
A Texas Nature Kayaking Guide

Gear and Supplies

There are two schools of thought concerning taking gear in a kayak. One is to go with the minimal amount that you can get by with. The other is to take everything you would want to take in a 40-foot cabin cruiser. Some items are mandatory (light at night, PFD, noise maker) and are discussed in the Texas Nature Kayaking Guide “Rules and Suggestions for Kayakers” – Items 1, 4, and 5. Each individual and group needs to make a decision as to what should be taken. The type of trip also impacts what is packed. Obviously, if the paddling is within half a mile of a campsite on a lake, the first aid kit does not need to be as complete as when kayaking in the wilderness. Some of the items need to be in every kayak; other items do not need to be in all of the kayaks. Originally I was going to list the items based on their importance, but where you are going can drastically change the order of importance. This guide does not address gear and supplies for kayak camping. For that information, see the Texas Nature Kayaking Guides entitled:

Kayak Camping – Packing,
Kayak Camping – Sleeping,
Kayak Camping – Nourishment, and
Kayak Camping – Health & Safety

Water & Snacks in a Soft-Sided Cooler

Always carry water. Always carry more water than you think you will need. While you could safely drink from many streams without any treatment 50 or 100 years ago, it is not recommended in this day and time. Water is usually more palatable if it is kept cool. Rather than buy bottled water, I use half-gallon plastic juice containers. I fill them half to two-thirds full of water, add one half teaspoon of bleach, and freeze. When heading out, I fill them the rest of the way, add them to a soft-sided cooler, and have not only water, but also ice, to keep my snacks and lunch cool.

First Aid Kits

Hopefully you will never have to use a first aid kit, but it is nice to have one available if you ever need it. The contents of such a kit will vary with where you are kayaking and what you are doing in the

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Figure 1. My 6-year-old soft-sided cooler.

kayak. The kit should be in a container that will keep the contents dry, and be colorful enough so anyone needing it can quickly find it.

There are two important criteria for a first aid kit.

One – Know how to use everything in the kit. If you don't know, get rid of the item or get training.

Two – Take it with you. If it is sitting in the vehicle while you are kayaking, it is of no use.

First Aid Kits are so important that we have written a special Texas Nature Kayaking Guide concerning First Aid Kits.



Figure 2. A first aid kit in a Rubbermaid container.

Personal and Safety Kit

As with the first aid kit, these kits should be tailored towards the environment, the length of the trip, and the number in the party. Most of these kits should include a headlight, pliers, duct tape, a solar blanket, a rain suit, and a fleece jacket. Consider adding dry clothes if you are over an hour from the launch site.

Navigation and Communication Gear

No one gets lost until the fog rolls in or something else happens. A compass can aim you back in the right direction if you know what the right direction is. If you are out between sunset and sunrise, you need a light to communicate your presence to other boaters. Depending on the jurisdiction you are in, a flashlight may be appropriate. In other areas a white light that can be seen from all directions is required. Some jurisdictions require that distress signals, such as flares be carried. Check with the agency governing the body of water you will be kayaking in to find out the requirements. Remember, if you cannot be seen, you may inadvertently get run over.



Figure 3. A GPS unit in a kayak gets wet and dirty. That does not impair its usefulness; but not knowing how to use it does.

Cell phones are wonderful devices, but most are not waterproof. If taken on the water, they need to be in some type of waterproof case. This might be as simple as a Tupperware bowl. Just remember that not all cell phones get a signal in all locations that kayaks can easily go.

Weather band radios can alert the kayaker to fast-moving storm systems. In 2004 a number of kayak fishermen involved in a fishing tournament were caught off-guard when a storm struck at 10:00 am that had been predicted to hit at 2:00 pm. While no lives were lost, several kayakers had to be rescued, and some of them spent several uncomfortable hours in the water or in duck blinds.

VHF radio Channel 16 is monitored by the U.S. Coast Guard. A VHF radio is more reliable than a cell phone in most U.S. coastal areas.

Seat

Some kayaks come with a molded-in seat. Others, especially the sit-on-top kayaks require an add-on seat that provides back support. The add-on seats are usually made from a cloth material and are adjustable. Not all add-on seats are created equal. If you are going to buy one, try the variety out before you spend your money, or if you purchase one that does not fit your needs, you may send it to me to add to my collection of kayak gear that was made to be sold and not to be used.

