

# Kayak Lights & Kayak Lighting Techniques For Dawn, Dusk & Night Paddling

By Tom Holtey

Many folks enjoy a night paddle on a summer's eve. In fall the days are shorter and the sun sets earlier, possibly catching late afternoon paddlers unaware of how dark it will get and how far they may have to go in low visibility. Early-bird fishermen may start with a pre-dawn launch.

The coolness of the night air, the stars or moon shining brightly can be a wonderful experience for kayakers. Nighttime waters can sometimes be very calm due to the lack of winds created by the sun's heating effect.

Whether you plan to paddle on a moonlight night or wish to be well prepared on a late afternoon kayak trip, lights can be a good thing to add to your kayak equipment.

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## Basic Preparation

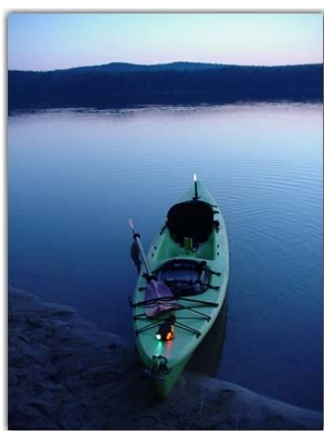
When planning a night paddler, plan carefully. Paddle in a place you know well. Select an easy route and calm conditions. You may even need to mark a chart or map with your planned route and compass headings. File your float plan with a non-paddler friend you can trust. Include your return time and check in with them when done on the water. Have a pre-launch meeting to review the plan with your comrades. Darkness can make simple things much more complicated. *(See: [Kayak Navigation](#))*

Go with a group and stay close enough to talk, not shout, to one another. You will want to be able to communicate easily, and not "alarm" others on or near the water. Sound carries a long distance over water. Assign a lead kayaker and a sweep kayaker. Buddy up in pairs, who paddle at the same pace, and take frequent head counts. Plan a couple stopping places to regroup and consult. *(See: [Group Paddling Techniques](#))*

Take extra precaution around powerboats. Even if you have a light you will still be very hard to see. Keep a close group to make a smaller "target". Cross boat channels at 90 degrees and try to stay out of them completely. Kayaking at night will be quite like bicycling at night. By leaning your head close to the water you can sometimes pick up unlit channel markers by their silhouettes against the lights that may be on shore.



## Lights For Kayakers



For Night Paddling you will need at the very least a single white light that can be shown in any direction to signal your position to other boaters and your paddling buddies. Any light used for kayaking should be waterproof and have fresh batteries at the start of your trip. A hand held flashlight will do for most paddlers. Check with your local boating authority or US Coast Guard for exact rules. Boats over 16 feet will often have greater requirements than boats under 16 feet. Know your kayak length and find out how local rules apply to you and your kayak.

A Deck Light for a kayaker is the best form of a "white light" (often called an anchor light). A steady burning white light that can be seen from any direction is best, but impractical for a kayaker. A pole for the light would just be too tall, fragile and inhibit normal function of kayak and paddler. The modest deck light will do just fine.

Anchor lights are most often mounted to the stern of a vessel, and often used in combination with Navigation Lights. (Red for Port ~ Left, Green Starboard ~ Right) When these lights are used in combination it is not so important for the white light to be seen from the front, as long as the navigation lights can be seen from the front. Lights arranged like this are not unlike those on your car.



Navigation lights are not normally required for small non-power vessels, such as a kayak, but can enhance your chance of being seen. Place navigation Lights in such a way, as they will not shine in your eyes. It is also best to place a white anchor light on the stern deck to preserve your night vision.

**A Head Lamp** or Hand-Held Flash-Light will be handy to have as well. It will be good to have these at the ready, **but not actually on**, until needed. Shine your flashlight at oncoming boat traffic to be sure they see you. You can also use a headlamp or flashlight to search out reflective navigation aids such as buoys and channel markers.

While one would think that a flashlight would help you see in the dark it is just not powerful enough. In fact leaving it on while paddling will hurt your ability to see by ruining your night vision. Your eyes will naturally adjust to darkness, providing better night vision, in about 20 minutes from being exposed to bright light.

**A Strobe Light is only to be used in emergency.** A Strobe is a flashing white light that will be seen as a distress signal to other boaters. A flashing red light is ok to use.

