

WET FEAT

If you've blinked recently, you might not have noticed that kick boats, float tubes and kayaks are opening up a whole new world of bass-fishing access for bank-bound anglers.

by Andy Parsons

There comes a time in the lives of bass anglers when nothing short of getting off the bank will do.

Some will plunk down the coin on a tricked-out, top-of-the-line fiberglass rig. To those fortunate few, we tip our caps.

But there are many of us who are left high and dry because of tight budgets, lack of storage space or many other reasons. A float tube, kick boat or kayak might just be the ideal alternative.

There are several advantages these human-powered vessels offer. For one thing, you can safely launch them on

many waters. For another, float tubes and kick boats can be stored in a hallway closet. You could hang a kayak on the wall of an apartment or garage.

Strap them to the roof of your car or toss them into the bed of your pickup and you're good to go.

And, as far as cost, unless you're committed to angling on foot, you can't pursue this sport for much less money.

Although you can't run and gun from them, just about any other bassin' technique is fair game. In fact, there are anglers competing in the sport's upper echelons who attribute much of

their success to what they've learned through this up-close and personal approach to bass fishing.

FLOAT TUBES

Float tubes are nothing new. "Donut-style" models have been around for decades. But if you ever tried one of those old-school versions, you may have found they had serious drawbacks. It could be tough to get in and out of the water in them. You often moved at the pace of a tortoise, and your back and posterior often paid a steep price for a few hours

of recreation.

Today's float tubes offer tough nylon covers that resist punctures. Back rests serve as flotation bladders for added safety, and multiple storage pockets are roomy enough for small tackle boxes.

U-boats have become popular alternatives to the round models. Their main advantage is they make entering and ex-

iting the water easier. Whichever you choose, a flotation cushion strapped to the seat improves comfort and raises you a few vital inches out of the water, which eases casting without sacrificing stability.

KICK BOATS

Probably the biggest innovation over the last decade in the world of float tubing has been the emergence of kick

boats. These pontoon-style rigs allow anglers to fish with only their feet in the water. You stay drier and warmer and get better casting angles. Heck, you can even pitch from these things. Plus, the addition of oars permits much faster travel than with fins alone. With large storage pockets and back decks behind the seats, anglers can carry plenty of gear. (Continued)



The most innovative float product of the last decade has to be the pontoon-style kick boat. You stay drier and warmer and get better casting angles. You can even pitch from these things. Photo by Mike Ayers.

KAYAKS

If the thought of being partly submerged while fishing just doesn't fire your engines, consider a kayak. Most bass anglers opt for the sit-on-top varieties. They're lightweight, fast and stable. With some simple modifications, they can accommodate a full array of tackle. You can cover some decent mileage in them, and they only require a draft of a few inches of water. Kayaks will let you access backwaters that boats and even float tubes have difficulty navigating.

ESSENTIAL ADDITIONS

If you want to give float tubing a try, there are a few additional items you're going to need.

- **Waders.** Neoprenes were standard for years, and they still work well, especially in water colder than 50 degrees. Most tubers, however, have found they prefer breathables. They're lighter, cooler on warm days, provide greater freedom of movement, and don't chafe as much.

- **Fins.** They are necessities even if you opt for a kick boat with oars. They allow the pinpoint positioning and fine maneuvering that are key to making this approach effective. Although some float-tube packages include them, many anglers upgrade to dive fins or Force Fins, which are made specifically for float tubing. They can increase your speed and make paddling more efficient.

- **Modifications.** You'll want to customize your rig so you can carry as much of your treasured gear as possi-

ble. Fortunately, self-propelled aficionados have devised innovative ways to carry enough extras to satisfy even the most die-hard of gear freaks.

Rod racks are easy to strap to float tubes using nylon webbing and side-release buckles. They'll also readily attach to the rear decks of kick boats. You can make your own out of PVC pipe or buy off-the-shelf editions from companies such as West Marine and Bass Pro Shops.

Depthfinders are also easily installed, particularly models like Humminbird's Fishin' Buddy.

Small, soft-sided lure binders can be added by the D-rings, and tackle bags fit nicely on a kick boat's rear deck.

Kayakers, too, have found innovative ways to bring along extra goodies, including strapping milk crates behind their seats for stashing tackle boxes and installing rod racks.

INFLATABLE ADVANTAGES

What's suitable water for a float tube? Perhaps a better question would be, "What isn't?"

Farm ponds are great choices and are especially kind to beginners. You'll usually have the water to yourself. The bass are typically plentiful and uneducated, and they're great places to get your chops down as far as casting and maneuvering your rig.

