

Marna's Kayak Camping Primer

by Marna Powell

(I'm always willing to kayak for fun or profit!)

PACKING A SEA KAYAK

When packing a sea kayak for a camping trip there are four important considerations to keep in mind:

- 1) Moisture
- 2) Space
- 3) Weight
- 4) Placement

1) **MOISTURE** —There is always a chance that everything will be exposed to water. All gear should be as waterproof as possible and packed in watertight containers.

Do not bring cotton or down clothing or sleeping bags. Down loses its insulating ability when wet and takes a long time to dry. Cotton

insulates poorly when wet and dries slowly. Wool insulates well when wet but dries slowly.

Bring only synthetic sleeping bags and clothing. Synthetics insulate very well when wet and dry quickly! (Okay, I admit... I often bring a wool sweater for land wear, and silk tank tops or underwear. I also bring a long-sleeve button down silk shirt for cover up when it is hot out—but it packs into a tiny little wad that weighs nothing. Alright, you got me — I've also been known to bring a down vest for warmth on land and it makes a superb pillow — but I bought it for \$7 at K-mart and I'm willing to sacrifice it to the water gods. Just do as I say and not as I do!) Don't even think about a down sleeping bag—use synthetic and enjoy a warm, dry good night's sleep.

Unless you can afford to lose it, don't bring any expensive equipment that is not waterproof. Even if your camera or binoculars don't fall in the water they can still be damaged from splash, moisture in the boat, condensation, and salt air. A good alternative is to purchase a couple of one-time use underwater cameras and a pair of low cost binoculars.

You don't have to go out and buy a bunch of dry bags. A great alternative is to use strong garbage bags, tie them well, and place each bag inside a drawstring nylon stuff sack. (Rumor has it that large Glad bags are strong) To waterproof a nylon stuff sack, line it with two plastic garbage bags, place your gear inside, squeeze all the air out of the garbage bags, tightly twist the top of each garbage bag separately, and tuck it inside the stuff sack.

2) **SPACE** — Kayaks have small hatch openings and tight space inside. We can pack a lot in if we plan ahead. It is easier to pack many small stuff bags than a few large bags. The small bags naturally fit amongst themselves whereas large bags are harder to fit through the hatch and around each other. Because sleeping bags take up so much space you may have to put your stuff



sack or dry bag in the hatch first and then stuff the sleeping bag into the dry bag. You may want to use a compression sack to make your sleeping bag smaller to pack. I like to label all my small bags with names like “breakfast” or “raingear.” If you can sew, get your hands on some fusible coated nylon and make your own dry bags for pennies. I made a few long, skinny dry bags that open on each end and labeled both ends so I know which side to open. Sounds crazy but haven’t you noticed that the coveted thing you want is always at the bottom of the bag?

3) **WEIGHT** — Like backpacking, lighter is better! We sometimes find need to carry our fully laden boats away from incoming tides, onto ferries, or to make room for other travelers. If you must move fully loaded kayaks, try to have at least four people per boat to carry. Six is optimal. Chose one person to lead, check that everyone is ready, then on the lead person’s count of three lift on “three” then carry when the lead says “carry.” This sounds really mundane but more injuries occur on land and if one person is not ready to either lift or move forward then the whole thing can get dumped and backs can be sprained. Your group may even want to practice the lift and carry with an empty kayak before the trip begins.

If you carry gear and camping equipment from the boats to campsites each day you’ll appreciate a lighter load, especially when carrying your gear up steep trails and making several trips. Bring a large netted gear bag or collapsible back pack to carry gear up these trails. I also like to bring expandable hiking poles.



4) **PLACEMENT**— A properly loaded touring kayak is extremely stable. In fact it will be more stable than it is when empty. However, an improperly loaded touring kayak is extremely unstable and will capsize easily or be difficult to handle. Remember you want to maintain a low center of gravity. To ensure good stability, heavier items should be placed as near to the cockpit and low in the boat as possible. Place lighter items such as clothing or sleeping pads into the ends of the bow and stern. My touring kayak has such a long bow that I have to tie a line on my Thermarest in order to retrieve it from the forward storage area. Try to pack each side from the center line with an even balanced weight distribution. Try to pack the bow and stern with an even weight distribution. (Note: in certain wind conditions you can pack you kayak heavy in certain places to compensate—this technique is not intended for this basic discussion!) Do not load your deck up with a bunch of stuff. Deck stuff creates wind resistance causing weather cocking, and will make the kayak less stable by raising the center of gravity too high. That said, it is okay to have a low-profile deck bag, or low profile and lightweight items on deck. It is also imperative that you have easy access to drinking water at all times and there is generally no other place than your deck to put a water bottle. A hydration backpack can be handy but you should be able to ditch it quickly in the event of capsize. You don’t want to wear anything that will weigh you down in the water. Your spare paddle needs to be in easy reach. Place it under the bungee on the deck. Forget filling the solar shower with water and placing it on your aft deck while paddling. It will be too high and heavy and cause your boat to be too tippy.

