



IN THE THICK OF IT

Paddle or Pedals, Kayak Anglers Are
Pumped Over Florida's First Coast.

➔ Mike Kogan · www.jaxkayakfishing.com

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Jacksonville, home to Florida's First Coast, has always been recognized for its well-rounded fishing opportunities. With over 68-miles of Atlantic Ocean coastline and approximately 400-miles of productive inshore ecosystems, Florida's largest city has as diverse a fishery as any locale. Combine the varied angling opportunities with great weather and plentiful access, and you have what is likely the best destination for kayak fishing in Florida. Kayak fishing is one of the fastest growing outdoor activities in the state, if not the country, and it's no secret why. If you're a die-hard member of the growing cult of plastic crusaders and have yet to fish this prolific stretch of fertile coastline, then you owe it to yourself to get in on the action.



Jacksonville, indeed, offers near-shore and inshore anglers plentiful opportunities with a wide variety of species, although it is an undeniable fact that it's often overlooked by more glamorous destinations such as Mosquito Lagoon or Everglades National Park.

While these locales unquestionably yield world-class action, Jacksonville anglers, too, have much to brag about. If you don't already know then rest assured, Jacksonville and its surrounding watershed offers consistent action with seatrout, flounder, redfish, sheepshead

and black drum. During certain times of the year anglers also connect with tarpon and snook. With numerous labyrinthine mazes of spartina grass, no-name creeks, oyster-lined tidal flats, countless accessible shorelines and crusty fish-holding docks, Jacksonville offers limitless adventures to open-minded kayakers.

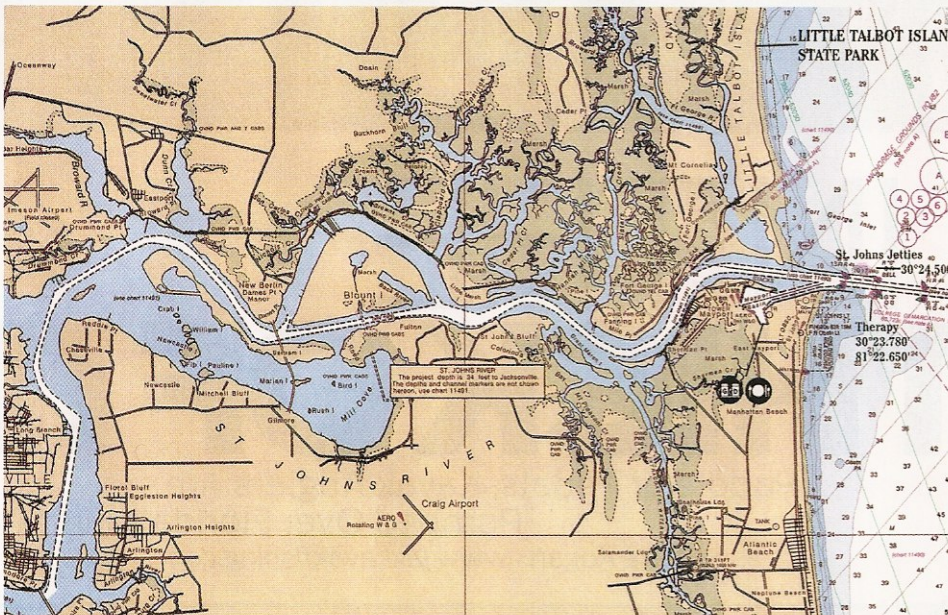
Seasonal migrations provide anglers in-the-know vast opportunities for rod-bending action.

