

Fall Kayak Fishing, Get'em Before They're Gone

By Kayak Kevin Whitley

The change is in the air. The fall is the natural change of the guard. To me, one of the most fascinating aspects of fishing the Chesapeake Bay is the migratory pat-

Lynnhaven. I left the tag in and wrote the number down. When I received the paperwork on the history of that fish, he was tagged just under a year before in Lynnhaven, when the red was only 11 and a half inches.

Speckled trout are known to

gas, or late crew members. Just get in and go. The Chesapeake Bay watershed is made for kayak fishing.

LITTLE REDS

Whether you call them red drum, puppy drum, channel bass, spot tail bass, redfish or little reds, they are the most prevalent targeted fish in our backwaters. I simply call them reds; I feel it's insulting to call these awesome light tackle fighters, puppies. These are the little brothers of the big reds we wrestle with on the Eastern Shore. They fight exactly the same

marsh grass next to a deeper channel.

To combat the relentless reds, I use medium casting gear with 15 pound braided line. Depending on the structure I'm fishing around, pilings, rocks, or oysters, I'll use 20 to 30 pound fluorocarbon leader. Last year we had a lot of 16 to 18 inchers. This year, they have returned and grew to the low 20-inch size. Don't let the size fool you. A 22-inch red will pull you around and into the structure you hooked him in. You don't want to go with ultra-light gear. Many backwater kayakers this year have found themselves in surprisingly brutal fights with reds in the 30-inch class.

I use one type of bait for every inside fish. Berkley GULP! has revolutionized inshore fishing. I used to take a flounder rig and belly strips for flounder, bottom rigs and squid for croaker, cut mullet



terns of all of the fish. Speckled trout and little red drum are on their way out and south bound. It is harvest time, and the fish are fattening up to prepare for their travels south. How do I know there is a mass evacuation to the south when the water's cool? As a volunteer for the Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program, I have had some fantastic recaptures of the fish I have tagged and released. I have stuck tags in reds and specks on the move.

A local 14-inch red was recaptured four months later in Currituck sound. One little 9 inch was recaptured almost a year later in the back of the Pamlico Sound, and grew to 21 inches. Little reds can also move at an astonishing speed; a 15 inch ran from the Poquoson area to the Oregon Inlet in seven days. Some stay down south, but most come back to the Bay year after year. In Oct. 06 I tagged a 14 inch red at the HRBT. In June of 2007, Ric Burnley and I were fishing inside Lynnhaven. Ric recaptured that fish - he had grown to 19 inches. I caught a tagged 21 inch in

remain in the waters they are spawned in south of Cape Fear, spending their entire life in one body of water. But up in this latitude, they migrate like every thing else. A 19 inch tagged locally, was recaptured after eight months up the bay, off James Island State Park in MD. But the long distance champ is a 14-inch speck from Norfolk that was recaptured two months later in Wrightsville Beach, NC!

Since these inshore fish feed in inside places, there is no better time to be a kayak angler than the fall. In shallow backwaters, stealthiness is key. There is nowhere inside that a kayaker can't get to and quietly. With the days getting shorter, launching quickly equals more time on the water for those after-work afternoon sessions. Load the kayak on the vehicle the night before. As soon as you escape from work, drive down to your favorite inlet and throw your kayak on the beach. There's no waiting for an open spot on the ramp to launch, or to get

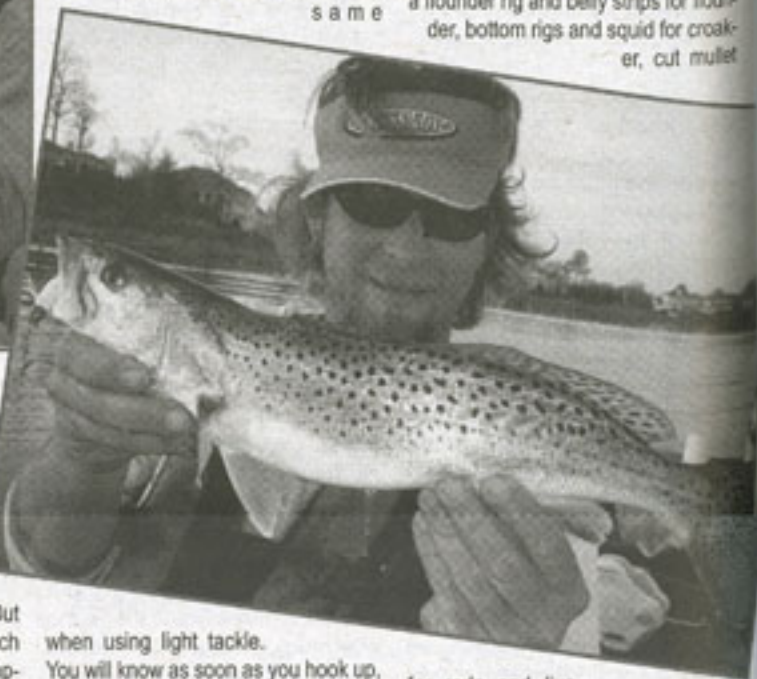
when using light tackle.

You will know as soon as you hook up, by their relentless runs, strong pull and head shakes. They never give up.

