

Kayak Angling for Sheepshead

By Kayak Kevin Whitley

When I paddle out to the First Island, it's not for an afternoon; it's an all day event. Usually I spend 12 hours in my kayak, with nowhere to land and stretch my tired back. By mid July, when the water temperature hits 75 degrees and over, it's time to make the hour and a half pilgrimage for the angry little bruiser called the sheepshead.

What kayakers lack in speed and range on covering a lot of fishing spots, we make up in tenacity; thoroughly working every nook and cranny of the area we are committed to. My first sheep of the year hit after nearly 5 hours of no action, not even a nibble. But I was ready for the subtle bite; my arms spring loaded to set the hook at any time! There's no time to think. It's a sudden thump! The hook is set. For a split second it feels like a heavy oyster toad; then the wobble, which is the indication of a sheepshead. The anger sets in over the fish and he explodes into a terrifying line ripping run. There's no denying the signature fight. My line screams through the water up current under my kayak toward my anchor line. My rod tip was bowed under the water. I screamed, "woo hoo!" as I held on!

The sheepshead fight is insane. There is nothing like it in the Bay. They will always tear line from the tightest drag and bow doddle the stiffest rod. Hold on tight or you will see your rod torpedoing into the water. They don't fight vertically like a tog trying to escape into a hole. They rocket horizontally in any direction, often up current.

My adrenalin shot as the fish made his second run, pumping across the current; dangerously pulling my anchored kayak broadside. I usually drop my anchor rope to fallow, but the fight was so hectic, I did not want to take my hand off of my rod. My kayak

swung in the current in any direction the fish wanted to go.

Landing these angry armored rock dwellers in a kayak is a frightening challenge in itself. I had a moment of fear when the thought of having the thrashing razor blade and dagger armed fish in my lap. It's a knife fight in a telephone booth! I use my leg as a ramp and leader him in. Once landed, I immediately kick my legs over the sides and hold the leader and his head away from my bare legs and other sensitive regions. The 27 incher was my largest ever caught. Once he calmed down I was able to breathe.

Though the sheepshead is considered a new fishery in the Chesapeake Bay, they have been around for quite some time. A 19 pounder established the first state record in 1979. Sporadic accidental catches have gone on for years, usually by black drum fishermen using clams on the shoals in May. Divers have also reported seeing them all over the pilings of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Tunnel (CBBT). About 7 years ago, fishermen began targeting them. In 2001 a citation size was set at 5 pounds; today its 10 pounds, 24 inches for a release.

The ODU center for quantitative fisheries is in their second year of a three year study of the sheepshead to better understand the growth rate, age, sexual maturity, when and where they spawn. So far we know they are slow growers. Our citation size fish are 15-30 years old, and they are spawning around the CBBT islands.

We have some of the biggest sheepshead anywhere. Our state record is 20 pounds 12 ounces set by Arun Nhek. Its 8 ounces away from the world record of 21 pounds, 4 ounces caught in LA. We have a world-class sheepshead fishery!

