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SEPTEMBER 2005

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AN ANGLER'S
TRUE TALE
P. 14

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An angler rigs
his kayak for a
day of fishing off
the Baja Coast.



Big-game
kayak fishing
is angling
at its most
exciting –
and terrifying.

BY T. EDWARD
NICKENS

FOR PADDLING BILLET FISH

SHING





Jim Sammons's first kayak-caught marlin takes him for a ride.

"Kayakos! Kayakos! Quick-quick!" Alonso yelled in a fury of Spanish and English and wild arm movements meant to simulate paddling. Somewhere ahead, he had spotted a tailing Pacific striped marlin.

Following our panga captain's orders, three of us leapt to the panga deck and wrestled our kayaks into the water a few miles off Baja's Cabo Pulmo. "Fish! There! Quick-quick!" Alonso hollered. I grabbed a handheld VHF and a seven-foot trolling rod armed with a foot-long live mackerel and a 14/0 hook, then dropped overboard into a sit-on-top kayak. The other two anglers were already in the water, paddles flashing, lines trailing 70 feet behind them, pitching in a two-foot slop. We set up a dragnet, three abreast and 100 feet apart, then thrashed into wind and whitecaps and blue water. Somewhere close was a striped marlin that could easily go ten feet long and 350 pounds. Suddenly, I wasn't so sure I wanted to do this.

I found myself in this predicament because of a particular photograph of a kayak-fishing guide named Jim Sammons. Sammons is a fireplug of a man, heavily muscled, fond of raw fish and wasabi and tank tops. Most days he can be found guiding clients in San Diego Bay, pounding spotted Bay bass, halibut, sand bass and thresher sharks. But for four weeks out of the year, Sammons guides big-game kayak-fishing trips out of La Riberia, Mexico. The targets: big roosterfish, big dolphin, jack crevalle, yellowtail, tuna, pargo and, yes, striped marlin and sailfish.

In the photograph Sammons sits in an ice-blue kayak, looking over his right shoulder, directly at the camera. He is 20 miles off the coast of Baja.

The wake behind his boat suggests that he is moving, but he has no paddle. Instead, he is holding a fishing rod, bent in a deep arc. The rod tip points to a shadow in the blue water. It is the familiar outline, dark and ominous, of a marlin hell-bent for leather. After a two-and-a-half hour "Baja sleigh ride," complete with 30 to 40 leaps, Sammons landed the fish — a 120-pound Pacific striped marlin. It was only the second marlin ever landed by a kayak fisherman.

When I saw the photograph, I had two thoughts: Is it really possible to target a giant fish from a sea kayak? And: I really wanted to find out.

BLUEWATER KAYAKING

Sea-kayak fishing has exploded along all three salt coasts, but there's nothing quite like a Sea of Cortez kayak trip. We met each morning at 7 a.m. on the beach below the palm trees fronting Hotel Punta Colorado, an hour's drive from the Cabo San Lucas airport. There were five fishermen, including myself. One angler, Teresa

RIGGED FOR THE BLUE WATER

Baja guide Jim Sammons knows what it takes and what you need to catch big fish in big water from a tiny boat.

1 GET COMFORTABLE: Should you hook into a big fish, the fight can last for hours.

Sammons outfits clients with a seat cushion and backrest that offer maximum comfort and support all day. He also recommends sit-on-top kayaks for maneuverability.

2 HIGH AND DRY: For rod holders, Sammons suggests rocket-launcher models over flush-mounted holders.

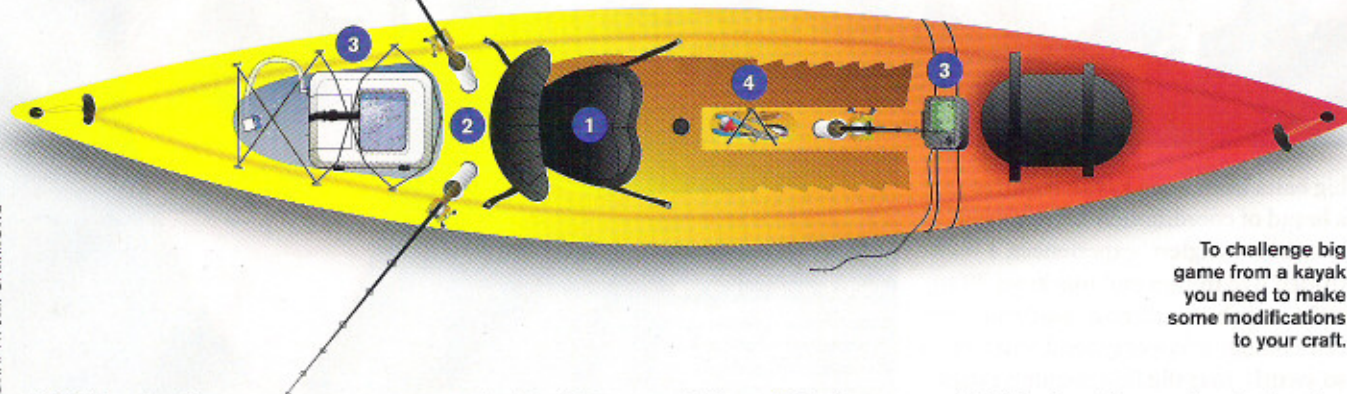
Rocket launchers keep rods and reels elevated higher, which reduces contact with salt water. When trolling, he rigs flat-line clips on the ends of his rocket launchers to keep lines off the kayak.

