



Redfish Kayak Fly Fishing

For Many Saltwater Fly Anglers, Nothing Raises the Hackles on Their Arms More Than the Sight of a Cruising or Tailing Redfish

Capt. Chris Siess – Knot the Reel
World Fly Fishing.
(571) 334-4721
knotthereelworld@gmail.com

Watching redfish forage for crabs in mud or grass, or hunt mullet on an oyster bar is one of the most exciting experiences in flats fishing. Luckily, for coastal anglers in Virginia all the way to the southern tip of Texas, redfish, also commonly referred to as red drum, can be successfully targeted with a fly rod via kayak or stand-up paddle board. These crafts offer the ability to silently glide through the water, explore hard to reach places that a boat cannot access, and enjoy the shallow marsh and marine environments in a unique, unparalleled experience.

After chasing redfish in a kayak from Virginia to Florida for the past decade, I've discovered a few important tips and tricks to benefit kayak anglers targeting reds and other species on the saltwater flats.

Standing & Stability

The wonderful thing about stalking redfish in a kayak is how close you can get to these fish. With a small profile and ability to silently glide through the water, kayak anglers rarely ever need to cast over forty feet to a fish.

Modern kayaks and paddle boards are extremely stable and built to be stood upon, allowing anglers to quickly spot the fish from a higher vantage point. The key to stability while standing is keeping a wider stance and slightly bending your knees. This allows you to rock with any waves and shift your weight as needed.

Poling & Casting

The poling approach and casting process in a kayak will make or break a day when searching out reds in shallow water. Perfecting it takes some trial and error and the fly angler will likely spook and miss fish as he or she figures out the best scenario or approaching fish. I'll provide my routine as a guideline.



I pole within casting range, then I gently set the paddle down across the kayak at my feet, pick up the fly rod resting on a wet towel and begin casting.

Upon paddling to a flat I am confident holds fish, I will stand up to give myself the best vantage point for seeing the fish. Turn your back to the wind and present the fly on your back cast when the wind is blowing into the caster's side. Many are surprised to hear I don't hold the rod. This type of fishing is akin to hunting. Blind-casting in an area can have success and is necessary if the water is off color, but I much prefer to hunt and sight cast to redfish in the clear waters of North Carolina or Florida. Seeing them will make your knees shake and watching them turn to a fly and suck it in is my favorite part of fly fishing.

Upon sighting a cruising or tailing fish, I pole within casting range, gauging the wind and direction the boat is positioned. Then, I gently set the paddle down across the kayak at my feet, pick up the rod, unhook the fly and begin casting.

If the fish eats, I strip set the hook, drop anchor, and fight the fish on foot, if water depth and bottom firmness allow it. Getting out of the kayak can be tricky, but so long as the water is shallower than my waist with a firm bottom, sliding into the water off of the side of the kayak isn't particularly difficult.

Boat Positioning & Dealing With Wind

Boat positioning is crucial to being able to cast to these fish. Using your paddle to pole and hold your position is a skill that will need to be developed but it's fairly easy to figure out. Kayaks easily glide a long distance off of a single push and can be stopped quickly by jamming the blade of the paddle in the sand or mud.



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Wind is always a factor while kayak fishing, particularly involving boat positioning and fly presentation. Depending on the direction and your positioning to the fish, wind can make the cast easier or infinitely harder. I've found the wind to be a benefit and a hindrance to me in various situations and only you can determine what will be most effective position for you.

Upon spotting a fish, I prefer to "quarter" my kayak to the wind, set down the paddle, pick up the rod and make the cast. The wind can make the boat do some funny things, however, and a stakeout pole in a windy situation can be helpful. The ability to cast across your body or lay the fly out on a back cast are equally as important, as it is not always possible to set up for the perfect shot.

Practicing casting from unusual angles will absolutely increase your success rate.

With further regards to wind, I've found wind speed topping 14 miles per hour makes kayak fishing more work than fun. Paddling into strong winds is challenging, especially if you're covering a long distance. Unless you're in an area protected from the wind, you'll likely have to paddle against it one way or the other. Boat positioning in higher winds is more difficult, particularly when lining up a shot at a fish. You'd be surprised how far it can blow you in just one gust.

Wind will also kick up chop on the surface, making visibility into the water more difficult. I have fished in high winds and been successful, but given the circumstances, I'll take the skiff instead of the kayak if the wind is blowing 14 miles per hour or more.

“Must Have” Equipment for Redfish Kayak Fishing

Anchor

There are 3 “must have” pieces of equipment I take with me. The first is an anchor. The ability for the wind to catch your kayak and blow it away from you in a heartbeat is not to be underestimated. I prefer the small 5-8 pound anchors that spread out with arms and lock into place to grab the bottom. 30 feet of rope will do. I prefer to tie off to the front of the kayak and rest it in front of one of my feet, where I can easily access it. In a pinch, I’ve used a brick. Another option is a stakeout pole but their length can make them a hindrance on the water.

Paddle Leash

Your kayak’s ability to sneak away as you admire your catch isn’t lost on your paddle either. Most paddles float, at least all of mine do, and while they sit just under the water surface, the wind can still blow them away in a hurry. The easy solution to this is a paddle leash. Should the paddle fall out while being towed by a big fish or during your photo op, it will only float as far as the leash allows it. After having to chase down a friend’s paddle that blew over a half mile away on a particularly windy outing, I can assure you that you don’t want to be stuck out on the flat without one.

