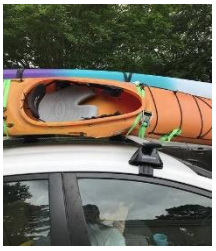
The Hooks of Doom

Bow and stern tiedowns are an essential safety feature when transporting a canoe or kayak. Used properly they will ensure that your boat and even your rack will stay with the car in the event of a rack failure or accident. You don't want your kayak to become an unguided missile endangering other people or causing property damage, not to mention damaging or destroying your boat and car. Most all reputable rack manufacturers now include bow and stern tiedowns with their saddles or J-bars. In addition, if you read their use and installation instructions, the use of these tiedowns is normally required for warranty coverage. Warranty coverage may include not only the rack and saddles or J-bars, but damage to your kayak, car, or other property as well. Tiedowns will reduce the movement of your kayak caused by crosswinds, turbulence from other vehicles, and rough roads. All of these can cause repetitive stress on rack components that may lead to a catastrophic failure. Of note here are cheap J-racks that often fail at the junction of the base and J-rack.

There is one major problem with bow and stern tiedowns, whether purchased as an add-on or included with some rack systems. That is the presence of open hooks. If one of these hooks

comes loose, especially on the bow where it is hooked to an undercarriage tow eye, it can easily be caught by a tire. In an instant the bow of your boat will be bent down to the windshield. A plastic boat can suffer irreparable distortion, a Kevlar or carbon/Kevlar boat will suffer extreme damage to the gelcoat and epoxy, and a fiberglass or carbon fiber boat may have the bow break off entirely. The bow of the boat can also break the windshield. If a stern tiedown comes loose it can drag and bounce down the road possibly catching in a tire. A bow tiedown attacked to hood loops can flail about damaging the car.



Most boats and racks will flex and bounce a bit on a rack, especially longer boats. This is normal and reduces stress on the rack and its components. If you look at the hooks, from the end of the hook to the bottom of the curve, often less than an inch, that is all that is keeping the hook secured. That's all of the distance the bow or stern of the boat will have to move before there is a good chance of it coming loose. Keep in mind that you only want the straps and tiedowns to be snug, not too tight. Overtightening can cause oil canning in plastic boats and gelcoat and hull damage in composite boats.

Fortunately, there are tiedowns that do not use open hooks like these from Malone that use a secure carabiner. Oddly, Thule seems to now offer tiedowns with a carabine at one end and an open hook on the other. Other manufacturers offer a range of tiedowns, some with open hooks and some without. What can you do if you have one on these open hooks of doom? In some cases, you can simply untie the hooks and replace them with a more secure fastener. There is a wide selection of secure fasteners to choose from. Whatever fasteners you use be sure to use brass or stainless. If it uses a spring-loaded clip, be certain that it is rated for marine use. If the spring fails due to corrosion, it's just an open hook.

However, if you already have a tiedown with an open hook there is usually a solution where you do not have to replace the tiedown. I have found that these open hooks are very strong, but with enough force can be bent to form a closed loop without breaking or cracking. This can be a bit difficult. While you could possibly accomplish this with a hammer, it is much easier to do using a heavy bench vise. Not everyone will have access to a vise, but if you ask at the place where you have our car serviced, they will likely be willing to do this for free. It only takes a minute. There is a very small risk that the hook will show signs of breaking. If it does, do not use it.

An example of the open hook being formed into a loop on the left. This is on a stern tiedown and the colored straps take the place of a flag and are about three feet long. A stainless quick link joins the brass hook to the tiedown.

A strap with an open hook coming loose and caught by a tire is not as rare as you would think. It's happened to a couple of our more experienced members fairly recently, essentially totaling their Kevlar kayaks.