3 EXTRA EYES: A compact fishfinder and a kayak-friendly bait well filled with live

bait will give you an edge in the open ocean.

4 MAKE THE CUT: If a heavy leader wraps around you or the boat, an accessible cutting tool, typically attached to your PFD, can save the day. Sammons also suggests carrying a hand gaff or lip-gripper.

— Joe Cermele



To challenge big game from a kayak you need to make some modifications to your craft.

O'Malley, is a Jim Sammons acolyte. An experienced whitewater rafter, at age 54 O'Malley thinks nothing of knocking off a 200-miler through the Grand Canyon. A few years ago she signed on for a one-day trip to San Diego Bay with Sammons's outfit, La Jolla Kayak Fishing. Her conversion is complete. Her kayak now sports custom trolling rods with purple wraps. "I'd always

flyfished for trout," she explained. "Sea kayaks turned me on to salt."

Paddling out to Alonso's panga, we ferried gallons of gear to the pint-sized mothership: Trolling rods, casting rods, fly rods, tackle boxes and bags, spare reels, radios, BogaGrips, water bottles, lunch bags brimming with burritos and, on one morning, at least a case of Pacifico beer. Sammons customizes kayaks with rocket-launcher

rod holders both forward and aft, giving paddlers the chance to troll with mullet and mackerel while keeping a casting rod at hand. Sometimes he adds portable fishfinders, bait wells, even drift socks. "A lot of people paddle to where they want to be, and then get out of the boat and fish," he explains. "But it's a whole 'nother world when you're fighting a big fish from a little boat."

On the first morning, Alonso looked toward the horizon as if he could see into the eyes of the wind god and divine its intent. "New wind," he muttered. Alonso was barefoot and had the burnished skin of a man who knows what a new wind feels like, and what it portends. "Will be for t'ree days here."

So we fished long and hard and close to shore, along the broad, scalloped bays that frame La Riberia to the north and south. We roped the kayaks behind the panga, towing them to the mouths of wide arroyos that led into the water.

We fished a sampler platter of near-shore waters, trolling shallows mere feet from the sand, the knife-edged breaks between green water and blue, yo-yoing five-ounce iron jigs over reefs two miles off the beach. Trolling

This big Baja rooster is about to be released.





big baits from a sea kayak requires a brand of coordination far removed from most anglers' experiences. I trolled live mullet and mackerel 70 to 100 feet behind the boat, paddling just fast enough to cover ground, but not so swiftly that the fish couldn't swim freely. It didn't take long to learn the difference between the pause-filled zzzt-zt-zt-zzzt of a Mexican needlefish on the line and the full-throttle ZZZZZZ of a roosterfish burning teeth off the reel clicker.

But when the fish hit, the gymnastics begin: Stow the paddle across the boat. Reach around behind the cockpit to lift the rod from the holder. Set the hook. And hang on, because even a five-pound rooster pulls with enough authority to spin a kayak.

The first time I tied into one I nearly went overboard. The fish slammed a mullet I trolled just in front of a half-submerged tree trunk. I gave it a good 15-second count, then lifted the rod so the circle hook could do its work. When the line came tight the kayak suddenly became possessed. It spun around 180 degrees, the line singing through the surf as the rooster blitzed away. Three seconds later the fish changed course, as did my boat. As I brought the fish to the boat it dashed away to aft, and I thrust the rod overhead like a spear, laid down backwards in the cockpit and led the rocket around the stern with mere inches to spare. Later I learned to hold the rod tip low, even submerged, and pull against the fight so the force of the



(left) A wine cork is the ideal compact tackle box for the kayak angler.
(above) Celebration time after a successful fight.

fish keeps the kayak pointed true. But for a brief few moments I lay on my back in the kayak as vultures skirled overhead, and for a split-second I wondered if they'd seen this all before and were just biding their time for me.

