

WindPaddle Kayak Sail



photos by Nick Wiltz

There are plenty of good reasons to rig a kayak with a sail. The most obvious is speed. In winds of ten knots or more, most kayakers would be hard pressed to keep up with a kayak sailing downwind, even if the chasing paddler is an accomplished chop hopper willing to soak up the sweat that fast, downwind paddling requires. As he or she grunts and accelerates off each wave, the kayak under sail scuds along, always one boat length ahead.

On longer trips and expeditions, a sail can be a valuable addition for more reasons than speed. If bad weather delays you and the next leg of the trip is downwind, you can rig the sail and off you go, easily making up with speed the time you lost. In this scenario, the advantages of a sail multiply because you've got free hands—to make a VHF radio or satellite phone call, run the GPS, read relative angles or angles-off-the-bow to keep track of where you are and where you're going, eat a sandwich, run the desalinator, or set up the solar charger, etc.

There are lots of kayak sail rig options out there, ranging from the complex to the simple. Some—most often affixed to doubles owned by outfitters—have semi-permanent aluminum masts stationed amidships with a sloop's recognizable right triangle sail. Other sails are simple, free-floating affairs akin to tarps, several metres square, often sent aloft by a lashed pod of kayaks and with lines at each corner attached to paddles. The sail hovers above the kayaks like a cloud, pulling the pod along. (Here's a link to a video of one of these sails in action: <http://paddlingtravelers.blogspot.com/2007/10/sailing-four-kayak-pod.html>)

Finally, there are single-kayak foredeck-rigged sails. These are typically V-shaped, with wishbone masts holding a rigid sail aloft—a sort of upside-down wedge, jutting up from the foredeck and resembling two fingers making a peace sign inside a sandwich bag. Sometimes those masts, small as they might be (about the length and stiffness of a two-piece paddle) are somewhat unwieldy. They have to be stored when not in use, tend to clutter the deck, and need to be lashed down. (Here's a link to one of those sails in action: <http://paddlingtravelers.blogspot.com/2007/12/sailing-kayak-solo.html>)

Rudder control on such sailed kayaks is optional; the majority require little more than a paddle deployed bow-rudder or low-brace turn style for steering. Still another type uses fixed rudders and larboards, and can be sailed both across and upwind, effectively turning the kayak into a sailboat, a style seen mostly on folding kayaks like Fölbots and Kleppers.

Nick Wiltz, who lives in the kiteboarding/sailboarding mecca of Hood River, Oregon, has come up with a new design, the WindPaddle, that solves many of the problems associated with kayak sails—the bulk, the hassles of foredeck storage, the overbig presence—in a unique way. His sail, like any kayak sail useful in wind ranging from moderate to fresh, requires mast support. His take on the mast, though, is a circular loop, configured from stiff but flexible, virtually unbreakable plastic.

Having attached the packed WindPaddle to your foredeck lines, when it's time to sail, you slip the figure-eight-shaped rig from its mesh bag, untie the questionably designed compression strap (more on that later), and let go. The sail pops open like a

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sapling released from a stake in the ground. That's it. Grasp the sail's sheets, which double as stays, and you're sailing.

Sailors have a couple of tactics for dealing with gusts: shift weight to windward (not very easy in a kayak) or ease the sheets. Because the WindPaddle's mast is made of flexible plastic, it has great tolerance for gusts. If the wind is strong, the mast bends, spilling air so you never lose control of the sail. When the gust subsides, the mast straightens. Nice.

In tests on a local lake well known here in Massachusetts for its gustiness, the WindPaddle worked just fine. Running downwind, overall speed was impressive: about 5.5 knots, 6.0 in sustained gusts. When the wind topped out at about 18 knots and thicker whitecaps leapt up around the kayak, the mast bent, spilling the gust.

The WindPaddle is also unique in that it's the only foredeck sail I've seen that's round rather than wedge or diamond shaped. The result is a sail lower to the foredeck yet wider than most. To deal with the inevitable visibility problems that arise from a sail on the foredeck, the center of the WindPaddle is made of the same clear plastic that speckles the luffs and feet of sailboat racing sails. Overall construction is quite good: strong, durable nylon stitches that encase the circular mast with fat seams, and extra stitching at stress points. Nick comes from an area where high performance Dacron and Mylar sails have been designed for decades, and his attention to sail making shows: no loose threads, extra fabric at stress points, rip-stop nylon, flat seams, sledged edges. This is a sail that will last as long as its owner, with the caveat that, like all sail fabrics, it will weaken if left exposed to sunlight for too long.

The sail does have some quirks that will vex a new owner. Although the sail is easy to deploy, thanks to its coiled mast, recoiling it is wholly counterintuitive. You want to bend the mast but can't. Instead, you twist it. Unfortunately Nick's in-package support materials are lacking: a few hard-to-follow photos and some perfunctory text that does a poor job of explaining that the trick to putting the sail back into the bag is to twist it. I had to call Nick for instructions, watch the online video (www.windpaddle.com/stowing_sail.htm), then ask my girlfriend Yvonne, who has a lot of experience dealing with biases in fabric, to get the trick down. Turns out all it takes is a simple twist of the wrists, like coiling a rope, but that twist isn't easy to figure out. Do it right, though, and you end up with a sail and mast that fit neatly into a mesh bag about the size of a newspaper. That trick of coiling, not bending, took me over two hours to discover.

A final quirk is that the sail's compression strap, a short nylon cord, goes flying off into the air, and overboard, like a spring from a broken capstan, as soon as you release it. And without that compression strap, keeping the sail compressed while you coil its mast is like trying to hold together two giant magnets pointed the wrong way at each other.

Anyone who wants to improve their kayaking should give kayak sailing a try, and perhaps for reasons more valuable than fast downwind running. Sailing is a miles-burner, but it is also a fine way to observe and anticipate the changes in wind speed and direction that affect the waters we paddle. Wind exerts the largest influence on sea conditions; it generates most of the swell, waves and rough water we learn to savor or avoid. Learn to sail your kayak and you'll become that much more adept at reading the wind's power and its particular seasonal trends and quirks in your paddling area. With Nick's reasonably-priced sail (under \$200 US) standing in as tutor, you'll learn how to assess, read, and anticipate what those winds are up to, and thus too the sea state you're sure to encounter.

www.windpaddle.com

Colors: Blue/White/Blue, Red/White/Red

MSRP: \$165 (Adventure Mark II) [↓](#)

Nick's Note

The new model of our product (called the WindPaddle Adventure Mark II) will be released in late January 2008. Adam tested the WindPaddle Adventure Mark I. There are several significant improvements to the design, including the elimination of the detached compression strap and the attached paddle pocket/bag.

The WindPaddle Adventure Mark II comes with an attached strap that won't fly off, and which simply loops around the coiled sail rather than compressing it. This design improvement is much easier and more convenient to use than the compression strap of the Mark I.

The WindPaddle Adventure Mark II also comes with a much larger window with a new horizontal orientation for an increased wide-angle field of vision. Expanded color choices and a lighter overall weight are also new improvements. We'll retain the Mark I model for those who also want to fly the sail like the "Sport" model from the blade of a paddle, but for most users, the WindPaddle Adventure Mark II is clearly the model to own!

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