Paddle Leash

If you drop your paddle and it floats away, you are up the proverbial creek without a paddle. I have wanted to use that expression for a long time. Paddle leashes are cords that attach the paddle to the kayak. If you turn over and hold on to the paddle, the kayak cannot get far away. To save the cost of a paddle leash, some people tie their paddles to their kayaks with 6' to 8' long pieces of rope that test out at 100+ pound tensile strength. If the kayak turns over, and one's foot gets tangled in the rope, interesting problems can develop. Many, but by no means all, paddle leashes have a Velcro fastener at each end. If one gets tangled, it is easy to unhook the paddle. To eliminate the risk of entanglement, some people choose not to use paddle leashes. When setting a paddle down, they slip the blade of the paddle under a bungee cord on the front deck, or use a clip on the side of the kayak. Others maintain that they carry a knife and can cut the paddle leash cord if a problem develops. I wonder, are these the same people who do not wear their PFD, but plan to put it on if they need it?

When turning over in high winds or in rough seas, a kayak may be carried away from you if you do not hold onto it. Kayaking with others will limit the risk of losing your kayak. In open waters, paddle leashes make more sense. In rapidly-moving rivers, they are a definite hazard.

Consider the options and then decide whether a paddle leash is for you.

Dry Bag

We all have items we do not want to get wet. These may include extra clothes, watches, cell phones, and wallets. An easy way to store them is in a dry bag. A gallon-size zip-lock bag is the low-priced version of a dry bag. There are larger and higher-priced versions of dry bags that offer more security than a zip-lock bag. The zip-lock bag comes in very handy when several people are storing items in a larger dry bag.

Bow and Stern Lines

A bow line comes in handy if you need a tow, or if you need to get out and wade. It becomes especially helpful if your kayak gets loose and someone has to chase it down and return it to you. If you are having problems re-entering your kayak in deep water, a bow rope can be used to fashion a sling to assist you in remounting your kayak. Stern lines are mainly used for chasing down a runaway kayak, for towing other kayaks, and for lining a kayak down rapids.

Maps & Map Case

A map of the area you are in can help you navigate the area. While waterproof maps are available from many locations, if you need many of them, you might consider the National Geographic TOPO Mapping software, and the Adventure Paper (waterproof) that goes with it. You can print easy-to-manage 7.5' Topo maps on 8.5 x 11 paper.

If you are dealing with larger maps, a waterproof case made from 2" PVC pipe with a cap on each end keeps the maps rolled conveniently out of the way, but available when needed. Flat cases made from clear plastic are also available.

Rudder

Good paddle skills can eliminate the need for a rudder most of the time. That having been said, a rudder is a handy device when paddling in wind or to control the angle of your kayak when drifting.

Anchor or Stake-Out Pole

A small folding anchor can be very helpful, but beware of anchoring in swiftly-moving water. If you are in shallow water, a stake-out pole may make more sense. A stake-out pole can be as simple as a 4 foot long piece of $\frac{3}{4}$ " PVC pipe. It can be upgraded with a T on the top. Run it through a scupper hole if you are in a sit-on-top kayak, or through a loop of rope tied to a handle of the kayak if you are in a sit-inside kayak as a simple anchor. It also makes a handy cane when standing up after sitting for an extended period of time.

A Pole

An eight to ten foot long pole that is 1" to 1.5" in diameter can be used to pole the kayak while you are sitting down, but it takes practice to use it without banging on the side of the kayak. Probably the lightest and least expensive pole can be made from 0.75 to 1.0 inch diameter PVC Schedule 40 pipe (inside diameter). Plug each end of the pipe so water and mud will not enter, and it will be lighter. On the upper end mount a cap. On the lower end mount a bushing and a large T (preferably a 2" or 2.5" T). After gluing the T in place and letting the glue cure for 24 hours, cut the lower portion of the T off. The T will provide a foot when poling over mud or sand. The smaller diameter pole will flex, but the kayak takes little effort to propel. Longer and more substantial poles are used for poling while standing. Plug each end of the pole with expandable spray foam so it will float if you drop it.