

A Guide to Kayak Fishing, Island-Style

by Adam 'Trout' Traubman



Trout Traubman's 30-lb kahala. —John McVey photo

• **From the beginning of time**, our ancestors have thrived on the sea's bounty, eternally exchanging extreme respect (and occasional human loss) for a portion of its life-sustaining gifts. Flash-forward to the 21st century, and here we are, still nurturing the delicate relationship that is so important to our existence. Although technology now allows us to fish almost any body of water via motorized vessels, we look in a different direction. Driven by our natural, innate

urge to find a "better way," we return to our roots. Our motivation is the same—to procure the divine medium between respect for the ocean and bountiful returns that keep us happy, healthy and full.

Modern-day kayak anglers evolved from assorted environments: shore anglers inhibited by land limitations; private boaters looking for more convenience; locals looking to fish the blue water without spending thousands of dollars; "cattle boat" warriors looking for fewer elbows to bump; and kayakers looking to add some excitement while paddling between points A and B. Though many are still content with their original ways and means, it is apparent that kayak fishing is filtering into anglers' routines, if not consuming them. No matter how this newest subculture of open-ocean anglers came to be, it's here to stay. Prominent catches, unlimited personal options and freedom of choice continue to net kayak fishing "newbies" each day, and the addiction is impossible to shake. Following are some basic pointers, suggested accessories and gear, safety tips and motivation to get you fishing the open ocean as frequently as a surfer catches waves.



Trout Traubman's a ulua weighed just under 50 lbs. It fell for a giant 'opelu rigged on a 3-way-swivel setup.

Gear and Accessories

Kayak—There are many models to choose from, but as far as the style of kayak goes, the "sit-on-top" is most recommended for safety, storage, ideal outfitting space and overall fishability. While a select few choose to fish from "sit-inside" kayaks for reasons ranging from staying dry to overall comfort, the sit-on-top kayak anglers heavily outweigh them. Demos are available at most paddle shops, and a half-dozen or so kayak models should be tested prior to purchase.

Paddle—Again, models vary. Definitely listen to the experts, but make your final decision based on what feels right to you (and your budget). The basics to consider when choosing a paddle are its size, weight, durability, construction and purpose (i.e., you don't want a white-water paddle for the open ocean). Note that paddles thrown in with a kayak in "package deals" are usually junk; the same goes for seats.

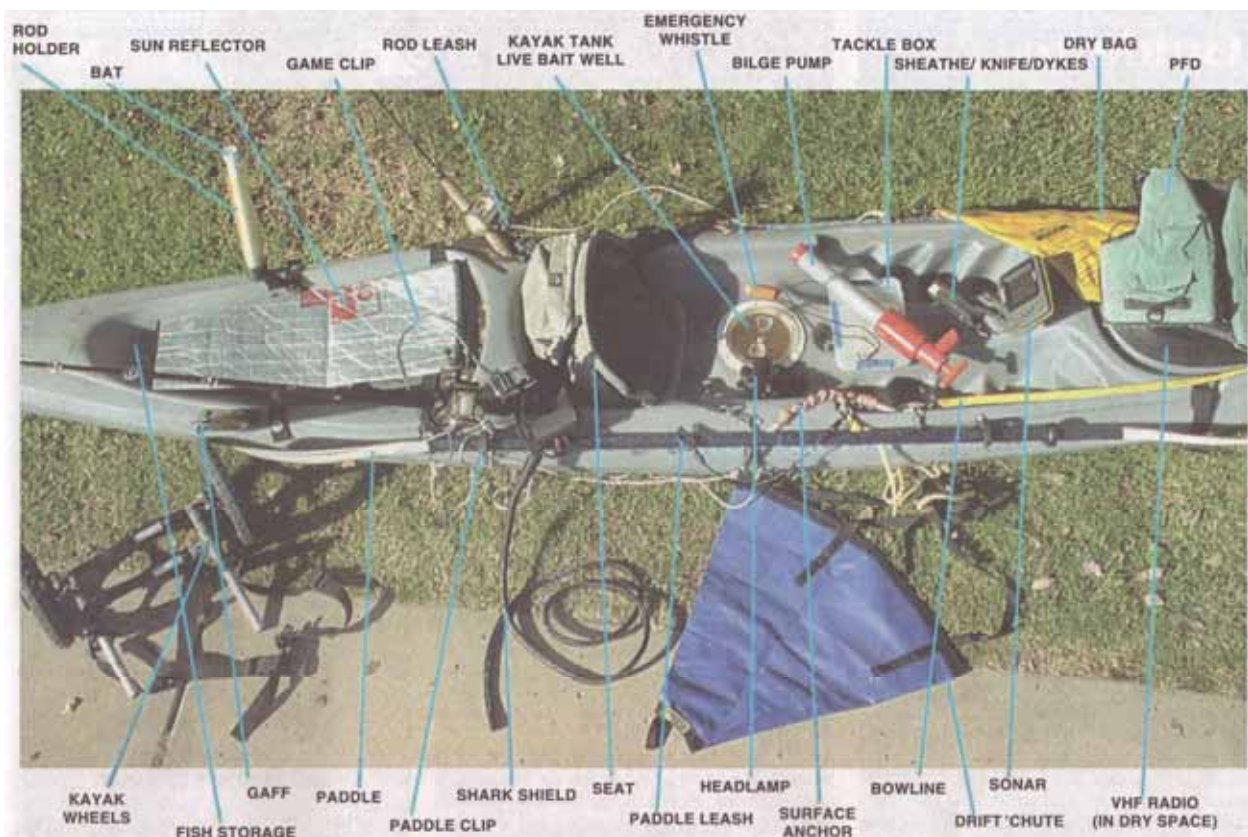
Seat—Spend a few extra bucks here, as your comfort is crucial when you are spending a good chunk of the day on the water. Get a seat that handles weather well, especially the combination of salt water and direct sunlight.

