



FISH FINDIN'

When a veteran paddler joins the legions of kayak fishing addicts, she understands why the sport is enjoying meteoric growth—it's fun. **By Kari J. Bodnarchuk**

IT'S 4:30 A.M. ON A FOGGY NEW JERSEY MORNING, too damn early for anything but newspaper delivery trucks to be stirring—and fish. Twenty of us are setting off for a 10-hour challenge to see who can hook the biggest and greatest number of fish along a 50-mile stretch of coastline. The catch: We're casting our poppers and spoons from kayaks.

Our group includes three guys from Team Wilderness Systems, two local guides and me—the only woman in this event, which is Extreme Edge Fishing's (EEF) second-regional kayak fishing tournament in the Northeast and one of three held in 2005.

Not only am I a minority in this tournament, I'm a minority when it comes to kayak fishing—a paddler who's becoming an angler instead of the other way around. I started kayaking years ago, but haven't gone fishing much since I was a kid. Conversely, most paddling anglers have been fishing since they were kids and have more recently taken to kayaking. For them, the benefits of combining these two sports appear endless.

"Yaks" are stealthy, meaning you can sneak up on fish without spooking them. You can launch in 6 inches of water, and then access miles of coastline and shallow, untouched inlets where the big boats can't go. And, you can fish the surf zones and

drift-cast along shore in front of private land and McMansions without worrying about access issues. Even better, there are no hefty gas bills, motors or maintenance problems to contend with, and if you ground your yak, you can simply hoist it onto a shoulder and carry it out to deep water again. Not to mention the thrill: Even a moderately sized bluefish can drag you all over the water.

"People who fish see the kayak as a tool," says Joe Cambria, who co-owns Kayak Fishing Stuff, a shop and outfitting service in Mine Hill, New Jersey. "Fishermen are looking at it as the best way to get to the fish." Cambria, 41, has



been fishing for 25 years and owned all sorts of boats, but says he'd choose a kayak over anything else, any day. "My goal is to catch a 100-pound tarpon from a kayak," he adds, "and I'm going to do it this year."

I'm hanging on his words, hoping simply to catch anything with scales.

WE LAUNCH FROM A rocky beach just before dawn and float through fog along an embankment, throwing shallow runners near the tall grass. "We call this Bluefish Bay," says Capt. Paul Eidman, our guide.

"Or Fallout Cove," adds local fisherman Jeff Weiss with a chuckle.

I've been kayak fishing with a dozen different guides in the Northeast, and each time I've been told we're in Bluefish Bay, Striper Cove or some place with a toxic-sounding name. I've given up trying to find these spots on a map. Anglers, I've come to realize, fiercely guard their prized fishing holes.

Eidman, 45, who runs Reel Therapy Flyfishing out of Tinton Falls, New Jersey, has been fishing since he could grip a rod and casting out of canoes since he was a teenager. He explains to us with great precision half a dozen techniques, complete with sound effects, for hooking fish in "Bluefish Bay."

At first glance, this is a postcard setting: Egrets and blue herons dot the shoreline. An osprey perches on a tall tree trunk sticking out of the water. The red sky casts a warm glow. And (at least for my fellow anglers) the fish are biting.

But as the fog lifts and the sky brightens, a different scene

comes in to view: Bridges for the Garden State Parkway, three other major highways and an elevated trellis for New Jersey Transit trains span the bay. An oil tanker inches past in the distance. A 300-person ferry prepares to dock at a nearby marina. And a blob of algae floats by my kayak and snags on a barnacled heap of rusty metal that's jutting out of the water. You go where the fish are, not the views.

A RELATIVELY NEW SPORT, kayak fishing has taken off in Southern California, Texas and along the East Coast. With rising gas prices, waterfront development sprawling, it's gaining even more in popularity. Plus, kayak manufacturers have started producing fishing-specific kayaks that offer a good mix of stability and gadgetry. Diehard kayak anglers fish 10 months of the year in the Northeast and year-round in warmer climes.

