached to the dive reel with a carabiner, which you can use to effectively moor the kayak to your dive reel much as you would to a pot buoy or other mooring point. This has the advantage that the buoy then takes the weight of the warp rather than your kayak. You can then run the rope from the buoy to your kayak via the carabiner on your anchor trolley, and secure the rope to your kayak. If you use a cam-type cleat, then the rope can be wedged in the cleat to anchor. If you need to get away in a hurry, either to take a photo of a mate's fish or for safety reasons, you can just free the rope from the cleat and you are free. You can then come back and pick up the buoy, with your anchor attached, whenever you want to.

The so-called quick-release system also has the advantage that, if the anchor becomes snagged and you can't break it out, you can leave the anchor and buoy and come back later to recover it.



A few metres of floating rope and a carabiner make it very easy to release your kayak in an emergency.

length of floating rope with a carabiner at one end which can be used for other purposes (for example, to moor up to pot buoys or for tying off to another kayak).

Recovering your anchor

I nearly always recover my anchor from the front of the kayak, because this is where the hull has most buoyancy. If I'm anchored by the stern then the first step is to let go of the quick-release system, which leaves the kayak drifting down-tide of the marker buoy with the rope streaming out behind the buoy. I then bring the carabiner to the middle of the anchor trolley and paddle up to the buoy. I grab hold of the buoy and release the clutch on the diver's reel so that the line starts to pay out and the kayak drifts backwards once any forward momentum has dissipated. While the line is slack I put it through the carabiner, lock off the reel and run the trolley up to the bow. I then put the trolley line through a locking cleat to keep the carabiner at the bow. The kayak is then anchored from the bow and the anchor can be pulled up and in. Once the chain has reached the carabiner, it's a simple matter of bringing the dive reel back to the side of the kayak and taking it out of the carabiner.

It's worth practising anchoring a few times in sheltered waters, and making sure that you can easily get the anchor back on board. If you think you are going to have a problem getting the anchor back, then don't anchor in the first place.

When pulling up my anchor I always mentally go through the process step-by-step before starting it for real. This helps me to ensure that I do everything in the right order. It is always a good idea to fish with other more experienced kayakers. Ask someone to show you their anchor set-up and demonstrate it so you can see how the process works.

Downricing

If you are already a boat fisherman then the chances are that you'll already have the vast majority of the gear that you're going to need to fish from a kayak. If you are just starting out then you don't need very much gear: a couple of rods and reels, a few lures and a relatively small amount of terminal tackle. Even if you go for relatively high-end tackle, it shouldn't cost you much more than £300–400 to set yourself up. If you want to use starter equipment from the bottom end of the market, you might only spend as little as £100.



I use this type of leash for my rods, as the quick release makes it easy to detach when you get a bite.

Types of rod

Opinions vary here, and you often see very short rods sold as kayaking rods. While these are easy to control on a kayak, I prefer to use something a little longer. The defining length for me is the distance from my seat to the bow of the kayak, so that if a fish runs across the bow I can guide the line round without it being fouled on the bow. For my kayak, this means a rod length of about seven feet.

When it comes to rod strengths I have always preferred to fish light. On a kayak, not only does light gear give you more sport, but a lighter rod will also cushion any sudden runs from a fish. If using a thick heavy rod, a sudden run might unbalance you.

For most of my fishing I use a 6lb class boat rod, and hardly ever have to use more than three ounces of lead (I often fish with one ounce or less). If I'm after bigger fish, such as conger or tope, I will switch to a soft-actioned 12–20lb class rod.

Types of reel

Choice of reel is also personal. Kayak fishing doesn't require much from a reel except for excellent corrosion resistance. I don't bother with much in the way of breaking and go for a basic model with a level wind. Brand-name reels like Penn, Shimano, Daiwa or Abu should all be up to the job. For lighter work I use an Abu 6500, but a Penn 320 or a Daiwa Slosch would also be a good choice. For heavier lines I use Shimano Calcutta 700s but an Abu 7000, or one of the larger Penn boat multipliers would also work well.

(Left) here's an Abu 6500 on a rod in a RAM mount, safely constrained by a leash.

(Right) I use this Shimano Calcutta 700 for my heavier kayak fishing.

I've not had any problems with corrosion on the reels as yet, but I do religiously wash them in freshwater after every trip. I find that the smaller reels in particular need stripping and greasing once every three months or so to keep them in tip-top condition.



Tackle

Kayak angling is very hard on tackle because it is so close to salt water. You have the choice of either investing in good-quality gear and looking after it well, or go for cheaper stuff which you would then replace every season or so. Part of your decision will come down to how religiously you use a rod leash. If you don't leash your tackle you will lose it, and at that point you may be glad you only bought a cheap reel!

In keeping with using lighter fishing tackle, I only use braided lines on a kayak. I prefer the non-stretch type of line and a thinner diameter; this means you can get away with far less lead than with conventional lines.