

Getting Started with a First Kayak

The statements contained in this document are my personal opinions. They are based on about 13 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.

Each type kayak has its own purpose and limitations. There is not a single kayak that will do everything well. See the Introduction/Forward for a description of the different types of kayaks, kayaking, and training needed.

Recreational Type Kayak:

Unless you have your heart set on whitewater or sea kayaking, a recreational kayak will be the most useful, and least expensive “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. Recreational kayaks can be found in most discount sporting goods stores.

I am not a proponent of recreational kayaks because they are very wide, have huge cockpits that do not permit a watertight sprayskirt, usually don't have thigh braces, and I cannot “wear” the kayak. Since I cannot wear the kayak, I can't use hip action to balance the boat. I also have to reach farther to the side to get my paddle in the water. I have been spoiled with kayaks that fit me.

Crossover Type Kayaks:

A “crossover” type kayak is one that is manufactured so one kayak fits all situations. In truth no kayak is best for multiple applications. Dagger once made “Crossover” model. Later Perception used the same mold to make the “Enduro” model. They are the same boat and I have owned both. These 12 ½ foot kayaks were manufactured with all the safety features that are included in whitewater boats and were rated for Class III whitewater. I have used mine for Class III whitewater and they don't handle as well as a dedicated whitewater boat. I found them to be superior kayaks for me to use on recreational waters because they have thigh braces, cockpits that will accept my watertight sprayskirt, I can wear the boat, I can roll the boat, and there is plenty of room for camping gear. The Crossover and Enduro require quite a bit of skill to make them go straight and they make good trainer kayaks. A brand new paddler might get discouraged when trying to make it go straight. However once one learns to paddle one of these, you can paddle any kayak straight with minimum bow wiggle.

In the past few years, Liquid Logic manufactured an XP 9 and an XP 10. These are a little longer than their “Remix” model and includes a drop-down skeg. With the skeg up, these boats are better whitewater boats than the “Crossover” / “Enduro”. With the skeg down, they have

much greater directional stability and therefore make better recreational kayaks than the “Crossover” and the “Enduro”. The rear sealed hatch holds much less than the Crossover and the Enduro.

If you wish to use one of these crossover type kayaks on deep water, you must find a way to secure float bags in the bow, and learn the sea kayak rescue techniques. I say “secure” because if you just stuff float bags in the bow, they will float out when you need them. Your bow will sink, pointing down, with the stern sticking straight up. Your friends will hate you because the kayak will be nearly impossible to rescue in deep water. You must add front floatation if you choose to use one of these boats on deep water.

If you can afford a crossover type kayak for your first kayak, it will make both a good trainer and a good all around kayak. If you get serious about whitewater kayaking or sea kayaking, you will likely want a dedicated kayak for that purpose.

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 kayaks 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. It is best if you can "wear" your kayak rather than simply sit in a large cockpit.

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 I 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 (approx.) 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. These longer paddles will force you to paddle with a low angle. Every forward stroke will turn the boat.

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 or shoulder height.

Feathering: Unless you have knowledge or reason to do otherwise, begin with a 45 degree feathered paddle. Werner Paddle Company still considers 45 degrees to be 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 \$500 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 and less is better. ☺

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 right hand control paddle even if you are left handed.

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-\$350. Here is a source good and high quality paddles.

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

Recommendation - First Recreational Kayak:

All this said, I would recommend a narrow recreational kayak in the 10 – 13 foot range or one of the crossover type kayaks. 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.

Discount stores typically sell wide recreational kayaks with huge cockpits. Consider a “crossover” type boat for an up-scale recreation kayak such as the Dagger Crossover, Perception Enduro, Liquidlogic Remix XP9 and XP10. These boats have thigh braces, decent sized cockpits, can be outfitted with a Neoprene sprayskirt, and can be rolled if that is your interest. Crossover type boats can be used on whitewater and flatwater but are not quite as good as having two boats. They do make superior kayaks for recreational waters.

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.

Revised: January 16, 2013 by Chris Collins