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## Gearing Up for Photography from a Kayak

By R.D. Decker

As a golden sun peaks above the horizon my paddle dips into the cool, salty water, nudging my kayak forward against the tidal current. Along one bank are quaint little houses, the pilings of docks and boat lifts stabbing into the creek. On the other an island of sand held together by the roots of marsh grasses, live oaks and cedars. Ahead a Reddish Egret stalks its prey. I point my little boat in that direction, I open the dry bag resting on the floor between my legs, reaching for my camera to take a shot...

The idea of combining an expensive digital camera and an even more costly super-telephoto lens with a kayak may seem anything but sensible. After all, water and electronics just don't mix! However, by using the right specialized gear and techniques the combination can result in an all access pass to locations that would otherwise be off-limits to most nature photographers. Not only will a kayak open new areas of exploration to the photographer, it may allow them to get closer to many timid animals than they would've ever imagined possible. For many birds, mammals and reptiles predators approach from the land, not the water. As such, a photographer paddling a kayak may create minimal alarm when approaching otherwise nervous subjects. Plus shooting from the water provides a unique perspective not available to land based photographers. In short, not only does paddling and nature photography mix, the combination can be quite rewarding.

When looking to purchase a kayak for photography the first time the best advice is to work with an outfitter that specializes in the sales and rentals of these nimble little boats. Usually locally owned, the staff members of these businesses are often avid paddlers. In most cases they are familiar with local kayaking areas and conditions. In contrast, the sales people found at the "big box" stores may never have even paddled a kayak and can lack the necessary knowledge to make suggestions about choosing a boat for photography. As a general guideline a recreational class boat, with its wide beam and roomy cockpit, is usually a good choice for an entry-level photography kayak. These boats have a bit more side to side stability than the other classes. Additionally, the large open cockpit makes it easy to enter and exit the craft and for stowing and accessing photography equipment. Deck rigging straps and a bulkheaded storage area are nice additions. The outfitter will be able to make good suggestions about paddles, personal flotation devices and the other requisite accessories.

Obviously a stable, reliable boat is only part of the equation. When kayaking there are going to be some drips, splashes and sprays that find the way inside the boat. Plus there's at least a minimal chance of capsizing or taking a wave over the side. There is an obvious need to protect sensitive electronic gear when paddling from spot to spot. Probably the best solution is to use dry bags. These are vinyl or heavy duty plastic bags with special roll top closures that create a water tight seal. Available in many sizes, it's easy to find bags to fit a variety of needs. A large bag to hold camera with lens, a medium sized one for accessories and a small bag to protect a wallet and cell phone

will be sufficient for most photographic adventures. For longer expeditions even larger bags can be used to store camping equipment and provisions. Another option would be to use one of the many commercially available hard-plastic, water-tight cases. A popular choice for underwater photographers, they have the advantage of being tough and providing good protection for fragile gear. It's also likely that they would float if dropped in the water. However, these boxes are bulky and take up a lot of precious space in the small boat's cockpit. Regardless of the system selected, camera gear should be stowed safely while launching, landing or paddling the kayak.

Color choice for equipment is also a factor worth considering. Simply put, there is no perfect color choice for kayak photography. Some subjects will be more color sensitive than others. Plus kayaks are used in a variety of environments as photographic platforms. What works well in a marsh may not work as well in an open water environment. A good general recommendation is to go with earth tones if possible. Tans, browns, greens and even blues work well. But remember, a lot of photographers do enjoy success using bright yellow, red or orange boats. Paddle color may be a bigger factor than boat color. The paddle is constantly waving and movement is a big factor in frightening wildlife. Light or bright colored paddles are best avoided for this reason. Color certainly isn't the biggest issue in gear selection for kayak photography, but it is worth a little thought.

Of course there's more to successfully photographing from a kayak than equipment considerations. The photographer needs to learn how to launch, paddle and maneuver the kayak safely. A little research will reveal a myriad of "how-to" videos on the internet. Local outfitters and paddle clubs are also great sources for learning to paddle. Most clubs and outfitters offer classes teaching basic skills and emergency recovery techniques in the safety and comfort of a heated swimming pool. No matter which educational method selected, a little knowledge in technique will go a long way towards keeping the photographer and camera gear dry.

While not an intuitive mix, the use of cameras from modern recreational kayaks can be a great combination. Shy animals allow closer approaches and the agile little boats permit exploration of areas not accessible by land. Additionally kayak photography provides a unique point of view not often seen in wildlife photos. With the selection of the right boat, proper gear and a bit of training and practice, a kayak can be a wonderful tool for nature and wildlife photographers. A kayak and a camera may not be the answer to every nature photographer's dream but for some it truly is.

...The sun is much higher now. The water and sand are bathed by bright, harsh light and deep shadows that aren't friendly to photographers. But that's okay, I think to myself. My memory card holds images of egrets and herons, of sandpipers and terns, of horses living wild and free. As I turn my nimble little boat to return to the launch again the paddle strains to push the kayak against the current. The tide has changed and with it an enjoyable morning spent.

*Bob makes his home along North Carolina's Crystal Coast. A professional wedding & portrait photographer his true passion is photographing and exploring the great outdoors with his camera. To learn more about his outdoor adventures, view his nature and wildlife images or learn about his one-on-one instructional opportunities visit [www.carolinafootprints.com](http://www.carolinafootprints.com), [www.facebook.com/carolinafootprints](https://www.facebook.com/carolinafootprints) or follow @NCFootprints.*