WEATHER

Check the weather patterns and forecasts of the area you are planning to paddle in. Be aware that forecasts can be wrong, wrong, wrong. Look at the conditions before you launch. Here in Humboldt County we say “if you don’t like the weather, wait five minutes or go five miles.” Our weather can change drastically. Be prepared for all kinds of weather. In many areas you have to rise early to take advantage of paddling in the mornings to avoid afternoon winds. Paddling is always dependent on currents and weather/wind. The timing of your trip will be balanced by weather/wind forecasts and current tables.

An easy way to adjust to changes in weather while paddling is to change hats. I like to use a low-profile deck bag and keep a variety of hats in there. A wool or fleece hat can be put over a synthetic visored cap for warmth. A rain hat can go on top. To cool off quickly have a cotton bandana handy to dip in the water and place on your head. It is easy to cool off but hard to get warm if you’ve gotten too chilled.

FISHING

Check with local authorities for fishing regulations and secure the proper permits. Respect these regulations as many areas have been over-fished and the resources are getting scarce. You also want to make sure you have legal equipment for the area and fishery. Depending on where you go, there may also be great clamming, crabbing, seaweed gathering, and oyster gathering possibilities. If you are fishing from your kayak be sure your fishing line is not too strong in the event you catch something bigger than you can handle in the boat! For instance, for rockfish plan to bring or purchase 10 to 12 lb test line (not too heavy or a big fish will tow you away!), lead heads with rubber tails 1/2 & 3/4 oz, maybe a couple of 1 oz. You’ll also need a stringer and sharp filet knife. For oysters you need a small pry bar and a handy rock. Small collapsible crab traps are easy to handle from a kayak. Clams require a digging tool.

PESTS

Many “pests” are very cute and photographic. Problems occur when wild creatures learn to eat human food. Don’t feed the wildlife! There can be terrible problems in popular camping areas with raccoons getting overpopulated and aggressive to the point of slashing open tents and tearing open kayak hatches. You may have to hang food while on land. Ravens, chipmunks, blue jays, and seagulls will take things from picnic tables and campsites. Minks, otter, and bald eagles will steal fish from fishermen. A mink stole the whole stringer once! Even the deer on some islands have been known to be pests. No-see-ums, gnats, mosquitoes—ARRGGHH. Mosquito nets, citronella, DEET. I wouldn’t dream of having a tent without a net. Do what it takes. Better yet, just bring me! I am a mosquito magnet. Mosquitoes will flock to me and leave you alone!

HIKING

Some folks chose to play cards on land while others enjoy exploring. Personally I like to explore, plus after spending hours in a kayak it’s nice to move around on legs again. There are usually abundant hiking opportunities. Be sure to bring good lightweight trail shoes for hiking and climbing around on rocks and tide pools. I also like to bring a small daypack for water bottle, camera, lunch, and spare clothing. Having been a gimp for 30 years I also bring at least one expandable hiking pole. In fact I keep it on the deck under the forward bungee cord for use at stops and lunch along the way.

FOOD

Whether planning to pack your own food or sharing meals with the group, keep in mind that food generally weighs more than anything else that we bring! It's probably best to find a buddy who has similar taste to yours and share meals with your buddy. It's also nice to split up dinner cooking among the group, for instance we can take turns, two people make dinner for the entire group each evening and everyone fend for themselves for breakfast and lunch. No matter what the meal arrangement, it's always best to do some meal planning before embarking on a trip.

Check with the local health food and backpacking stores for dehydrated foods that weigh little but are very nourishing. Try some out at home before packing for a trip! Some pre-made meals pack and carry well, and cook easily such as "Tasty Bites" Thai food. Bread doesn't pack well but pita bread and tortillas keep and store easily. Soft cheeses won't stay fresh without some refrigeration. Hard cheeses such as Parmesan and Asiago carry and keep for days. Bring spices, garlic, even butter. Do not bring anything that requires refrigeration. Don't bring mayonnaise. Meat does not keep well at all unless it is jerky or canned. Salami can store well if kept cold prior to packing in the kayak, loaded down near the bottom of the boat and kept carefully away from sun and heat. Veggies — forget lettuce and sprouts. Cabbage keeps very well for days without refrigeration and can be eaten cooked or raw. Carrots, onion, and potatoes keep and carry well. Broccoli stores okay but not great. If you have a breathable container to store them in, tomatoes, bananas and avocados can last a couple days. Liquids weigh the most so go sparingly on those little boxes of soy and rice milk.