Personal Flotation Device (a.k.a. life jacket)—Aside from the fact that it's the law to have a PFD, it also may save your life one day. Storage and warmth are bonuses. Collapsible/inflatable models are also available.

Paddle Clips—These are mounted on the rail of the kayak in a position that is customized for each individual kayak angler. They eliminate the inconvenience and problems of wedging the paddle under a leg or balancing the paddle on the kayak, which is uncomfortable and even has the potential for disaster (lost paddle). Paddle clips allow the kayak angler to know where to place the paddle each and every time—quickly, conveniently and safely. They serve primarily as a paddle holder but can also be used to store one or two fishing rods when launching in moderate surf conditions.

Bowline—High-grade, braided line with clips is essential in the list of safety gear. It also serves as a line to attach to other kayaks or anchor up to another object/structure. These are usually mandatory on mothership trips.

Surface Anchor—This simple accessory has "1,001 uses." This nylon/elastic shock cord with loops (and optional brass clips) does the following and much more: takes the shock out of swell and/or wind chop when anchored up to any form of structure; effects the application of a folding anchor (bottom) or a drift "chute (a.k.a. "sea anchor"); backs up the paddle clips when taking rods through the surf (tie-down); provides shock absorption while tied up to another kayak; and helps lash down various items to the deck of the kayak. Plain bungee cords submit to weather quickly.



Rod Holder—There are many rod holder designs available, but all serve the same purpose: to store your rods, free up your hands, allow you to troll effectively and provide you with the option to "dead stick" one setup (fishing a second setup hands-off) while actively fishing another. Many add extra rod holders to stow a net and a gaff.

Folding Anchor—This collapsible bottom anchor is primarily used in flat water (e.g., bays, estuaries, lagoons, harbors and lakes). If you find a hot spot and want to stay on it while keeping both hands free, this is a must. One of the top uses is during the process of chumming and catching live bait inshore.

Deck Sheath—This can be attached to the deck, worn on a belt or hung from a fishing vest or PFD. It is used to store a bait knife and a pair of dikes/pliers while keeping them out of harm's way. Without the deck sheath, getting poked or stabbed while on the kayak is inevitable.

Live-Bait Tank—This is a vital accessory for those inclined to fish with live bait. This fully plumbed tank runs off of a battery, and it can hold two to 20 baits, depending on size and species (i.e., akule vs. 'oama). The Kayatank is the best on the market if you are not interested in making one from scratch.

Wheels—Although many beaches have excellent access, there are a number of exceptions, especially secret spots! Some of the best fisheries are guarded by distance and/or rugged terrain (i.e., deep sand, rocks or logs). Sturdy kayak wheels are required in these situations.