While the sport may still be niche, its growth has been exponential. Five years ago, Confluence, one of the largest kayak manufacturers, offered a mere six angler models. Today, it produces more than 35 fishing kayaks across three brands (Wilderness Systems, Perception and Mainstream).

"Our business has increased more than 1,000 percent since 2001," says Kelley Woolsey, executive vice president for Confluence. "It is by far the fastest growing segment of our market and our business."

"Kayaking as a sport reached a plateau in 2000, but kayak fishing is going through the roof," adds Cambria, whose kayak fishing retail store—one of the country's largest—has increased

Inshore

s e t u p s



1) Perfectly suited for inshore anglers on any coast, **Lamiglas' 7-foot IC 70 MLS graphite spinning rod** (\$190; 360-225-9436; www.lamiglas.com) will probably outlast you. The moderate-fast tip action provides enough power to really sling a lure and the backbone to fight a whopper. Pair it with **Quantum's PT Cabo spinning reel CSP50PT** (\$190; 800-588-9030; www.quantumfishing.com), for even more of an upper hand in that big-fish fight, especially when you add "Quantum Hot Sauce" lubrication. Finally, many anglers are turning to braided lines when fishing the flats. (a) **Fifteen-pound PowerPro high-performance braid** (\$15, 100-yards; 800-650-8003; www.powerpro.com) handles like mono and has one of the highest strength-to-diameter ratios available.

2) Weighing in at just 4 7/8 ounces **Sage's Xi2 9', 4-piece 9-weight** (\$650; 800-533-3004; www.sageflyfish.com) provides excellent line feel throughout the cast, which helps the angler feel the rod load and cast more efficiently. The perfect mate? **WaterworksLamson's ULA Force 3.4 9-weight** (\$499, \$229 extra spool; 800-435-9374; www.waterworks-lamson.com). Relying on its bike-building experience, WaterworksLamson came up with a simple yet highly effective 8-ounce titanium reel. Load it up with (b) **Scientific Anglers' Mastery Series Redfish fly line** (\$60; 800-430-5000; www.scientificanglers.com), which is tangle resistant and shoots extremely well for long casts. If you only have one shot at a fish, you don't want a gaggle of tangled fly line at your feet.

3) **Shimano** just made life a heck of a lot easier for bottom jiggers. Its revolutionary **7' Trevala conventional rod** (\$100; 877-577-0600; www.shimanofishing.com) uses a slim, lightweight blank for more sensitivity, yet still delivers a powerful backbone for lifting those beasts out of the trenches. The high 6.2:1 gear ration on **Shimano's Torium 16 reel** (\$170) is what you need to haul those monsters up: With each crank, you reel in 46 inches of line! Spool this winch with durable (c) **30-pound Ande Premium Extra-Extra Strong in Hi-vis Monster Yellow** (\$80, 6,800 yards; 561-842-2474; www.andemonofilament.com), the strongest line the company has produced in 40 years.

its sales five or six times annually over the past several years.

Not only are retailers, guide services, clubs and organizations promoting the sport, but regional and national Web sites are being developed to serve kayak fishing communities. Kayak Fishing Stuff has an active online site (www.kayakfishingstuff.com) with 5,000 members from across the country and forums dedicated to tournaments, environmental issues, gear, trips, demos and newbies, among others. Last year, Mark Attardo of New Hampshire co-founded and launched NewEnglandKayakFishing.com, which now claims more than 425 members in the Northeast.

"A lot of us [kayak anglers] were originally connecting through a forum on a national surf-casting Web site," says Attardo, 34, who goes fishing two or three times a week and

confesses that he doesn't actually eat fish but loves the challenge of hooking them. "The surf-casters were giving us crap because we were catching all the big fish and putting the photos up on their site, so we thought it would be good to have a more local site serving New England kayak fishermen."

