

Outdoors

Kayak fishing is rapidly growing popular

BY WILL WOODBERY
STAFF WRITER

On a hot Sunday afternoon, Bucky Schoocraft trolled the murky waters of Lookout Lake on Lookout Mountain, casting his line as a slight breeze sent his craft drifting slowly amid fallen tree limbs poking above the surface.

There, with rod in hand, he patiently waited, but with little success.

The fish weren't taking the bait.

Still, the Chickamauga resident held out hope.

"There's some really big fish in here," Schoocraft said. "But they can be caught. I've caught 'em before."

He wasn't too surprised he was coming up empty.

"It's hard to find fish at this time of day," he explained as he surveyed the blue sky, his voice echoing across the water. "But as soon as a cloud goes over, they'll bite instantly."

At least one eventually did, a largemouth bass — a small victory in less than ideal conditions.

The real accomplishment was that Schoocraft could navigate the shallow water — as low as 18 inches in some spots.

Schoocraft, a Chattanooga native who competed in bass tournaments for 25 years, got hooked on kayak fishing four years ago.

"You put a kayak in there and you're catching fish that haven't seen a lure their entire lives," he said. "You're accessing waters that people just have not accessed."

He's a representative for NuCanoe, one of more than 90 companies in an increasingly competitive kayak fishing market. There are an estimated 113 participants in North America.

"Once you do it, you get away from the crowds, and it's so peaceful. It's fun," Schoocraft said. "You catch a big fish and it tows you around. You're right there face to face with it."

More and more fishermen are experiencing similar close encounters.

"Kayak fishing has been the fastest growing segment of the paddle sports industry for the last few years," Tim Shuff, editor of *Kayak Angler*, wrote in an e-mail response. "Part of the reason for this is the base of people who already fish is enormous, over 100 million. A small per-



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Bucky Schoocraft enjoys the maneuverability and ease of navigation he achieves fishing from a kayak.

centage of these people getting into kayaks represents growth like nothing the paddling industry has ever seen before."

Shuff said many fishermen are attracted to kayak fishing's relative affordability, among other perks.

"It's a less expensive and more adventurous way to fish," Shuff noted. "It brings the fun back into the sport to be able to access small, secluded waterways and fish at water level in a completely self-contained craft that you can carry on the roof of a car or in the back of a pickup and launch anywhere."

Michelle Wall can attest to the increased popularity.

"It's got a lot of local people fired up and out there," said Wall, the lead consultant and casting instructor of Feather & Fly Sporting Traditions in Chattanooga. Wall attributed kayak fishing's spike in popularity to an influx in new designs that make the fishing experience easier.

"We all want to get out and we want to fish, and all of us love being in the water. But it wasn't always easy to get there," she said. "That prompts us to get out and find (new kayak models), so we're not land-

locked but out on the water to fish, which is the main purpose. If you're over here and the fish are over there, you're able to get where they are."

Companies such as NuCanoe are facilitating that process by providing crafts with better stability, which equates to fewer unwanted turnovers, a common problem with traditional kayaks and canoes.

"You can stand up in it," Wall said. "That's probably the latest, greatest thing — that you can actually stand up in it. With canoes, you can stand up in them, but you better be careful not to fall out or to dunk the canoe. We've all done it. I speak for myself."

Wall added that the lower profile on NuCanoe models diminishes wind resistance to the sides of the craft, thus reducing the chance of a cap-sized kayak.

An avid fly "fishergal," Wall said she has benefited from the advances in kayaks geared toward fishing, including raised seats.

"You've got to have room to cast, and you don't want your fly line to drop in the water before you can get it out where you need it to go. So you're sitting a

little higher up and you can put that to use," she said.

Schoocraft knows the importance of having a higher seat while fishing. He sought out a model with that specific feature after arthritis in his back and hip became too much of a nuisance. He needed a craft that would cut down on the aggravation, but he was set on continuing to use a kayak as his preferred transportation when fishing.

A traditional kayak, with its seat basically at water level, was not good for his ailment.

"In wintertime especially, I would hurt so bad getting out of one of those traditional kayaks that it would just kill me," Schoocraft said. "I wanted to stay in a kayak, but I wanted something that was better suited for me."

That turned out to be the NuCanoe, a canoe-kayak hybrid designed by Tim Niemier, who is credited with pioneering the sit-on-top kayak movement. The NuCanoe's seat is raised about seven inches above the fisherman's feet, a feature that immediately won over Schoocraft.

Now he tries to win over others unfamiliar with kayak fishing.

"I tell people, if you don't want to become addicted to it, don't do it," he said. "That's all there is to it."

E-mail Will Woodbery at sports@timesfreepress.com