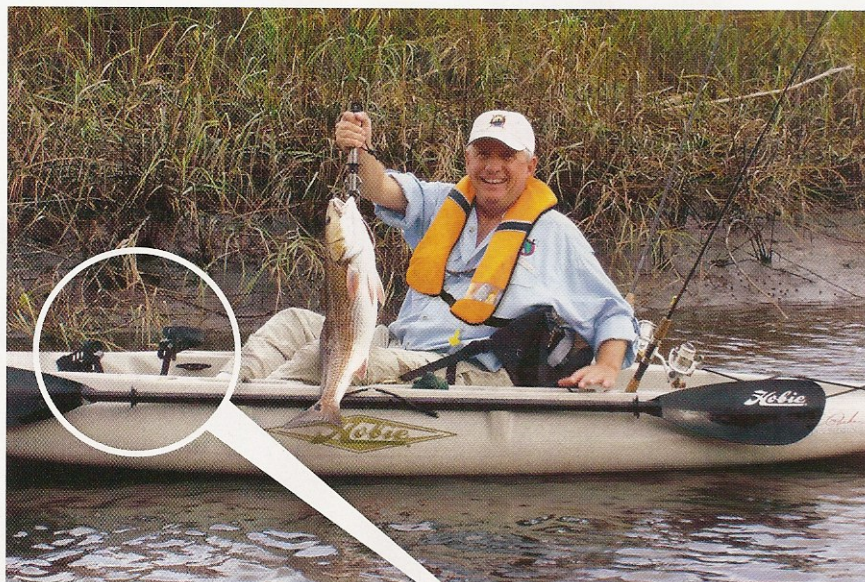
While the summer run of menhaden sets the stage for unrivaled near-shore action with kingfish, tarpon, jack, cobia, sharks and bull redfish, where Jacksonville really excels is its inshore fisheries with literally hundreds of creeks off the ICW and St. Johns River, including some sensational wetlands, preserves and parks. If you're an enthusiastic shallow water angler, fly-caster, or live bait aficionado, the choices of location are limitless and the species available are downright spectacular.

When targeting this unique destination it is crucial that kayak

With a wide variety of intertidal habitat, Jacksonville is a kayak angler's dream come true.

When targeting this unique destination it is crucial that kayak anglers take note of the large tidal fluctuations.





Hobie's Mirage Drive offers anglers a worthy alternative to traditional paddle power.

ing the outgoing tide to scout the shallows, then working against the incoming tide on your way out. Of course, you can also use the tides to your advantage. For example you may let an outgoing tide take you from your launch to a favorite creek, which you then enter, fish the low tide and first portion of the incoming tide, then let the incoming tide help you maneuver back to your launch site.

TO PEDAL OR PADDLE?

With such a great expanse of worthy venues, and the fact that you will undoubtedly at one time or another be forced to fight a swift current, kayak selection is critical for anglers in this unique ecosystem. Thanks to innovative manufacturers like Hobie (www.hobiecat.com) and Native Watercraft (www.nativewatercraft.com) kayak anglers now have several human-powered propulsion options to consider when it comes to selecting the proper platform. The idea behind a pedal-driven kayak is to enable the kayaker to utilize the leg muscles which are much larger than arm and torso muscles primarily used by a paddler, and that pedaling is a more efficient means to cover longer distances than paddling. However, the debate continues as to whether pedaling is faster than paddling because the design of the

The author displays a healthy black drum coerced from a muddy no-name creek.



anglers take note of the large tidal fluctuations. The First Coast has the largest tidal movements in the entire state with tidal swings often greater than five-feet. There's always a lot of moving water which plays a highly dependent role on the location of game fish and forage, as well as how kayak anglers must approach their intended destinations. Powered solely by strength and stamina, fishing Jacksonville's inshore and coastal arenas with the aide of a kayak is definitely a tidal affair. If you don't plan accordingly you may find a lot of mud between your kayak and the mouth of a creek you were intending on fishing or worse yet, between your kayak and your launch site.

My experience has proven that the most consistent action occurs during an outgoing tide as well as the first two hours of the incoming, when baitfish are more heavily concentrated and flushed from their typical hideouts. These tidal movements produce a lot of water flow so if you are from an area with more gentle tides, then you will certainly

go through a bit of a learning curve when deciding when and where to focus your efforts. If you find you are always paddling against the tides you are probably doing things right—that is moving into the back bays and creeks dur-



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Fish a kayak today and experience it for yourself. I promise it won't take you long to realize what all the hype is about.

hull and abilities of the paddler, or pedaler, both come into play. I have seen good paddlers with consistent form, decent paddles, and a kayak with an efficient hull design leave a pedaler way back in their wake. I have also seen folks with great legs and endurance on an efficient Hobie Mirage Revolution pump clear out of site.

