
A Texas Nature Kayaking Guide

Kayak Communication – Low Tech

A fellow kayaker signaled, and I read his message clearly. Initially, it did not make sense, but suddenly it made a great deal of sense. He started by holding his paddle vertically and waving it in broad side-to-side sweeps followed by a few frantic vertical pumps. Then he waved it in vertical circular motions, then a few frantic vertical pumps, and then he held it horizontal so I could see the blades and pumped it up and down. He rotated the paddle so the blades were horizontal and I could see only a thin line, and pumped the paddle up and down. Then the cycle was repeated. He was signaling like crazy, and any normal person with some knowledge of signaling would have said, “I can’t make heads or tails out of what he’s trying to say, but he sure is signaling like crazy.” What he was telling me, and the message was loud and clear, was if everyone in the group does not agree on the signals to be used, they are meaningless.

How does a drowning person signal that he needs help? Even if he has a whistle, he will not give three sharp blasts, because he does not have the energy to expend on blowing his whistle. Unlike on TV, a drowning person is expending all his energy to get his mouth above water to breathe; he will not be yelling for help, blowing his whistle, waving his arms, or holding his paddle up and waving it around. Even though he is not following a recognized signal system, he needs help; and he could be drowning within arm’s reach of you, and you may not know it.

While on the water, remember, emergencies happen, and the person needing help probably will not be in a position to signal for help, so it is up to every kayaker on the water to recognize problems and to act. Look for anything that is out of the ordinary. You can only do this if you remain alert to your surroundings and to everyone in your group. Keep the group together. Know how many kayaks are in your group, and periodically make a count. If you do not get the right number of kayaks, and you remembered to count yourself, one of the kayakers may have wandered off or may be having a problem.

Some of my best communication occurs as I paddle beside a friend, and we care and share (that is the politically-correct term for gossiping). Talking to the person next to you is often the most effective way to communicate while on the water, but there are times when distance and other sounds prevent effective verbal communications. Various radio devices are available, but need to be turned on and kept dry. Most of them are expensive enough so most kayakers will not buy them. Even if they do buy radios, not all radios can be used to communicate with radios that others in the group may have. Thus, we need some simple signals that we can agree on, and we can remember.

After reviewing kayaking literature, I was surprised that so little information on signaling was in some of the classic kayaking books. I expanded my search to the internet, and found

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complex signaling systems that were more complex than Amer Sign. You could speak paragraphs using some of the systems that are available.

When on a river where there is a flow of water and simple rapids, the kayakers need to keep enough distance so they can wait until the kayak in front of them has cleared the rapid or other obstruction before proceeding. When bird watching in coastal marshes, kayakers may be separated by 100 feet, but are not visible to each other. Thus, we need a method to communicate when we are not side by side. This group of signals is simple and appropriate for coastal bays and easy-river-running situations, but not extensive enough for white water kayaking and sea kayaking. They seem to work better when the signaler remembers to face the people being signaled, while performing the signals. They also work better when the signaler moves out from under overhanging trees so the signals can be seen better. I am asking all who kayak with me to try to learn these signals and before every trip to remind me to review them with the group.

Whistle Signals

The Coast Guard and most state Parks and Wildlife Departments mandate that each kayaker carry a noise-making device. A whistle meets that criterion. Some whistles are loud and shrill. Others are not. We have found the Fox 40 Whistle and the Storm Whistle to be among the loudest we have tested. In the first kayaking class I took, the instructor stated that the whistle should be used only if you thought your life was in danger. Most whistles, no matter how loud and shrill they are, do not function well when your life is in danger. Wind and waves and even marsh grass make short work of sound waves. The major function of a whistle is to get someone's attention so other forms of communication can be used. Here are the common whistle signals.

Attention – One blast of the whistle. There may be a pause and the signal repeated. This signal can also be used to signal the next kayaker that the rapid is clear and to come on.

Come Back or Gather – Two blasts of the whistle. There may be a pause and the signal repeated.

Help or Emergency – Three blasts of the whistle. There may be a pause and the signal repeated. If someone blows a whistle, it would not hurt to check and see if they need some kind of help.

Paddle Signals

Stop – Hold paddle horizontally above your head, with hands grasped in the normal paddling position. Pumping the paddle up and down is shouting “STOP.”



Figure 1 “STOP!!”



Figure 2 "All Clear"

Back Up or Go Back – Hold the paddle horizontal, as with the "Stop" signal and seesaw the alternate sides to signify an X.

Help or Emergency – Wave anything you have. Since this is the paddle section, hold your paddle vertical and wave it back and forth. Wave your arms. Wave your hat. Do anything to get attention. If you see someone signaling in a nonconventional way, consider that they may be signaling for help, but keep your eyes open, because there are people who need help who will never signal.

Assemble On Me – Hold your paddle vertically, and move the upper blade in a circular motion. If several people give this signal, it means "Leader says to assemble here right now." This signal can be confused with a very calmly performed **Help**, but if the **Help** signal is performed calmly, it probably is not an emergency.

Hand Signals

I'm OK – Pat your head. We should all learn to use this signal whenever we surface after turning over or are in any other situation when a person may need to know our status. If you can remember, do it three times. If you cannot remember three times, then do it four times or two times.

All Clear or Proceed – Hold the paddle vertically and stationary. Pumping paddle up and down means "please hurry."

Go That Way – As with the "All Clear" signal, but hold the paddle about 30 to 45 degrees from vertical and pointed toward the desired direction of travel. Never point towards a hazard unless you are plotting someone's doom. There will always be someone who heads towards a hazard if you point at it and say, "Don't go that way."



Figure 3 "Go That Way"



Figure 4 "I'm OK"



Figure 5 "Are you OK?"

Several years ago I observed a vivacious young lady in our group sitting motionless in her kayak. Since this was out of the ordinary for her, I paddled over to ensure that she was OK. She smiled, thanked me for my concern, and stated that she did not want to disturb the damsel fly that landed on her paddle. I drifted away without disturbing the damsel fly, and knowing that she and the damsel fly were OK.

Don't Mumble

When you signal, make eye contact. Use sharp, clear signals. Get away from a group to signal, so your signal can be seen. Get out of the bushes, so your signal can be seen. Is there any doubt that the man in Figure 5 is addressing you?

Are You OK? – Point at the person you are communicating with, look at the person you are communicating with, and pat your head until you get a response.

Other Signals

Any arm-waving, hat-waving, shouting, tree-limb waving, or any other actions that seem chaotic, may indicate a problem.

Paddles are natural signaling devices, so any paddle signals that are clearly outside of anything and everything agreed upon, may indicate distress.

If a person seems to be just drifting, they may be communing with nature, or they may be having a heart attack or other problem. If anyone in the group is not acting like they normally act, check on them. Usually they are OK, but it is worth the effort to rescue that one or two percent who need help.