Towel

Third, I cannot stress enough the importance of a medium to large towel. It can serve multiple purposes but the main benefit is creating a smooth “casting platform.” As we all know, fly lines tend to get caught on anything they can. Between snaps, bungees, screws, the seat, foot pedals, etc. there are a litany of snags the line can get caught on when you’re trying to cast to a cruising red. Solve *most* of these issues by laying a large towel down across the bottom of the kayak to strip your line onto. You can even get it wet first to give it some extra weight, should the wind be blowing, and the damp towel will provide extra slickness to your fly line. I cannot count the number of times I hooked up to a nice fish and looked down to see the fly line wrapped around the

edge of something, stuck, as the fish started its run. You may find it beneficial to have 30-40 feet of line stripped off of the reel and coiled onto the towel at your feet for an even quicker presentation.

Other Equipment

One of the joys of being an angler is collecting an absurd amount of gear. It is up to the intrepid kayak angler to determine exactly what they need on their craft. To be successful, it's likely less than one thinks. There are rod holders, electronics, tackle crates, etc. Personally, I minimize to keep it as simple as possible. My rig's external hardware is just a seat and foot supports from the factory. On trips, I bring two fly rods, a small cooler, one fly box, a spool of leader material, PFD, pliers, paddle, anchor, large towel, small dry-proof bag for my phone and a GoPro mounted to a small flexible tripod.



GoPro mounted on a small flexible tripod. Photo timer set to 3-, or 10-second delay.

Having fallen out of my kayak several times while fishing (it is bound to happen), picking up the yard sale off of the flat is easier. There's also less stuff for your line to get hung up on while fishing. I carry two rods with me for different fishing applications. Perhaps I know I'll be paddling to a spot with a large drop off and want to use an intermediate line. Or, I carry the rod I plan on using most often, my seven weight, and something heavier for windier situations or throwing a larger fly. I formerly carried three rods and found that to cause too many hang-ups. Through some trial and error, one can decide what works best in what to bring on your ride.

Bonus: Hero Shot Camera

Everyone enjoys getting the hero shot with their catch to show off at the bar later. Doing it well from a kayak —solo— is completely possible. I'm often asked who my photographer is out with me on my kayak trips. Most of the time, no one. After hooking a redfish, I'll drop the anchor and step or slide out of the kayak to fight and land the fish, if the bottom allows it. Once I've got the redfish under control, I leave it hooked in the water! A tired out red will stick around like a dog at your feet and give you the opportunity to set up your GoPro or similar camera. Mounted on an adjustable



Pheasant Drum Bugger

3-second delay time shot, and take many grip and grin shots with it, while lifting the fish in and out of the water.

The water droplets provide great detail and make sure the sun is shining on you for the best light. The beauty of this is the fish spends most of its time still in the water and can more quickly recover for a safe release. Back in the office, the best photos can be pulled from the camera card.

Redfish Flies

Redfish are widely known for their propensity to eat a wide variety of lures and flies. Through years of guiding, I'm finding the more I fish for them, the more likely I am to use a natural-colored fly that looks "shrimpy." Most of the time I'm fishing clear water or pressured fish and they won't always respond to a fly that looks like it's dressed for a music festival. Recently, I developed a pattern that has proven to be successful, is natural looking, and can be fished in the mid- to lower sections of the water column.



Click image to watch YouTube video

The **Pheasant Drum Bugger** is simple and extremely effective. A tail of marabou and few strands of crystal flash. A collar of ringneck pheasant, four legs to each side, Shrimp eyes, and then multiple more ringneck pheasant feathers make up the entire body. It is difficult to get more than three wraps of "hackle" out of a ringneck pheasant feather, but the variety of feathers on a ringneck skin and the gorgeous variation they provide more than makes up for it. I'll use seven or eight feathers per fly, tied on a Size 2 saltwater hook.

A medium gold **Fish-Skull Shrimp & Cray Tail** provides just enough weight to get it down in the middle of the water column and a weed guard post can be added if necessary.

Cast this fly to cruising or tailing fish, watch the eat, strip set, and hang on!

About Chris Siess:

*Capt. Chris Siess is the owner and head guide of **Knot the Reel World Fly Fishing**. Chris has been fly fishing since the age of nine, when his mother booked him lessons with well known fly fisherman, fly tyer, and bamboo rod builder Hank Woolman. That lesson led to a pretty bad obsession for chasing fish with the long rod. Chris spent his childhood catching bass in local Virginia farm ponds and saltwater species on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Big time college football and family tradition drew Chris to Blacksburg, Virginia for his college years at Virginia Tech. There he fell in love with southwest Virginia; specifically its hikes, views, and of course the New River and local trout waters.*

Post college, Chris spent several seasons playing in the mountains of Colorado as a ski bum and fly fishing guide. Working for Aspen Outfitting Company, he was able to fine tune his trout skills on the extremely technical Roaring Fork River. Chris has since returned to Virginia to chase the multitude of species available in the Old Dominion. Chris spends nearly as much time tying as he does fishing. From first tying simple flies with the hair off the family pet Border Collies, he now designs flies for fish all over the world.

You can contact Knot the Reel World Fly Fishing at 571-334-4721 or knotthereelworld@gmail.com