When it comes to fishing, a pedal-driven kayak with a hand-controlled rudder has several advantages compared to paddling. The number one advantage as you can imagine is hands-free operation. Since your feet are doing the dirty work and the occasional rudder adjustment is made with a quick flick on the rudder control, your hands are free to cast, retrieve, and fish while you continue to cover ground. Or if you are moving between loca-

Erick Bell of Team Wilderness Systems is hooked on the benefits of kayak fishing—serenity, stealth and success.

tions you could use your hands to re-rig tackle or have a snack. If you are fishing in conditions that are sensitive to current, pedals are a great way to maintain your position—that is casting up current and letting your bait work back towards your position with a natural presentation. A paddler in this situation has the

paddle in his lap, and either drifts backwards or makes one-armed paddling adjustments to remain in position. The same goes for fishing in windy conditions—you only have so many arms!

There are, however, a few potential drawbacks to using a pedal propelled kayak compared to a paddle-fishing kayak. Because the drive system takes up space in the footwell, you typically have less storage space than traditional sit-on-top kayaks. Also when targeting skinny water you must remove the pedal drive from the water, so there's a bit of a tradeoff in storage space. And while pedals are quieter than a motor they are not as stealthy as a paddle, so most anglers use the pedal drive while making long treks to and from fishing grounds then switch to a paddle or pole when in close quarters or spots that call for ultimate stealth. Finally, pedal driven fishing kayaks cost quite a bit more than a paddle based fishing kayak—a paddler can have the world for \$600 to \$1,200 but pedal-driven units are in the \$1,600 to \$2,500 range. While pedaling is not for everyone, the rise in sales of pedal kayaks and their increasing

Tricked-out kayaks are a common sight along Jacksonville's inshore waterways.



Kayak Etiquette

All too often we hear horror stories about boaters who blew through a creek without considering the kayakers they almost hit or waked. No question there's plenty of blame to go around regardless of the vessel you fish from, but as a kayak angler you need to remember that the world does not owe you any special treatment. All you can really ask for is to be treated with the same decorum and respect that you have for others. For example, if you decide to fish the edges of the ICW on a weekend when there will likely be heavy boat traffic, you need to be aware of the wakes passing boats will produce. While boaters are responsible for their wakes to a certain extent, expecting boats running the channel to slow down or come off plane because a kayaker is on the edge of the ditch is unrealistic. If you are very close to the edge of the ICW in a foot or two of water you need to understand that tiny wakes can turn into small breakers when they hit shallow water. If you're paddling for a specific spot and someone is already there, what do you do? Well, you could try for some camaraderie and probe whether they'd be okay with you sharing the spot, but the prerogative belongs to whoever got there first. Some anglers don't mind the company, but just because someone does not want to share does not mean they are in the wrong. Once again put yourself in their shoes. One thing is for sure; getting angry will not get positive results. Whether it's a close encounter in a creek or recognizing the type of water and traffic around you, the golden rule and clear communication are tools that will keep you sane. Camaraderie between all boaters can and should be a positive thing—a wave or nod of the head goes a long way towards making things pleasant and enjoyable for all.

popularity on the water speaks volumes. Like any other equipment decision the best thing is to try what's out there and make up your mind based on your personal preferences.

Whichever kayak you prefer, in Jacksonville and all over the state, these personal fishing vessels offer shallow water anglers numerous advantages. With no mechanical components, trailers, registration, insurance or launch fees, the

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affordability factor is obvious. However, there is so much more. Fishing from a kayak practically puts the angler at eye level with his quarry—a unique perspective. Kayaks, which float in just a few inches of water, allow anglers to reach fish held up in the skinniest of areas that cannot be accessed by any other type of vessel. Kayaks also provide the perfect

means of transportation for wade-fishing enthusiasts who want to explore numerous flats in a single day. While limited mobility and distance constraints are downsides, the pros far outweigh the cons. Fish a kayak today and experience it for yourself. I promise it won't take you long to realize what all the hype is about. See you in the thick of it... 