



Kevin hoists a healthy puppy drum over his leg and into his kayak. Puppy drum, or redfish as they are also called, inhabit the shallow estuaries of Virginia almost year-round and can provide consistent action for kayak fishermen.

## An Evening on the Water with Kayak Kevin

Story and photos  
by  
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We are all familiar with what they say about the best laid plans. I think it's safe to multiply the saying by two when the plan involves fishing the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel at night in a kayak. So I wasn't surprised when I finally emerged from the tunnel and saw whitecaps smashing into the rocks and the wind blowing from the opposite direction and twice as hard as had been predicted.

I found myself torn somewhere between fear and disappointment. Certainly we wouldn't go out in these conditions, which meant I had driven two-and-half hours from Richmond for nothing. Or would we? In which case I thought I might

voluntarily turn around and head back home. I must admit, I was a little skeptical of kayak fishing. My initial thought being, *Why fish out of a kayak when you could fish from a boat?*

Moments later, as I pulled into the Willoughby Spit parking lot, there was no mistaking whom I was meeting. Kevin Whitley, or Kayak Kevin as he is more commonly referred to, stood waiting behind his pickup truck with two kayaks strapped in the back.

"Looks a little rough out there," I commented, shaking Kevin's hand.

"Oh, yeah," he responded. "We aren't going out there."



Juvenile striped bass like this one often hang around bridge pilings and make prime targets for kayak fishermen using both artificial lures and live bait.

**Boat position plays a big role in kayakers' success. Positioning your kayak down-current and bouncing artificial baits along the bottom with the current keep lures in the strike zone for a longer period of time.**



I imagine my relief was transparent as Kevin explained that he had another spot he wanted to try, Pretty Lake at East Beach in Norfolk.

Another ten minutes in the car and we were there. No white caps. No wind. This seemed more the speed for a novice kayaker like me.

Kevin, who's 36, started fishing from a kayak in 2001. "It's more fun than being in a boat," he says, "and I can go pretty much anywhere in a kayak."

He works as a boat lift driver at Taylor's Landing Marine Center. When he's

not working, he is fishing. Last year alone, he spent an estimated 800 hours fishing from his kayak. I'll let you do the math on that. I know it is more hours than I could ever dream of spending on the water in a single year.

Following some quick rigging, we launched the two kayaks from a small beach and eased out into the channel around some larger boats docked at the marina. I was surprised at how comfortable I was, sitting just inches above the water as I rocked back and forth checking the stability. Just a hundred yards up the creek, a bridge

crossed the shallow inlet, and we began pitching Berkeley Gulp grubs around the pilings.

Before I had time to make a second cast, Kevin was shouting, "Fish on!" from over my right shoulder. I turned to see him land a small striper. A couple casts later I heard him again. This time the striper was a little larger, maybe 17 inches. I slid my boat in closer to the rocks and out of the current where I could cast back up under the pilings. The fish seemed to be laying where the water dropped off into the main channel. On my next cast I hung a smallish striper of 16 inches. Five minutes, three fish. There appeared to be something to this kayak fishing.

You don't have to know Kevin very long to get a sense of his personality. He radiates intensity. In actuality, his intensity often precedes him in this area. I first heard of Kevin as "the guy that fished out of his kayak from Florida to Virginia." That's some serious fishing. He began the 1,800 mile journey back to Virginia from Big Lagoon State Park in Pensacola on May 2, 2005. He arrived here September 11, four-and-a-half months later. Along the way he caught tarpon, snook, jacks, reds, trout, flounder, black drum, cobia, barracuda, and mangrove snappers; and even had a few run-ins with some feisty gators.

Kevin is currently planning another long fishing tour in his kayak. This time he hopes to paddle 2,700 miles from Brownsville, Texas back to Virginia. Kevin jokes about what seems like an impossibly daunting task to most mortals: "I will only have 900 miles to go, and then I will know where I am," he says, laughing. He is now looking for sponsorship for this upcoming journey from companies and private citizens. He estimates the trip back from Texas will take him roughly six months in his kayak.

Just as the striper bite appeared to taper off, the redfish bite started to pick up. Kevin caught the first of the reds, measuring around 15 inches. He placed a small tag in the fish's back and released it back into the



**Sitting just several inches above the water offers a unique perspective on the natural world. You may find yourself noticing things you have never noticed before, hearing things you have never heard before, and hopefully, with a little luck, catching some fish you may have never caught before.**

water. Within the next hour, as darkness rapidly approached, we landed and tagged nine juvenile redbfish.

Last year Kevin tagged 697 fish as part of the Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program. He tagged every species on the targeted list: redbfish, specs, flounder, black drum, sheepshead, gray trigger fish, tautog, spadefish, cobia, and black sea bass. And he tagged them all from his kayak.

This year Kevin has begun guiding kayak fishing trips to the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel, the Eastern Shore marshes, and the concrete ships off the Eastern Shore. He and other avid kayak fishermen landed dozens of large stripers over forty inches from their kayaks fishing live eels around the concrete ships back in January.

Kevin certainly stresses safety when fishing from a kayak. The most important things to consider he says are to

have a solid boat and to always wear a life-jacket. "Something can happen so fast," Kevin points out, "you must have your equipment right and never panic." He also adds that it is important to pick your days and locations and to never go alone, especially if you are unfamiliar with the water and the currents.

As our day was coming to a close, Kevin and I paddled a ways up the creek to fish a different spot. It was quiet, much quieter than fishing from a boat and much more intimate. The paddling wasn't tough, even into a slight outgoing tide. The shadows had lengthened, and the sun burned slowly down below the horizon. Here and there baitfish flipped nervously on the water's surface. Several herons searched the shallows for a meal, and oysters shot tiny water spouts from exposed mudflats. There definitely was

something to this kayak fishing, I thought.

For more information on Kevin's guide service and for weekly fishing reports, big fish pictures, and some cool fishing stories, check out Kevin's website: [www.kayakkevin.com](http://www.kayakkevin.com).

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