Kayak fishing tournaments are on the rise as well, as anglers take the sport from hobby to the competitive level, vying for the longest or heaviest fish or going for a slam—catching three different species of fish for the greatest total inches or weight. In West Coast tournaments, anglers generally use live bait, weigh their fish and keep their catch. Tournaments on the East Coast and in Texas are predominantly "paddle-catch-photo-release" events and only individual anglers, versus teams, can use live bait.

Tournaments offer roughly \$3,000 to \$18,000 in cash and/or prizes (anything from monofilament to a new tricked-out fishing kayak), and almost all tournaments donate some of the proceeds to charity.

Rick Roberts of EEF (www.extreme-edgefishing.com) ran six events in Texas and Florida during the 2003-2004 season. During the 2005-2006 season, he plans to hold 10 regional and six national tournaments in the United States. Roberts, 62, has worked as a fishing guide, in fisheries management, and in sales and marketing for a kayak manufacturer—he helped design the popular Heritage Redfish—so he’s watched the sport grow from all angles. Now, he’s tapping his 56 years of fishing experience, 14 of which were in a kayak, to run tournaments and raise awareness of kayak fishing.

Typically, events draw anywhere from 15 to 150 anglers. Although I was the only female participant at the Rhode Island and New Jersey tournaments last year, Roberts claims that for the 2005 national EEF series, “Eight percent of the participants were women,

and they won 18 percent of the prizes.”

I'M HOPING I CAN HELP boost the stats, but so far I'm 0 for 2. In my first tournament, three months ago, all I caught were weeds and the seabed. Now, after six hours, I'm drifting alongside the railway trellis when I finally hook something. I reel hard, letting my catch pull me in closer. Definitely “photo-worthy,” I think. I round a corner and spot my prize, which is suspended a good 4 feet above the water's surface: an abandoned popper that's snagged on the side of the bridge and still attached to broken line.

“That's a nice one,” says Captain Jerry Sparks, my teammate and mentor, who runs Northeast Kayak and Guide Services. Sparks, 55, has been fishing for 50 years and kayak fishing for more than a decade and, he's passionate about getting people into the sport. “Probably worth a good 10 bucks.”

At least my luck is improving. And I'm boosting my arsenal of tackle gear. Now all I need is a new kayak. I'm in a sit-inside ocean touring sea kayak surrounded by sit-on-top, souped-up rec boats. My kayak

floats, which helps, but there is nowhere to store gear or quickly stash a rod (or, with any luck, a fish). Sit-on-top paddlers often bungee cord a milk crate to the deck to store gear, and one creative fishing partner of mine uses PVC piping for rod holders.

I join Sparks in a cove ringed by reeds and watch a gull with a fish in its mouth swoop down and land on a rock to feed. A fish swims after my red-and-yellow popper, and then darts away. I'm thinking about switching back to a spoon for some vertical jigging when I finally feel something on my line. I give it a good tug and start reeling, quickly stopping to adjust the drag a few times.

“Keep going!” Sparks yells. “Don't give him any slack or he'll slip away.”

It isn't a huge fish, but it's a fighter and pulls my kayak sideways. I keep reeling and playing out the line, and by the time I finally get the striped bass on my boat, it's towed me clear across the bay.

Sparks helps me measure and photograph the striper, a tricky maneuver that requires a long plastic ruler, a waterproof camera, a good fish gripper, an extra set of hands and *(continued on page 72)*



(continued from page 70) a few unrepeatable words. It turns out to be 8 pounds, 23 inches—and the first fish I've ever hooked while kayaking.

I don't score any prizes for my catch that day, but I'm hell bent on getting back out there next year and, with luck, hooking more fish than bait. And even though I haven't snagged a keeper (yet), I'm starting to realize there's more to kayaking than the views.

