



Kayak Kevin releases a 43 inch drum.

## Wrestling with the Reds

By Kayak Kevin Whitely

Here I am sitting in the wide turbulent inlet between Fisherman Island and Smith Island on the Eastern Shore. My Ocean Kayak Drifter bobbing on my anchor in five feet of water. Four foot ocean swells breaking twenty feet away; rolling white water down the edge of the shoals. I am carefully keeping an eye on the waves and my ear on my rods, while targeting fish 3/4 the weight of my boat.

Unlike cobia kayak fishing, where we put out baits and take a nap, big bull red drum kayak fishing on the shoals requires 100 percent concentration, 100 percent of the time. Between the current, the breakers, and the constant critters, the shoals is the burliest place we fish for the burliest fish in the bay.

Every spring, from May into June, we anticipate the giant red drum migration into the bay. The waters around the lower Eastern Shore are a magnet for these monsters. The natural shore lines and untouched inlets are the perfect feeding ground for hungry red and black drum. The breaking waves on the Fisherman Island Shoals constantly churn, exposing crabs and other drum treats. The deeper slews that wind through the inlet are the highway the drum travel.

We don't paddle out with light tackle to wrestle with the reds. I use a heavy Jesse Buky (JB rods) custom rod to put

as much pressure on the fish as I can. I use 40lb braid and a fish finder slider sleeve with 2 to 5 ounces of weight and a 60 to 80lb leader snelled to a 8/0 circle hook. Everything is pre-rigged and in its own separate bag, ready for quick deployment. You can't catch 'em if you're tying rigs all day.

Peeler crabs are red drum candy. Hard crabs, menhaden chunks, and sea clams are effective as well. I always keep a bag or two of Gulp! peeler crab on board. It works! I caught a 30" black drum on Gulp! after running out of crabs.

The tide rips through the inlet. To hold in the sand, I use a scoop blade grapnel anchor. I like to fish the incoming tide in the late afternoon, although, I have caught my largest red, a 48 incher, at noon. Plus, an incoming tide will push you into the inlet if you get in trouble.

Medium size black drum also run these shoals; they vibrate the whole kayak when they drum under you. We also have to contend with dogfish (dogsharks) and rays the size of car hoods. Dogfish and rays will deplete your bait, tackle, and strength. I looked back at Lee Williams to see him wrestling the hook out of a 30 inch doggie with its tail repeatedly slapping him in the face.

Anchored into the waves, I pitch one bait toward the slew. I lob one into the

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white water. I back off the drag to free spool and put the rod in its holder with the clicker on. Reds take off with it so fast you will think your reel is going to explode, and clicker shrapnel will fly.

With circle hooks I slowly increase the drag, the hook works its way into the fish, and they're on. Exercise good drag control. In a boat, proper drag control keeps the fish from breaking off. In a kayak, proper drag control keeps the

fish from yanking you into the water.

I try to fight the fish to my kayak, get a positive identification, and drop my anchor rope to finish them off and land them. I have a crab pot buoy attached to my anchor line. Once free, I winch myself to him. In that shallow water, the rest of the fight is within 20 yards of my kayak. Reds have tried to pull me into the breaking waves. Luckily, they always turn to head for deeper water.

The most common question I've been asked is, "How do you land those big fish?" I use my legs. I call it the "scoop" - invented out of necessity when landing flounder, which are notorious for shaking the hook loose just as they get to the boat. I put my leg in the water, leader the fish between my leg and the kayak, and scoop them in. I only have to get the fish a couple inches out of the water and it's in my lap.

The big bull red fishery is catch and release. We move quickly to get the measurements, take the pictures, stick a tag for the VA game fish tagging program, revive and properly release them.

Without conservation efforts, we wouldn't have so many of these monsters to pick fights with. And we certainly wouldn't have the hundreds of little reds we catch year round.

Worn out and beat by the battling reds, you'll feel good paddling back, especially knowing you fished and survived the burliest place and landed the burliest fish from a kayak! Know your ability before you even think about it, but if you're up for a true test, paddle out and get on'em.

**Editors note:** Kayak Kevin Whitley is the first Virginia 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, Virginia. Kayak Fishing with Kayak Kevin is the name of 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 [www.kayakkevin.com](http://www.kayakkevin.com).



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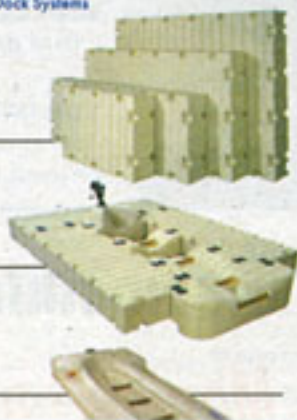
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