I know someone who brought nothing but canned food for every meal the entire trip. He had the heaviest boat in the beginning and the lightest at the end. We were lucky to find campsites with garbage disposal. He had no meal preparation, and very few dishes to ever wash. If I liked canned foods better I might consider this option.

Peanut butter and jelly on pita bread gives you carbs, protein and sugar — everything you need for paddling energy. This combination gives you the energy you need when you need it. Our bodies burn sugar very quickly, carbohydrates more slowly, and protein takes the longest for us to use. Breakfast is especially important when paddling long distances. Think in terms of time-release food. Depending on your metabolism, the activity you are doing, and the actual meal you eat, this time-release will vary. In general, sugar is immediate fuel, carbs last a couple of hours, and protein is good for 4 to 6 hours of fuel.

Use your stove and camp cookware at home before embarking on a trip. Just because it worked last summer doesn't mean it still lights every time. I know my "Whisperlight" needs to have its cork oiled before it will function. Don't wait until you've paddled all day and are eagerly expecting a great meal to find out your cooking system doesn't function the way you thought it would.

Do be sure to bring a good combination of protein and carbohydrates. Bring high-energy snacks such as trail mix to munch on while paddling. It is possible to eat really well while kayak camping.

ALCOHOL

While we don't want to drink and paddle, it is nice to have something to relax with at camp after a day of paddling. Bring a bottle of wine or spirits to share with the group. I know it's not the first choice of wine snobs but bag-in-the box wines can be removed from the box and then stowed in front of your feet against the forward bulkhead. If you bug the sailboats and yachts for cold beer then be sure to offer to pay twice what they're worth—you don't want to give kayakers a bad name!

CLOTHING LIST

- Light weight Trail shoes for onshore wear
- Warm socks — synthetic or wool
- Shorts
- Pants
- Underwear
- Long Johns
- Fleece pants
- Fleece shirt
- T shirt
- Long-sleeve light weight sun shirt
- Warm jacket (fleece is good)
- Rain jacket — with hood
- Sun hat
- Warm hat (wool or synthetic)

OPTIONAL CLOTHING LIST

- Neoprene gloves or pogies for paddling
- Warm gloves for onshore
- Rain pants
- Rain hat or hood
- Bandanna
- Fleece vest
- Tank top
- Bathing suit

GEAR LIST

- Synthetic sleeping bag
- Sleeping pad
- Tent with good rain fly and tarp (to set tent on)
- Water bottle
- Collapsible water container(s) (at least one gallon capacity — old “bags” from bag-in-the box wine work very well!)
- Personal eating gear — fork, spoon, knife, bowl, cup
- Cook set
- Pot scrubber
- Headlamp or flashlight w/ extra batteries and bulbs
- Waterproof matches or lighter

- Pocket knife or multi-tool w/ knife
- Repair kit — needle/thread, safety pins, duct tape, wire, etc. — fiberglass repair kit for composite boats
- First aid kit, personal medication, waterproof band-aids, antiseptic, antibiotic ointment, scissors, moleskin, adhesive tape, anti-inflammatory (aspirin or Motrin, etc), antacid
- Enough small stuff sacks to waterproof all your gear plus four extra small garbage bags and several medium zip-lock freezer baggies (they're handy)
- Camp towel (not cotton) or chamois
- Biodegradable soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, toilet paper
- Waterproof sunscreen
- Lip Balm with sunscreen
- Brush/comb
- Polarized sunglasses
- Trash bags

OPTIONAL GEAR LIST

- Mesh gear bag to carry gear from kayak to camp
- Tarp
- Inflatable lumbar pillow
- Thermalounger (converts Thermarest into a chair)
- Small frameless day pack (for hiking trips)
- 50 feet of light utility cord
- Mosquito repellent
- Mosquito net
- Camp shower
- Fishing pole or jig line (on a stick) and gear
- Bungee cords
- Waterproof binoculars
- Waterproof camera and extra film
- Field guides
- Book, deck of cards, journal, sketch book
- Sleeping bag liner. Fleece binky

KAYAK GEAR LIST

- Touring Kayak 16' to 18' long
- Paddle
- Spray skirt
- Comfortable clothing — appropriate for the water temperature. Whatever you decide to wear be sure it is water wicking
- Bilge pump
- Bilge sponge
- Paddle float
- Whistle (Coast Guard requires an audible signaling device — bullhorns are kind of large to carry)
- Booties or sandals for kayaking
- Type III Coast Guard approved PFD

- Splash jacket or windbreaker
- Flares, other signaling devices (camp mirror, strobe, flashlight)
- Marine radio (at least one person in group should have one)
- Spare break-apart paddle (at least one for every two kayaks — one each in extreme areas)
- Compass
- Charts
- Deck bag
- Cell Phone, in waterproof enclosure (check for service)
- Paddle leash
- Helmet for surf landings