Many cities and counties maintain parks with lakes of up to 100 acres or more. Often they have only limited shore access and strict horsepower limits. Those who can venture onto their waters have huge advantages over bank-bound anglers and little competition from bass boaters.

Some rivers and large streams are prime kayak water, and they may even be OK for float tubes. They can be tremendously scenic, their bass (usually smallies) are acrobatic and aggressive, and once their steelhead and salmon runs conclude, they tend to be underfished.

One of the surprising things about float tubing is how successfully it can be plied from what are traditionally considered big-time tournament waters. Many of our premier lakes have ample shore access, and plenty of hotspots close to launch areas — you won't have to put in hours of tedious finning or rowing.

For some anglers, float tubing has



In a kick boat, float tube or kayak, you won't be able to run and gun like the \$30,000 rigs can. But you can do about any other style of fishing there is, and for a lot less! Photo by Mike Ayers.

proved to be a gateway to bigger and better things.

Angler Chris Zaldain fished out of a kick boat for six years, many times while competing in tournaments organized by the organization Bass-n-Tubes. The 24-year-old won the amateur side of the 2005 BASS Western Open held at Clear Lake, Calif. He took home an 18 1/2-foot Triton in the bargain. From there, he turned pro and used his new boat to attain three Top 20 finishes in the 2007 FLW National Guard Western Series.

"Some of the things I learned in a kick boat — like to keep chucking a BaitSmith SwimBait — really paid off," Zaldain said. "It teaches you to slow down and pick things apart."

Zaldain also said he enjoyed being eye level with bass.

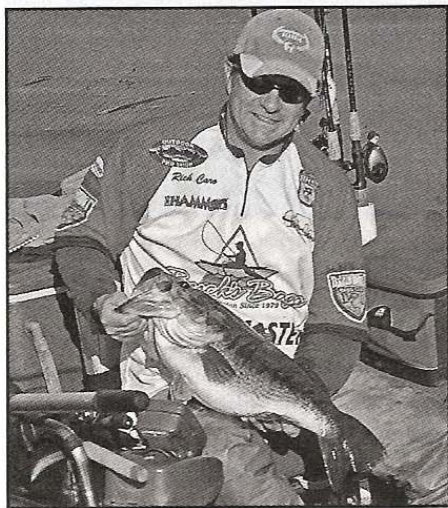
"I'm in their territory, on the water and right with the fish," he said. "And it's a lot less expensive way to learn. You don't have to spend \$150 on gas and oil to catch a bass."

Few Western co-anglers have enjoyed more success than Pat Wilson. He won more than \$160,000 in cash and prizes from the back of the boat in BASS and FLW events. He, too, cut his competitive fishing teeth in tournaments.

Wilson has kept his approach deliberately simple, sticking with a round boat and carrying only two or three Powell rods with him when he journeys onto the water.

He said "belly boating" has helped him win, as anglers have to be more methodical and thorough because they can't cover a lot of water.

"You tend to fish slower as a tuber, and on bigger waters, you'll also be



Rich Caro shows the result of using a pontoon boat for bass fishing. Photo by Mike Ayers.

fishing behind bass boats. So, you fish more thoroughly, become more versatile, and that boosts your confidence,” he said. “You realize you really can catch fish behind others, which is what you’re usually trying to do as a co-angler.”

THE KAYAK CONNECTION

Angler Gordon Rydquist has found kayaking to be a great way to pursue bass. He fishes out of a 12-foot sit-on-top Hobie Mirage Outback that sports pedals and weighs about 60 pounds.

The pedals only propel him forward but not backward, so he still needs an oar for backing up and getting in and out of the water. The oar also helps him get through thick weeds or extremely shallow water.

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Rydquist’s molded polyethylene Hobie has a rudder that he controls with the boat’s tiller.

“Pedals let you keep your hands free for casting,” said Rydquist. “Trying to get around with just an oar would be like trying to use a hand-controlled trolling motor versus a foot-controlled one.”

Rydquist lists the advantages kayaks offer: “They’re quiet and unobtrusive. I enjoy photography, and I can get very close to birds like herons that would otherwise be spooked. Also, they’ll float in as little as 1 to 2 inches of water. You can fish lakes with little or no boat access, and I’ve covered up to nine miles roundtrip in my kayak.”

For more details about bass fishing from one of these rigs, Rydquist recommends www.ncka.org, a site dedicated to all things related to kayak angling. □