Rhynobar—The Rhynobar gives the kayak angler a mounting place for rod holders, sonar, VHP radios and other accessories. It is also designed to serve as a stable base for tying off larger species, including billfish.

Shark Shield—This is a unique shark deterrent system that utilizes a technologically advanced three-dimensional electronic wave. It is small, portable and lightweight and can be

deployed easily through a scupper hole or over the side of the kayak.



The Shark Shields' electrical field surrounds the user and deters shark activity by scrambling their senses.

Starting Out

The entry-level kayak angler needs nothing more than a knife, a pair of dykes, one rod, a few artificial lures, damashi and/or cut bait with terminal tackle (hooks, swivels and lead). The minimalist approach facilitates low-maintenance kayak fishing that allows the newbie to concentrate more on his or her surroundings, such as crashing birds, structure, bait boiling and other factors that lead to hookups. Excessive gear for the beginner allows for unnecessary distraction and additional damage/loss/ injury in accident situations.

Start by choosing a day with a favorable forecast: small surf (1 to 2 feet) and minimal wind. It is highly advised that you go with a buddy, preferably someone with experience. Early morning is usually best (this also depends on tides, wind and moon phase), and fishing the inshore structure is a great way to start.

Drop some cut bait down to the bottom (fresh tako legs and ika strips are good choices), and be sure to try several different spots if hits aren't coming your way. If this is unproductive, try throwing some artificial lures (e.g., chrome spoons, poppers or plastic swimbaits) with varied drops, jigs, retrieves and drifts. Between the cut bait and artificials, the day's catch should consist primarily of papio, moana, weke, to'au, ta'ape, kaku, mu, uku, humu and other inshore species.



Progressive Kayak Fishing

Increased hours on the water will improve skill level, boost confidence and, in time, provide room for helpful gear additions that can facilitate a higher catch ratio. The experienced kayak angler can use his or her seasoned skills and the additional gear mentioned below to target and catch more desirable game fish with higher frequency.

1. Additional rod holders will accommodate a gaff and net to keep close at hand and, more importantly, hold additional rods with pre-rigged outfits for spur-of-the-moment changes such as a boiling and/or breezing school, an unexpected encounter with structure that requires an alternative setup, a variation in fish species (e.g., spotting a breaking billfish that demands 100-plus-lb monofilament) or having that extra stick for catching bait set up at all times for those scattered bait balls.

2. A wider variety of tackle and lures will expand the scope of fishing and provide backup in case there is no access to bait, as often happens in shortened sessions or last-minute decisions to hit the water.

3. A drift 'chute/sea anchor saves the day when the current is sweeping or the wind is pushing hard. Speed of the bait presentation can be crucial. Whether or not a sea anchor is on board will make or break a fishing session.

4. Sonar is big. Contrary to the misconception that we "paddle in circles until the fish alarm goes off," a sonar/fish finder plays a definitive role in locating bait, as well as structure where the target species live.

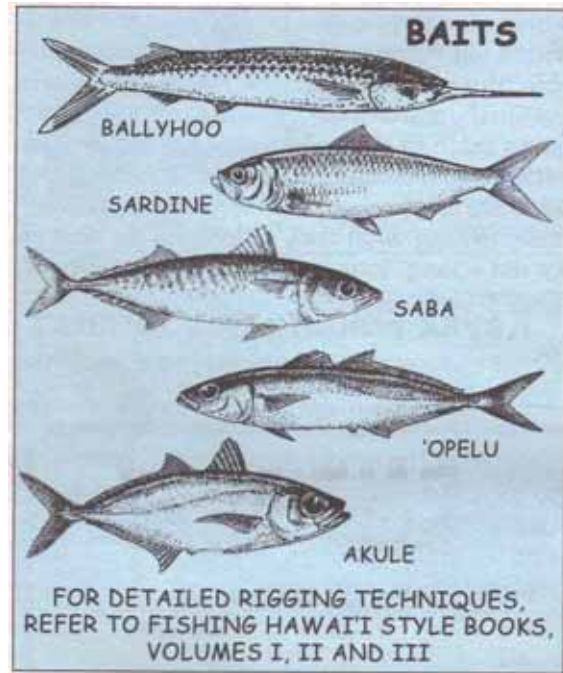
5. GPS is a great tool for marking successful spots and also using others' pre-existing coordinates to take some of the guesswork out of locating fish. It can also save your life in a bad visibility situation such as a thick rain squall or in the dark.

