

Kayaking – Getting Started with a First Kayak

Revised: August 4, 2007 by Chris Collins 316-942-4339

The statements contained in this document are my personal opinions. They are based on about 8 years of enjoying all three types of kayaking, and helping many new paddlers get started. I like recreational kayaking, whitewater kayaking and sea kayaking. I own all three types of boats. My opinions are not biased toward a single type of kayaking. And, not all my friends agree with my opinions.

Unless you have your heart set on whitewater or sea kayaking, a recreational kayak will be the most useful “first kayak” for use in Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma. Much paddling fun and camping can be had with a recreational kayak. Some people get started with a recreational kayak and then later add a whitewater kayak and/or a sea kayak. Each type kayak has its own purpose and limitations. There is not a single kayak that will do everything well. That is why I own and use three different kayaks. I have prepared a separate document that describes the different ways to enjoy kayaking, as well as the equipment and training needed for each. This document assumes that you would like to begin with a recreational kayak.

Develop Good Habits:

If you think your future will include whitewater or sea kayaking then it is important that you develop good habits. The most common bad habits are improper use of the paddle and slouching. Both are very hard to break later. Obtain advice from one or more experienced paddlers. If you just want to have fun paddling a recreational kayak, these are non-issues. Good habits are your choice.

Eskimo Rolling:

Eskimo rolling is not needed and in most cases not possible with a recreational kayak. Rolling is a necessity for whitewater kayaking and is a real asset for sea kayaking. The boat must be properly fit and equipped to permit rolling.

There are several things to consider when selecting a Recreational Kayak:

Suitable Waters:

Recreational kayaks are very suitable for shallow areas of our local lakes, and most rivers and creeks in Kansas. Examples include; Arkansas River, Little Arkansas River, and Kansas River. They will be suitable for most non-whitewater rivers in the Ozarks such as the Current, North Fork of the White, Spring River (Arkansas), etc.

Beware that some rivers and creeks that are non-whitewater at lower levels can be very dangerous for recreational kayakers at higher levels such as the upper portions of Fall River just below highway 99 or Grouse Creek.

For safety reasons, recreational kayaks are not suitable for sea kayaking, deep-water crossings or for genuine whitewater.

Boat Length / Width / Draft / Speed / Maneuverability:

Draft: Much river floating is done in shallow water. A small boat will sit deeper in the water, or require more water depth to float. Longer and wider boats will generally have less draft and require less water to float. A boat's displacement and the shape of the hull will affect a boat's draft.

Maneuverability: Shorter boats are more maneuverable (easy to turn) than longer boats. Shorter boats and boats without a keel have less directional stability (difficult to keep straight) than longer boats or boats with a sharp or strong keel. Maneuverability is needed in swift water to avoid strainers, obstacles and sometimes just to follow the channel.

Length / Speed: Speed is generally a function of the waterline length. For the math geeks, speed is proportional to the square root of the waterline length. A boat that is twice as long as another will not go twice as fast but the difference will be noticeable. People using very short boats will have trouble keeping up with others in the same group using longer boats.

Stability / Width: Wider boats are generally more stable (less tippy). Experienced boaters prefer narrower boats for better control and easier paddling. Soon you will be experienced! Wide boats will require a longer paddle that will be harder on your shoulders and elbows. Narrow boats permit the use of a shorter paddle. See later discussion.

Camping:

Larger boats with more volume are easier to pack with camping gear. Smaller boats will dictate smaller, lighter and more expensive camping gear. Experienced backpackers will be able to camp from any size boat. Some gear can be attached to the deck by adding eyehooks.

Comfort:

Your boat must be comfortable. That said, most of us had to get used to kayaking before it became painless. New positions and motions require body adjustments. Boats can be made more comfortable with accessory seat pads, backrests, hip pads, thigh braces, etc. Be sure to test the foot room with the same paddle booties or shoes you plan to use.

Cockpit Size:

Most recreational kayaks have very large cockpits and no thigh braces. From a safety standpoint, you will easily fall out if you capsize, almost eliminating the need for wet-exit training. Neoprene sprayskirts are difficult to obtain for recreational kayaks because of their large cockpit size.

