

Skills Article: Paddle Float Reentry

by Paula Hubbard

Every sea kayaker needs to be able to recover from a capsize in deep water without assistance. This is especially important if you are paddling alone, but even in group situations, it may be necessary to get back into the kayak without assistance. In calm water it may be easy to simply climb back in, but once you get into rougher water, it may be necessary to have a method that stabilizes the boat while you get back in. One method of doing this is the paddle float reentry.

Following a capsize, the paddler should remain calm and perform a wet exit while holding onto both the boat and paddle. Holding onto the kayak is critical. Even light winds can quickly separate the paddler from the boat, a possible disaster especially if you are alone.

Paddle Floats

The purpose of the paddle float is to provide stability while reentering the boat. When inflated and attached to one end of the paddle, it serves as an outrigger. There are several types of paddle floats that can be used, and each has pros and cons. The important thing is to select a float that will provide adequate buoyancy to support your weight in rough water. The two typical options are foam slabs that can be attached to the paddle or an inflatable sleeve that fits over the paddle. Foam floats are easy to position, but may not have adequate buoyancy for larger paddlers and are difficult to store. Inflatable paddle floats can be either single or double chamber. Double chamber inflatable paddle floats tend to provide the greatest buoyance when both chambers are inflated and redundancy in case one chamber fails. Regardless of the type of float, it should be accessible, but secure so that it does not float away following a capsize and wet exit.

Test your gear at the time of purchase and re-test frequently; leaks happen and can render an inflatable paddle float useless. Make sure that the paddle float you select can be positioned over the blade of your paddle and secured. You should also make sure that you can't sink your float with your body weight.

Getting Back into the Kayak

After you wet exit, make sure you are holding on to your boat and paddle. Leave the boat upside down, and put one leg into the cockpit to keep the boat with you. This keeps the boat secure while leaving your hands free to set up the paddle float.

1. Retrieve your paddle float and secure it to one end of your paddle. It is critical that the float is secured to the paddle blade and that it cannot come loose during the reentry process. Securing the float to Greenland paddles is especially important since the blades are so narrow. Inflatable paddle floats behave like balloons in wind and quickly vanish.
2. Inflate the float. If you have a double chamber float, inflating both chambers can help secure the float to the paddle.
3. Turn your boat right side up. The easiest place to do this is at the cockpit. Hold your paddle under your arm and put one hand on each side of the cockpit. Push up on the side closest to you while pulling the far side towards you. Do this quickly to minimize the amount of water that you scoop into the cockpit.
4. Position the paddle shaft behind the cockpit right next to the coaming and use one hand to keep the paddle shaft jammed against the coaming during the entire re-entry. a. The paddle should be perpendicular to the boat, with the paddle float itself about four feet away from the side of the boat. b. Position yourself behind the paddle shaft. You are now ready to start getting back into your boat.



Paula demonstrates the paddle float self rescue: hook a knee over the paddle shaft

5. The goal of the first move is to get your belly centered on the back deck. Let your legs float to the surface, and if necessary hook one knee or ankle over the shaft of the paddle to give yourself a boost up.



Move the leg closest to the bow into the cockpit

6. Once you are on the back deck the next step is to get back into the cockpit, legs first. Always have a leg, an arm or a hand on the paddle shaft to keep the paddle perpendicular to the boat. Allowing the float to slide towards the boat reduces the effectiveness of the outrigger. Move slowly and keep your body as low as possible. a. Move the leg closest to the bow of the boat into the cockpit, keeping the other leg on the float to maintain the paddle position perpendicular to the boat. b. Begin to rotate your body so that you start to face the stern of the boat. As you do this, reach around to grab the paddle

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shaft with your hand to support the paddle float and prevent the float from sliding toward the boat when you put your second leg into the cockpit. c. As you work your legs into the cockpit, keep your weight shifted toward the paddle float. If you look straight down, your head should be over the water on the side of the float.