6. VHP handheld radios are perfect for communication with fellow kayak anglers. They allow the group to spread out and track the hot spots safely and efficiently. VHP radios also have immediate U.S. Coast Guard access in case of emergency. If you look at successful kayak anglers, many have a battery-powered live-bait tank. It can fit three times the amount of bait as a bait bucket and eliminates the need to constantly refresh the water.

Bait

Options really start to open up with live-bait applications. Whether it's drifting a nervous 'opelu

on the bottom for a big ulua, trolling an aggressive akule on the surface for a shibi, or fly-lining a slithering ballyhoo for a monster mahimahi, the key to a higher hookup percentage on these targeted species is live bait. Many kayak anglers prefer low-maintenance artificials (e.g., Yozuri, Rapala, various skirted baits and spoons), but big-game success on a kayak is usually the result of fishing with the real deal.

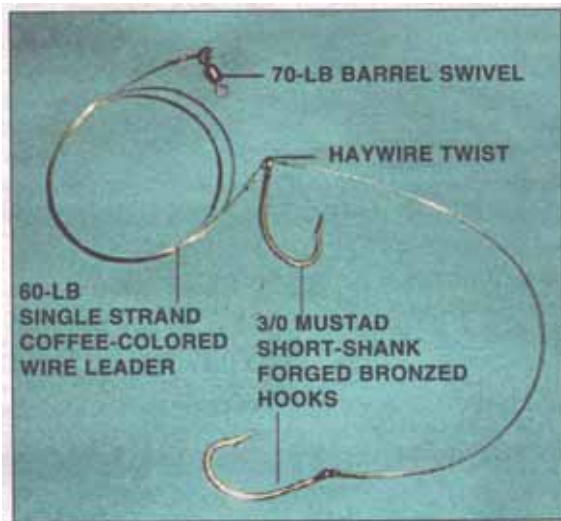


Live bait is caught by jiggging a bait rig (a.k.a. damashi) in the surf zone, scumline or around structure. A helpful tip is to scatter small amounts of wet cat food on the surface in order to coax the bait close to your kayak and damashi. Sonar is key for locating bait balls. Smaller baits can be caught from shore with the simplest cane pole rigs for 'oama or complicated techniques for bagging halalu.

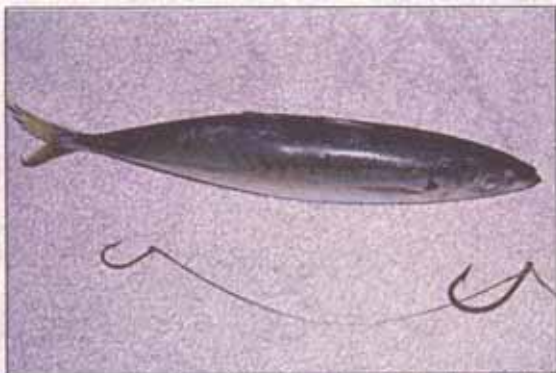


Steve Heusser's estimated 55-lb ulua hit a live 'opelu.

Often, live bait is scarce, hard to find or just not biting. An alternative between live bait and artificials is fresh dead bait. More often than not, that's what locals use. Dead bait is more successful than a typical lure, and it eliminates time spent catching live bait. Chinatown is a honey hole for the best fresh-dead pieces. Buy extra, and vacuum-seal them prior to freezing in order to avoid the "squish" after defrosting. With bigger baits, try using a trap-rig/trailer-hook to decrease short bites. For those of you who tend to get bored trolling for the big one, fresh-dead tako, ika and aku belly are the best baits for dunking.



Steve Heusser's live bait rig is a result of experience.



Space your hooks so the stinger hook attaches below the belly close to the tail as the belly will tear easily.



The finished bait will troll well and sink fast when you stop paddling—covering much of the water column.

Safety

Safety is first and foremost. The self-rescue process should be mastered prior to ever dropping a line in the water. Comfort and mobility on a kayak is mandatory. If someone has problems with balance, paddling and/or accessing gear, he or she should not assume that hooking and landing a 40-lb ulua will be a piece of cake. Some adapt to kayak fishing in days, others in years. Everyone's learning curve is different.