Rudders / Skegs:

Rudders and skegs are very helpful on open water, in windy conditions. They have little use on a river or creek. Rudders are most useful on longer sea kayaks that are designed to be used on open water. Even then, not all sea kayakers favor rudders. I like the rudder on my sea kayak, especially on windy Kansas lakes. I would not want a rudder on my recreational kayak because I use it almost exclusively on rivers and creeks, most of which could damage a rudder and require greater maneuverability than can be achieved with a rudder or skeg engaged. A drop-down skeg is a nice feature if it can be fully retracted when not needed. I think it is very important for everyone to be proficient at paddling without a rudder or skeg. The best paddling skills will be needed in shallow water and in hairpin turns where a rudder or skeg cannot be used. A rudder or skeg should be a comfort, not a necessity.

Paddles:

Let me start by saying that I favor shorter paddles for all types of paddling. I have learned this from others and through trial and error on my own. Shorter paddles are much easier on elbows and shoulders. Shorter paddles permit using a steeper entry angle that makes it easier to paddle straight. Testing with a GPS, I have not been able to achieve faster speeds with a longer paddle.

Whitewater paddles have shorter, wider blades. I think a person about my size (5-11) should begin with a 200 cm whitewater paddle. **Touring paddles** have longer, narrow, spoon shaped blades. I think a person about my size (5-11) should begin with a 210 CM touring paddle. The shaft length will be about the same on both of these paddles.

Most local (Wichita, KS) stores that sell recreational kayaks, will stock only touring paddles that range from 220-240 cm.

The real test of paddle length is how high your eyes are above the water when seated in the kayak. Your upper hand should not be forced much higher than eye level when you move the blade close to the boat during a forward stroke. Hand spacing on the shaft is an important factor too. There are no sizing charts based on eye height.

Feathering: Unless you have knowledge or reason to do otherwise, begin with a 45 degree feathered paddle. Werner still considers this the standard feathering angle. It will probably take a lot of experience to recognize the need for more or less than the standard 45 degrees of feathering.

Plastic / Wood / Glass: There are good and bad paddles made with all three materials. Generally you will get what you pay for. Paddles range from \$70 for a cheap plastic paddle to \$400 and more for a carbon fiber, foam filled touring paddle.

Weight: Lighter paddles are a real joy. They are also more expensive because it takes higher quality materials and better engineering to make a paddle that is both light and strong. Better paddles will be marked with a total weight. Swing weight is also something to consider but this value is not measurable. Basically, the more you pay the less you get. ☺

One Piece / Two Piece: If the joint is good quality, I like a two piece paddle for ease of storage and transportation. Initial shipping on a two-piece paddle is often less than shipping a long one-piece paddle. If you special order a paddle, the savings on shipping can help offset the cost of making the paddle two-piece. Some two-piece paddles permit adjusting the feathering angle. That feature could be a benefit to an experienced paddler so they can match the feathering angle with their technique and reduce wrist motion to zero.

Right Hand / Left Hand: Purchase a paddle designed for right hand control and learn to paddle with it. The dexterity needed is low. By using a right hand control paddle, you will be able to loan, borrow or even perhaps find a used paddle.

Length Problem: If you purchase a very wide recreational kayak, you might not be able to use a short paddle. You might be forced to use a longer paddle that wears and tears at your shoulders and elbows.

One Paddle Can Fit All: A whitewater paddle can be used for all types of kayaks. A touring paddle cannot be used for whitewater because the blades are long, narrow and fragile. A good quality whitewater paddle can be purchased for \$250-\$300. Here are a couple sources good and high quality paddles.

<http://www.WernerPaddles.com/> - plastic, glass and carbon fiber paddles

<http://www.CricketDesigns.com/> - very high quality custom wood paddles

Recommendation - First Recreational Kayak:

All this said, I would recommend a narrow recreational kayak in the 11 – 13 foot range. This will give you the needed maneuverability for swiftwater rivers like many found in Missouri and Kansas, and you will still have plenty of room for camping gear.

My favorite boat for recreational waters is 12.5 foot with no keel. The “no keel” gives me extra maneuverability. I would not recommend the “no keel” for most beginners because it requires added skill to make the boat go straight. I started out with 14.5 foot kayak and a rudder. I found that to be that to be too short for a sea kayak and too long for rivers. Be careful trying to get a boat that does everything. They do not exist. Buy a recreational kayak that will serve you well on recreational waters. Then if needs change, purchase an additional kayak for whitewater or for sea kayaking.

Recommendation - First Paddle:

If you are near my size (5-11) or bigger, I recommend a 200 cm whitewater paddle with a 45 degree feathering OR a 210 cm touring paddle with a 45 degree feathering. I am already thinking shorter for me.

I will be happy to help you try different lengths before you make a purchase decision.