

Testing Yourself and Your Kayak...

Prepare to Get Wet

by Joanne Schwartz

Remember when you were a kid how you jumped all over a toy to really get to know it? You sat in your red wagon, pulled and pushed it, stood in it, turned it over and stood on its bottom and played with its wheels. Now it's time to do the same with your kayak. You can learn the techniques listed here from books, articles, friends or, perhaps easiest of all, from classes. A warm sunny day and a calm bay or lake, or maybe even a swimming pool, help make this lots of fun, but moving, open water provides more realistic conditions for a second round.

Capsize your boat and learn how to exit gracefully so you don't bruise your shins or scrape your knees. There are several popular methods. I like keeping my legs in the ready-for-action position (knees locked under the deck and feet firmly on the pedals) while I pop the spray skirt. Then I move both my hands (one holds the paddle) along the coaming to just behind my hips, release my legs and push on my hands, gracefully rolling forward and right to the surface.

Then, with full flotation (either bulkheads or float bags in both ends), fill your kayak with water (in a shallow area), first with just a few gallons so it has about three inches of water. Get in it and paddle. Feel how much stability you gained or, probably, lost. Then add water until it is half full. Paddle again and feel the difference. Now, totally fill it up. Remember that if you capsize in nasty conditions (you'd probably never capsize paddling in a calm lake or bay bird watching), water will probably enter your kayak faster than you can bail it and the boat will quickly become too heavy to empty by traditional two and three person rescue methods. Now reenter, reattach your spray skirt, and pump it out with a hand pump inserted through the body tube of your skirt.....or paddle to shore if you're close. Kayaks are highly unstable when full! BE CAREFUL not to do these exercises far from a protected shore. It is best to have a friend nearby to help you wrestle with the heavy boat.

Next, practice reentering your boat in deep water. Practice using two person rescues (T-X, loop, or...). Then practice several solo rescues (paddle float, reenter an roll with or without a paddle float, crawling up on your stern and slipping in, and hoisting yourself back into your kayak seat first). Reenter both a dry boat and one filled with about four inches of water. Learn what you can and can not do in this kayak (small cockpits restrict the range of reentries you can practically accomplish, and less stable boats are more difficult all around).

Test the flotation on your kayak

Almost all kayaks seem to leak a little here and there, especially under rough sea conditions and surf where water is being forced along seam lines and over hatch and spray skirt covers. Before you get too involved with your new kayak, its best to learn how water-tight it really is. Remember that future wear or damage might increase leakage so retest your kayak before a major trip or at the start of each season. The first two tests assume your kayak has bulkheads.

First, test your bulkheads. Fill the cockpit with about three gallons of water and tilt the boat to one end for about half an hour so the entire bulkhead seal is covered. Then check to see if any water has leaked into the lower chamber. Repeat with the other end. If water has passed the bulkhead seal, your gear will get wet and your buoyancy will suffer should water enter your cockpit. While watertight bags are very effective in keeping gear perfectly dry, only repairing the leak will keep your buoyancy sufficient. Silicon sealers or other gasket caulking is available from your local kayak dealer or can be ordered from the manufacturer of your particular kayak. Obtaining the particular brand recommended by the manufacturer of a polyethylene kayak is necessary because few adhesives adhere well to plastic boats. Some kayaks come with the front bulkhead not sealed in place. Manufacturers claim that paddlers like to remove it to load long items. We recommend against this because you can not be assured that your bulkhead will remain in place while transporting the boat or paddling and they certainly leak badly when the seal is missing.

Next, test your hatch covers. The easiest test is to put about two gallons of water into each chamber, reseal your covers, dry the exterior of your kayak, and flip it upside down on saw horses over a dry surface. After about a half hour check to see if any water has leaked out (realizing that water on the deck will appear at the lowest point, not necessarily where it leaked from). Although this will expose major leaks, the real test is to take your craft into choppy seas or the surf zone for a couple hours (you need bracing practice anyway, don't you?). If your hatches survive the assault of pressurized water without leaking, you should be happy. If you have just a little (maybe a half cup) of water in each end after an hour of heavy water, that is inconvenient but not too serious. But if there's more, you'll want to get creative in creating a more efficient seal. Round or elliptical hatch rims which are pop riveted in place and covered with a heavy rubber seal often do better with a bead of silicon caulking around the perimeter of the rim assembly since water often enters not through the hatch cover but in between the assembly and the kayak itself. On larger hatch covers, perhaps you merely need to pull tighter on the fastening system (bungee cords, webbing or whatever) or realign either the soft or hard cover so they fit more securely.

Seams on fiberglass kayaks generally do not cause problems, but your boat might have a type of seam, faulty workmanship, or damage which allows water to enter. The most practical way to test seams is to add enough water to completely cover the length of a side seam when the boat is placed on its side, dry off the boat and let it sit for a half an hour. Try this along the fore and aft seams on both sides. Locating leaky seams can be difficult, but if you wipe the seam surface dry and watch for drops to form, you know where to start looking. Sometimes water can enter a seam channel at one place and simply migrate to another weak spot on the outside where it surfaces. You can often fix a leak temporarily by pouring a bit of resin in the cleaned out and dry boat and allowing it to run along the seam, hopefully filling holes along the way. But resin is very brittle and will break under the stresses and flexes of paddling. To make a more permanent repair, re-tape the seam on the interior with fiberglass. Your local retailer can probably do this for you if you're not into smelly fumes. Usually it will be best to talk with your boat manufacturer or retailer and learn his possible solutions before attempting a repair because there are several methods by which the original seam could have been sealed, each of which requires a different repair technique.