7. When both legs are in the cockpit, rotate toward the paddle float, keeping your weight on the paddle shaft until you are sitting in the cockpit.
8. Move the paddle from its position behind the cockpit to your lap. Stabilize the paddle outrigger by using your forearms to press the paddle shaft down onto the coaming in front of you while you use the pump to remove the water. Keep the float on the paddle until you have pumped the cockpit, put your spray skirt on the cockpit coaming, and feel stable in your boat.

Now that you are back in, you should make sure that you are able to remove and stow the paddle float and to paddle without capsizing again. While stowing your float, keep your paddle extended across the coaming in front of you like an outrigger, one blade in the water and one hand or forearm on the shaft; this will give you some support even without a float. If in doubt, keeping the paddle float inflated and on the paddle may be a good idea. It is difficult to paddle with the float attached, but if it is the only thing that prevents another capsize, keep it on. In this case, a call for help may be advisable.

Like all skills, the paddle float reentry requires practice, not only in flat water but in rougher conditions. Go out with friends and play with different techniques until you feel comfortable getting back in your boat.

Paula started kayaking about 8 years ago in the San Francisco Bay area. She received her initial ACA L3 Instructor's certification from Roger Schumann in 2008. Since moving to Maryland in 2010, Paula has been active with CPA as an instructor for SK 101, SK 102 and trip



Keep your weight shifted toward the paddle float as you work your legs into the cockpit



Rotate towards the paddle float, keeping your weight on the paddle shaft

REVIEWER'S COMMENTS

Rick Wiebush: Paula's article provides an extremely clear and accurate step-by-step description of the paddle float re-entry. I completely agree that mastering this skill in both flat and rough water is really important for all paddlers. I would just like to add a couple of comments about some variations that people use on the basic method Paula describes.

Some kayaks have straps on the rear deck right behind the cockpit that are designed specifically to facilitate a paddle float re-reentry. After the paddle float is attached to one blade and inflated, the other blade can be placed snugly underneath the purposed straps. Very tight bungee lines or even the deck lines can also serve this purpose. This addresses the problem that many people have of holding the paddle shaft against the coaming (it's hard to do) and keeping the paddle shaft perpendicular to the boat. The drawback to this approach is that you can create a lot of instability when you are back in your boat and reach behind you to try to pull the paddle back out from under the lines.

Another variation involves the swimmer positioning him/herself right next to the cockpit and *in front* of the paddle float set up. From here, they jump up at an angle on to their back deck and pin the paddle shaft to the deck with their chest. They can then use their chest and one hand to hold the paddle shaft in place. Due to the angle of their body, their feet and legs are already pointing toward the front of the boat and can be quickly placed into the cockpit. The key phrase here though is "jump up onto their back deck". Many people cannot do that and need to have a leg on the paddle shaft to give them an extra boost.

Other variations include the use of a sling/stirrup and the paddle float heel hook re-entry, both of which could be the subject of another article.

Mike Hamilton: Performing a paddle float re-entry and emptying your kayak can be exhausting work, especially if it takes several attempts and you are cold. Chances are good that you were already tired when you capsized. Consider the pros and cons of different kinds of pumps which may save energy or speed up the rescue. Hand pumps are versatile and inexpensive but require at least one hand to operate and can leave your arms tired. Foot pumps are expensive and take longer to empty the kayak but use the larger leg muscles and keep your hands free to paddle while pumping. Electric pumps are fast and effortless but rely on battery power which may fail.

If your kayak design allows for it, stow your paddle float and pump below deck in the cockpit. This keeps them in easy reach, out of the way and protected when not in use. Gear stored under bungees on the deck may get washed away and not be there when you need it. The pump can be mounted under the deck, and the float can be stored next to or behind the seat. Never store critical safety gear in the fore or aft hatches; opening the large hatches on the water will compromise the floatation of the kayak.

In high winds, position yourself on the windward side of the kayak (the kayak is downwind from you and your paddle float outrigger points into the wind). Your legs will trail to the surface instead of sliding under the kayak, and the paddle float will do a better job of keeping perpendicular to the kayak. As you keep weight on the paddle float, you will be able to lean into the wind for some support. When upwind of your kayak, be extra careful to hold on to it at all times!