Here are a few pieces of safety gear that should always be taken along: a whistle or blowhorn; a compass; a navigational headlamp; a glowstick in case of lamp failure; a bright flag; and binoculars. Others to consider are a GPS to help with your positioning, a VHP handheld radio for communication and U.S. Coast Guard access, an EPIRB (sends a trackable signal if you are lost out at sea) and an emergency flare. Once safety and the basics are covered and you've practiced launching and landing in the surf (without gear) enough times, it's time to go kayak fishing!

. . . And Away You Go!

The reel sings: hana pa'a! The zinging "Zzzzrrrrr!" is an unmistakable melody that every angler loves to hear, but what ensues on a kayak is in a realm of its own. It is deemed "the sleigh ride," and kayak anglers have adopted it with a smile. Those who have hooked a strong fish from a 'yak will attest. Add one part fishing pole, one part kayak, one part large game fish, wedge yourself in tight, and hang on. 'Ahi, mahimahi, ono, ulua, uku and many more are testimonial catches of our island waters that can "provide transportation."

Whether it's paddling directly from land to the inshore fisheries or entering blue water territories via motherships, kayak anglers are targeting these hard-hitting species and a variety of others with stealth movement and hunterlike tactics matching the indigenous water hunters that created this fishing method so many years ago. There's something about launching quietly at gray light with that sodden, early morning marine layer that allows the angler to regress and tune into how fishing used to be; dropping that customized 'yak at water's edge and making the soundless admission into the heart of the fishery. Even the most sheepish individuals on land metamorphose into fishing machines. A kayak angler paddling into the field with confidence will give even the wildest of fish the shivers.

Secluded fisheries enhance this covert fishing style, and our islands offer plenty. The vast

majority of motorized fishing vessels launch from local landings, bays and harbors and typically target nearby spots that don't mandate excessive gas use and travel time. This leaves long stretches of water, barren of everything but the aquatic dream that the kayak angler searches for. These waters have very little fishing pressure, and that boosts fish counts and average fish sizes above and beyond the norm. Worries of taking someone's wake over the bow are down; chances of seeing whales, dolphins, monk seals and other forms of marine life are up. It's no longer about whether or not fish are caught, but what kind, how big and how many. Of course, the kayak does not make the angler (fishing is fishing is fishing), but it certainly facilitates a low-profile method that prevents fish from spooking as much as the presence of a larger, motorized, gas-emitting vessel.

While those fishing the 'yaks revel in this ideal meshing of convenience and privacy in local waters, it's hard to overlook the adventurous side of the sport. There's no denying the urge to tackle the highly coveted game fish from the kayaks in proven fishing hot spots. Mothership kayak fishing expeditions to small, local islands and offshore buoys are increasing in popularity. The large motherships accommodate the anglers and multiple kayaks outfitted for tackling the particular fishery. This allows the kayak angler to tie into larger game fish on his or her vessel of choice. Many power-boaters question the motive of taking a boat out to sea, only to jump off into one that's a fraction of the size. Answers vary, but most revolve around the extreme challenge, increased excitement, personal space and simultaneously playing the role of captain, angler and deckhand.

Though kayak fishing appears to be on the radical side of life, the sport is really for everyone. Any individual can tailor the setup,



Trout and Isaac 'Rocket' Brumaghim hold part of their day's catch. Ono, mahimahi, kawakawa and uku are among the list of potential catches from the kayak in Hawai'i.
-Dean Sensui photo

style, intricacy and approach to his or her skill level and particular fishery. Paddling a kayak across the sea surface is an effortless stroke that conforms to any strength level. Nowadays a host of kayaks offer fishing platforms that suit every height, shape and weight. Add some hot fishing to the mix, and the result is the ultimate hybrid sport regardless of the participant's gender, age and skill level. Inshore or offshore, freshwater or saltwater, there is certainly something for everyone.

Many folks look shocked when they first witness a kayak angler strolling up the beach with a big stringer of fish. It seems inconceivable. But it's not about whether the onlookers eventually match that person's massive, oceangoing catch or if they end up kayak fishing for catfish in a peaceful corner of a lake. It's about deciding to give kayak fishing a try and eventually finding what they're looking for-just as we did a long, long time ago. . . . **Trout**

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