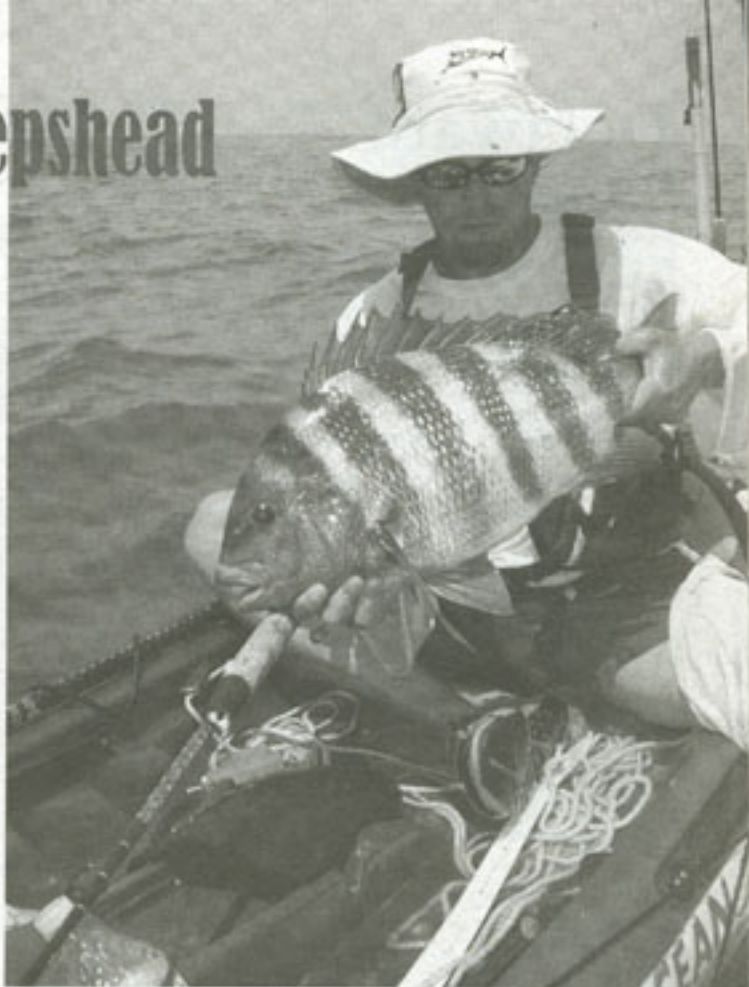


Photo by Ric Burnley.

My favorite place to fish for them is the First Island of the CBBT. It's three miles, and an hour and a half to get there. Any structure in the bay will hold them. I've heard of sheepshead caught at the Lesner Bridge at Lynnhaven, and even up Long Creek at the Great Neck bridges.

I use a short heavy rod customized by Jessy Buky (JB rods). He uses a carbon tubing butt piece that acts as a resonating chamber, essentially amplifying the sensitivity. The slightest nibble pops in my hands. I can even feel the fiddlers grab on to the rocks. I use 65 pound braid tied to a heavy barrel swivel and 50 pound fluorocarbon leader tied into a basic tog rig. I like the super sharp Owner cutting point hooks, 2/0 and 3/0 size.

Positioning the kayak is a tricky game. I use a kayak wreck anchor. It's basically a 20 ounce weight with thin steel rods sticking out the top and

one looped on the bottom. It works just like a rebar boat wreck anchor, but the rods are more flexible. It's easier to pull out of the rocks. Yanking on a jammed anchor, broadside to the ripping current is a step away from disaster!

Sheepshead are all around the islands and pilings of the CBBT. One day last year the water was crystal clear for about two hours. I could see them everywhere. Along with triggerfish and medium size spadefish. The sheepies were out and around the rocks, not like tautog that hide in the holes. I like to place the bait on the downside of a drop off, the east side of the tube on an outgoing current for example, or in an eddy of a big boulder along the side of the island.

Fiddler crabs are the prime bait and I take at least three dozen. Fiddlers are a one shot bait; if you miss, it's gone! There are a lot of other species that love fiddlers too; I take a

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minimum of five dozen when the baby black sea bass, croakers and oyster toads are hungry. Tautog, triggerfish along with the sheepies make what we affectionately call the island, or rock slam.

Limits of four per person were set this year. After the ODU study, I hope even stricter limits will be set to protect and grow our world-class fishery. I would like to see them put on a game fish status with limits of two per person with only one allowed over the 24 inch citation size, to protect the breeders. I believe we will break the world record through strict conservation of these slow growing, hard fighting fish. We still don't know what we have and we can't afford to loose these trophy class fish before we understand them. Sheepshead are too much fun to catch only once!

If you are up for a challenging, patience testing, tackle busting, adrenalin pumping battle, then paddle out anchor up and drop a fiddler and be ready for a fight like no other!

Be conservation minded, keep only a few. Just because the limit is four doesn't mean you have to kill your limit! Sheepshead should be sought after for their explosive battles. After all, the fight will last longer in your memory, than the meal in your belly! GET ON'EM!

Editors note: 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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