Reds are savvy predators, ready to ambush bait behind every and any structure in the water including pier pilings, submerged rocks, oyster beds, and jetty breakwaters. My favorite structure to fish for reds is marsh grass points. At high tide, reds patrol the edge of the submerged grasses flushing out small baitfish and grass shrimp. I cast right up against the grass, let the jig fall, twitch and bounce it a few feet from the edge. I reel back and repeat as I move down the grass edge. I thoroughly work every point sticking out. The best area to fish is

for reds and live minnow for specks. With GULP! I need is couple of bags and a few jig heads. GULP! is a simple plastic looking bait made in many different shapes from shrimp to crab, swimming minnow to squid. What sets it apart from other plastics is the scent that is ingrained into the material. It catches everything. Some anglers are complaining that it attracts too many fish.

I'll start out with the swimming mullet, which we call the curly tail. If a lot of croakers or spot are around nipping off the tails, I'll switch to the pogy style, commonly called the paddle tail. In shallow water, two to three feet, I



Get'em Before They're Gone

use a quarter ounce jig head. I'll use a three-eighths ounce in three to ten feet. In depths over ten feet I use a half-ounce jig head and bounce it across the bottom. I like to cast across or up current and retrieve it at a slow to moderate speed to let the sent of the GULP travel down stream.

SECRET SPECKS

Speckled trout have a serious air of secrecy about them. Their physical beauty alone renders an angler awestruck when holding an exotic speck. Maybe that adds to the quiet nature of a speck fisherman. Maybe it's because they are hard to find, but when you find them, you find a lot of them, and too much angling pressure can kill a speck spot. They can be skittish of noise and commotion, but not when you sneak to the spot in a kayak.

The secret code of the specks prevents me to tell you where the speck hot spots are, but I will tell you what kind of structures to look for. I find that specks will hold positions out and around a structure like a jetty or pier. I look for slews and holes where the specks will hide. It doesn't have to be deep. A shallow indentation is enough for specks to hunker down. The old adage 'if you find the bait you'll find the fish' holds true for specks. Underwater grassy areas that provide cover for baby croakers and spot are excellent fall speck haunts.

Although speckled trout are in the drum family they are different in the shape of their mouths. As Cory Routh explained last month, red and black drum, spot and croaker all have under set mouths; specks point up. When presenting my bait for drum, I'll bounce it across the bottom. When casting for specks, I keep it swimming. I use a quarter to three eighths ounce jig heads with the GULP swimming mullet, (curly tail). I swim the jig low in the water column, occasionally letting it drop to the bottom. I change color with the water clarity and light conditions. I like to use darker colors in clear water and bright light. In the evening, I switch to a bright natural color. In murky water I'll use chartreuse. I always use a contrasting colored jig head.

If finding them isn't challenging enough, keeping them hooked is the hardest fight. Their mouths are so fragile and paper thin that the hook

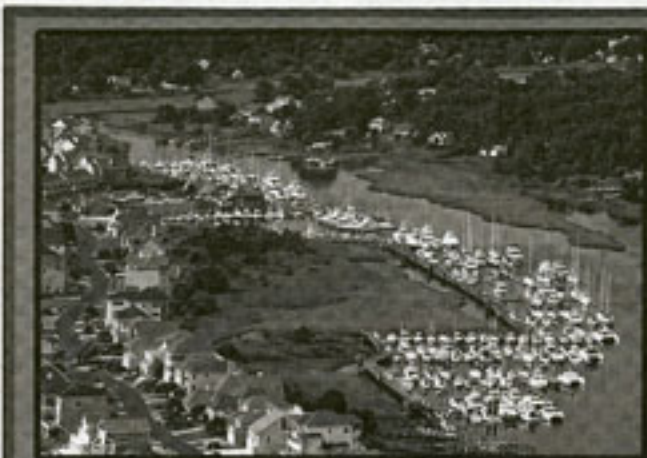
always falls out when the speck hits my plastic deck. I keep my drag set as loose as possible and use a flimsy bait casting rod. I fight them with a sensitive touch keeping light pressure. You'll know when you have a speck on the line by the head shakes. They don't run like reds, they'll make little sprints and a lot of head shaking. The most unnerving part of the fight to me is the surface shake. In the middle of the sketchy light touch fight, some specks will rise up to the top and shake their head completely out of the water. Without constant light pressure, this defensive tactic will throw the hook. I had a speck surface shake

from twenty yards out, frothing up the water all the way to my kayak. With a scoop of my leg, he's in the boat. I take a picture, stick a tag in its back and release him to be on his way down south.

When you catch one of the hundreds of reds and specks with orange tags poking out from its dorsal fin, if its legal size you can choose to keep it, and please report it to the VGFTP. The best thing to do is release it with the tag in place so we can possibly get multiple recaptures. Write the tag number down, punch it into your cell phone, or clip the tag in half. The tags have two sets of numbers. Call 757-491-5160 and answer a few questions, where, when, what, and the measurement. What you will receive

for your participation is the paperwork showing where the fish was tagged, a choice of a shirt, when in stock, hat, small tackle box or a cool fish pin of the species you caught. I feel that capturing a tagged fish is an added prize to an awesome day of kayak fishing.

Kayak Kevin Whitley is the first VA kayak angler to achieve expert saltwater angler status. He has completed multiple long distance solo kayak tours, including a 1,800 mile paddle from the panhandle of Florida to his home in Norfolk, VA. Kayak Fishing with Kayak Kevin is his guide service, specializing in kayak fishing the lower Chesapeake Bay. Kevin endorses Bending Branches paddles, JB custom rods and Aquaskinz outdoor gear. His web site is kayakkevin.com.



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