If You Go: *Jersey Paddler in Brick, New Jersey (888-225-2925; www.jerseypaddler.com), hosts kayak fishing events, provides equipment and arranges guide services through local anglers like Capt. Paul Eidman of Reel Therapy Fishing (732-922-4077; www.reeltherapy.com). Capt. Jerry Sparks runs Northeast Kayak and Guide Services throughout New England (413-219-8455). For more information about kayak fishing nationwide, visit www.kayak-fishing.org* **HOOKED**

{The Ride

Hobie Mirage Adventure Fish

This kayak comes fully loaded for fishing with a design that includes two built-in rod holders and one clamp-on, as well as a Twist-and-Stow rudder system, smart paddle storage, adjustable foot braces and an insulated soft cooler. The seat is comfy—even after a long paddle—and there's loads of storage space. What's more, it's Hobie's fastest boat in the fleet. \$849, \$1,119 with rudder; 800-462-4349; www.hobie kayak.com.



{Where to Inshore Fish

INSHORE SLAM HEAVEN Charlotte Harbor, Florida

Encompassing 270 square miles of mostly shallow grass flats, canals and a slew of wonderful little islands, Charlotte Harbor is the second largest estuary in the state of Florida. Located on the southwest side of the peninsula, the picturesque historical area moves to a much slower beat than Miami's South Beach, and fishing is the local activity of choice. All fab-four inshore species thrive here: redfish, sea trout, snook and the almighty tarpon. Come June the area is besieged by boats as big tarpon move through Boca Grande Pass. Although a major draw, the congestion of boats in the pass isn't for everyone. For

the sight-caster, there's no bigger thrill than casting a Seducer fly to a tailing redfish. The reds linger all year, but spring and fall are best. Snook like to hunt from mangrove coverage, creeks and deeper potholes. Captain Mike Manis says the redfish have really rebounded in the last few years and each day begins with the possibility of catching an inshore slam (three or more species in one day). **Contact:** 941-628-7895; www.flatscaptain.com.

WICKED STRIPERS Nantucket, Massachusetts

Clam chowder, lobster, corn on the cob, cobblestone streets and fat striped bass ... what more could you ask for? The stripers begin to

show up in mid-May as they migrate north and fatten up along Nantucket's many rips and sandbars. Cast a top-water plug off the beach or from a boat, and try not to jump when a monster inhales your offering. If you miss the spring migration, come back in the fall, when the fish turn around and pass by again. **Contact:** 508-228-4900; www.crossrip.com.

JERSEY ACTION Manasquan Inlet, New Jersey

The season begins with the arrival of school-sized striped bass in April. By June, the area has some of the East Coast's best action for weakfish (a.k.a. sea trout), as well as big bluefish. The action runs into fall, as light-tackle and fly anglers anxiously await the famed bass blitzes along the beach. As if that's not enough, Manasquan boasts the Garden State's best surfing. **Contact:** 732-528-1861; www.shorecatch.com.

—CHARLIE LEVINE

Hot Bites

The dangling hooks help give Shimano's Butterfly Jig an irresistible flutter-and-fall motion, and there are 62 different models from which to choose. Amberjack, snapper, grouper, striped bass and tuna will all grab onto this highly effective, aggressive jog. \$15-\$25; 949-951-5003; www.fish.shimano.com. // It's all about the stink and Berkley claims its new Gulp! scented baits smell fishier than the real thing. The biodegradable, soft-plastic lures come in an array of patterns and sizes for fresh and salt water. \$6; 800-237-5539; www.berkley-fishing.com. // No self-respecting fish can resist a wounded bait. Rapala's Twichin' Rap is a new balsa-wood lure that mimics the swimming motions of an injured minnow, eliciting strikes throughout the water column. \$6; 952-933-7060; www.rapala.com.

THE GUIDE: Cory "Ruthless" Routh, a kayak fishing guide from Virginia Beach, Virginia, and co-founder of the non-profit Tidewater Kayak Anglers Association (757-403-0734; www.tkaa.org)

FAVORITE LURE: Four-inch RipTide Mullet in chartreuse (\$3.30, comes in various sizes and colors; www.riptidelures.com)



"We have a saying here in the Chesapeake Bay. If it ain't chartreuse, it ain't no use. Nothing in nature is that color, but it just drives striped bass absolutely nuts. I don't know if they like it, or it makes them mad, but they really go for it."