Over the course of three days I landed five- and ten-pound roosterfish and school dolphin that dragged me in circles. But in truth, it was slow fishing. Baja's famed herds of fish, endless and big and hungry, were a no-show. Each of the local bait suppliers we talked to shook their heads: *No sardenas*. Typically, Baja's spring and summer waters are flush with flatiron herring, but during my trip they'd yet to show. Without baitfish, it's slim pickings.

And then the wind died. "Now," Alonso cooed, "is time for marlin."

THE FISH GODS SMILE

For 90 minutes after splashing off the panga, we begged for marlin, anglers Howard McKim, James Drummond and I coursing over the blue waters off Cabo Pulmo. We paddled in a line, 50 yards apart, a human-powered daisy chain of trolled mackerel. I saw a fin slice the water a few hundred feet from the boat, and my heart

raced. I paddled furiously to close the distance, then a white-sided dolphin leapt into the air. Within moments the school surrounded us — 50, 60, perhaps 75 dolphin leaping wildly. We paddled through the school, through breaking waves, upwind and downwind and crosswind. McKim caught a glimpse of a marlin, subsurface, 15 feet out from his boat, but it ignored his bait.

It was our only shot. "It's all or nothing with big-game fishing," Sammons apologized. But there was nothing to apologize for. Big-game kayak fishing may be exhilarating, hardcore and, at times, downright frightening — landing his first marlin, Sammons says, "Was the scariest, most exciting thing I've ever done" — but it is fishing nonetheless, and there are times when even world-class fishing tanks.

But as most fishermen know, when the fishing is slow, agonizingly slow, one of two things will happen. First: Nothing. The fishing will stink until the day you are scheduled to go home. Or, the fish gods will recognize your dogged determination, and they will smile.

On our trip they smiled. We'd been

TRIP PLANNER

The Hotel Punta Colorada is "old Mexico," says Baja guide Jim Sammons, meaning it's an authentic Mexican beach resort that has refused to glitz up its offerings: powdery beaches under tall sand bluffs; thatched-roofed palapas where anglers wash down reels and Pacifico beers overlooking what those who know call the best view of the Sea of Cortez in all of Baja. Four-night trips run \$690 and include guiding, accommodations, kayaks, live bait, panga support and three very good meals a day. A truly giant deal. Contact La Jolla Kayak Fishing, (619) 461-7172; www.kayak4fish.com.

— T. Edward Nickens

fishing all day, paddling and loading and unloading the kayaks all day, and fighting wind and two-foot slop that washed into our laps all day. I was ahead of the group, and when I first heard shouts behind me and caught a glimpse of O'Malley fighting a roosterfish, things were not looking good.

There are certain basic principles that even beginning sea kayakers learn very quickly. Among them: Do not let your boat turn broadside to breaking surf. Following this rule closely is another: Do not allow your boat to become pinned against exposed rocks. No surprise that a

swamped sea kayak can jackhammer a rock with force sufficient to break any human bone caught in between.

At the time, however, O'Malley was in monumental violation of both principles. I watched a rolling breaker bash the hull of her boat, which was pinned broadside against a large rock, and O'Malley disappeared in white foam. At that moment I made the decision to reel in my live mullet and start paddling like a madman to give what aid I could.

O'Malley had hooked up 50 feet into open water, slow-trolling a live mullet. But then the fish turned for the rocky shore, dragging O'Malley's boat behind. Pinned against the rocks, she leapt out of the boat into chest-deep water. Swells crashed all around her. With one hand she held a rod bent strongly, with the other she manhandled the bucking kayak onto a sliver of sand, and gave it a shove. Now she fought the fish from the water, buffeted by waves, until it wrapped the line around a rock and headed down beach, at a weird dogleg angle from which a shorebound angler would find it impossible to

recover line. I held the front toggle of her kayak. She yelled for it. "Give me the boat! I can't get any line!"

For a moment I considered replying back, firmly, "No, ma'am. You cannot do this." Instead, I shoved her the kayak. She clambered back in, tentacles of gray curls webbing her face, teeth clenched. "Now haul my ass out of here and fight, you sonofabitch!" she yelled at the fish. So bidden, the fish sounded for deeper water and towed her out of the rocks.

The fish spun O'Malley's kayak a half-dozen times, like a mechanical bull, sending sheets of spray in all directions. Her screams of defiance eroded into grunts of pain and weary determination. This was the most impressive display of fish fighting I'd ever seen.

When the fish finally came up, 40 pounds of black-and-silver flanks glistening in the sun and comb fins fully two feet long, whoops and hollers rang out from our little flotilla. On the panga, Sammons's grin was so wide it stretched his goatee into sparse salt-and-pepper bristles. "Now that," he cried, "is kayak fishing!" ~



A panga tows the kayakers to big waters for a shot at billfish.

T. EDWARDS/ST. PETERS