Flotation provided by your bulkheads or air bags is the most important safety feature your kayak can provide you. Your own skills and judgment will certainly keep you from most dangerous situations, but when the chips are really down, you want your kayak to float. How much flotation is enough? If you have bulkheads (and you know they and your hatch covers are tight), you and a friend should fill the cockpit completely then sit on both ends of the kayak to try to sink it (of course in very shallow water). There should be sufficient flotation to keep it afloat enough for you to reenter and paddle (slowly and without much stability, perhaps) a little. If your kayak is really not at all above water, you better add additional flotation (either air bags or closed cell foam blocks) in front of your feet or behind your seat. Most kayaks will pass this test.

If you use air bags for flotation, inflate one or two in each end and try the same exercise. Do you have enough? Never try this with flotation in only one end or you'll have a strange and difficult situation on your hands as one end submerges ten feet under water.

Now that you're sure you have enough air, perform the same test on your kayak with dry bags full of as much gear as you might carry on your typical (or fantasy) trips. It's a great chance to learn how to load your boat anyway ... where will you put your tent poles and the Dutch oven? We are always very proud to say that our kayaks carry 150 lbs of gear. But will your boat float if capsized with that much gear? If your previous (unladen) tests showed that you have marginal flotation, this will be the acid test. Your goal is to assure yourself of adequate flotation for the conditions of your real trips. Don't be caught surprised!

Test Your Skills

Many paddlers enjoy pool rolling sessions with whitewater boats and assume they will be able to roll as well in a sea kayak under real conditions (perhaps turbulent water, loose gear inside your cockpit, spray skirt ripped off and lots of water inside the cockpit). Well, try it in your new boat and see how you do! First just take your sea kayak into calm water, keep your spray skirt on, adjust your foot pedals properly and try it! You'll soon learn if you need additional knee or hip paddling or knee braces - many of us fall out of our seats (big, loose and very comfortable!) and burst through our spray skirts when we unexpectedly flip in all but the tiniest cockpit sea kayaks. Try to lock yourself in the ready-for-action position and roll. You will probably not be able to lie as far back as you're used to in a whitewater boat. It is

usually quite easy to adjust your position and technique to your new boat, but you'd better do this now, in calm water, before you really need it.

Of course you'll also want to go out in more difficult conditions, even ocean surf if that is encountered in your normal paddling, and refine and readjust until you can roll reliably. Knowing your limitations and designing a personal training program will help keep you safe and happy. Try to roll with your spray skirt off, since that's typical in some conditions. Try several rolls so you experience the technique with increasing amounts of water in your cockpit. You will probably find that you can do it just fine, even totally full, but be aware of the differences, especially of tenting to over-roll to the other side with a full load.

Now you will want to test your rescues. Remember back in your first couple of classes, you perfected solo, two person and three person rescues? Well, time to give them another try now that you have your new kayak. Just make it a fun session and let your friends who help know that you'll take them out for hot pizza afterwards and you'll get lots of cooperation. Or take your new kayak to a rescue class or club clinic. As with rolls, its great to learn rescues in calm water, but best to perfect them in rough seas or moving water. For comfort and safety, be sure to wear adequate insulation for a couple hours of intermittent exposure to the water and possibly to wind as well. Also have dry clothes and perhaps hot chocolate available on shore for afterwards.

Solo rescues are especially valuable. Paddlers often claim that they do not need to know these because "I never paddle by myself." Well, if conditions (surf, rocks, currents, etc.) are bad enough for you to capsize, they might be quite trying or even dangerous for your partners too! Partners might not be willing or able to come to where you are to perform a rescue. Its fun to hop out of your boat and try the standard paddle float rescues, try a reenter and roll with and without a paddle float (even if you do not know how to roll reliably, it's quite easy with a paddle float on). Then do each of the unassisted reentries if your cockpit is not a tiny British style one: climb directly onto the cockpit (landing seat first) or climb onto the stern an enter feet first, face down, then rotate to a sitting position. The goal is to get as comfortable with your kayak as you did with your little red wagon. Climb all over it! Know what you can and can not do with it ... and what you need to learn very soon!

Finally, try your rescues with your boat "fully loaded" with the gear (or equivalent weight in water bottles or sand bags) you might take on a trip. You'll find that you're probably unable to empty the water from your cockpit using the two or three person techniques. We just aren't strong enough to lift the boat, gear and water over another kayak's deck! Try it to find out what you can handle.

And while you're at it...

How well can you empty your cockpit of water? Your front lawn or the sand is a great place to fill your cockpit with about 6 inches of water and test your hand pump, deck mounted pump, or bailer and sponge technique.

Sit in the boat and start pumping. Unless you've splurged for the electric pump, you'll probably find that the 5-8 gal/minute that the pump's manufacturer rated your pump at is great if you've got the strength of a gorilla. Most of us can only pump a few gallons before our arms give out. There's not too much you can do about this, short of working out to increase your strength and endurance. Just know your limit so you can use an appropriate technique for each situation.

Next, try your bailer. Very effective bailers are plastic half or full gallon containers which can be purchased - and you get a free gallon of milk or orange juice with each! The trick here is to make sure you know how to best cut off the top of the jug so you can eliminate as much water as possible with each flick of the wrist. Also, you'll want a jug that is the right size to match your cockpit and to reach the floor of your kayak (with your legs inside). Too small a jug or opening just wont do the job and too large wont be ale to get in and out around your legs and through your coaming. Again, try your gear in calm conditions so it is ready when you need it.

Check out our article on customizing your kayak too, What Now? Finally, you are ready to begin paddling your new kayak! Have fun!

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