A strobe light is best mounted onto a PFD in a high position like the shoulder or the chest. It could also be tucked into a PFD pocket on a lanyard, stowed for "just in case". Turn it on only if you really need help.

A Flare Cone, or a C-Light or LED Deck Light can also be mounted on the back of some life vests. (Front mounting will likely blind you.) This will make the paddler more visible to others simply by increasing the height of



the light.

Be sure that any deck light, hand held light, or PFD mounted light is secured well. Very few flashlights will float. It would be very disappointing to see your brightly shining light source slowly sink into the dark abyss fading from view, or tantalizing close to the surface. Take extra steps to secure the light well. Bear in mind that rough waters could take even a well tied light right off your deck or PFD.

**Cyalume lights** or chemical light sticks fit nicely in a PFD pocket, stowed for when you need them. Cyalumes can be an effective light and will not ruin your night vision that much.

They are not very visible from a distance. You can make it seem brighter to those far away if needed. Tie the light stick to a string and swing in a large circle to increase visibility. It works by making the light look bigger, not brighter. Of course you cannot paddle with one hand swinging a light stick.

A "Man-Overboard Light" is a Cyalume mounted to your PFD with a squeeze trigger. An "Emergency Boat Light Kit" is a selection of chemical lights (With Red & Green Navigation lights) Both are worth considering



selection of chemical lights considering

Some Cyalume lights can be creatively fastened to a paddle shaft or blade. The standard "party favors" may actually have some good kayaking applications. The only limit is your imagination. A simple pair of light sticks, one hung on bow, a second hung on stern, will be far better than nothing.

Those who paddle light color plastic kayaks can place a bright dive light or two inside the hull to make their kayak glow. Yellow, lime green & orange kayaks work best.

Place one light facing forward in the bow hatch and a second light in the stern hatch facing backwards.

Reflective strips are found on some life jackets and kayaks. Reflective material can be added to paddle blades and to kayaks. When a light is shown in their direction the reflective material will shine brightly back.

Night paddling should not be thought of as a dare-devil activity, but something you can enjoy as well as feel comfortable doing should the need arise.

Two personal experiences of my own follow below this article, plus a link to Jo Hu's adventure. We hope you find this information helpful and will add this aspect of paddling to your kayaking experience.



## Night Surfing

My paddling buddy and I were given some expired "Man Overboard" chemical lights by a commercial boater who had to replace his every year. We thought: "What the heck, just attach them to our PFDs, better than nothing." We never really did need them, certainly not for emergency purposes.

Then we found ourselves night surfing our kayaks during a beach party. We weren't out to do anything crazy, just catch some waves in the twilight. On the way out we thought: "Let's use these things, they were free and they weren't getting any less expired."

So we triggered the lights, and they came to life burning brightly on our PFDs. A light stick was mounted on each of our kayaks as well, after all sometimes they can get away from you in the surf. We caught some waves and it was really easy, more or less, to keep an eye on each other.

I saw my paddling partner wipe out. No biggie it happens. Then he called out to me. He had dislocated his shoulder! Easy to spot, I paddled right up to him. He somehow popped his shoulder back into the socket, but was still in much pain.

We recovered his kayak, once again easy to spot. I helped him into the cockpit, but he was in no shape to paddle. So I towed him to shore. The folks on the beach were wondering what we were up to. They were quite bemused, but not worried, as they could see us coming and making steady progress directly to their location.

My "expired" old Cyalume made visible light for 48 hours or so before it faded.



## Out Too Late

During a wilderness trip we had planned a "Surf & Turf" day trip: Paddle across the lake, hike a portage trail, and paddle back to base camp. It was planned to take us all day. We packed a lunch, the first aid kit, some extra clothes, and I put a zip-loc bag in each kayak containing a few chemical light sticks, a waterproof flash light w/ spare batteries, and some had a strobe, just in case.

Off we went! One of our party decided to stay behind and practice some nature photography in a cove closer to camp. The paddle across the lake was beautiful, but uneventful. We reached the far side of the lake and found the portage trail we were curious about. We thought it wise to hike it before considering carrying our boats on this long trail. Good thing we did.

The hike was nice, but soon it was discovered that an ice storm had wreaked havoc on the trail. It was hard to walk at times let alone find our way. A "guest book" at the half-way-mark was filled with "colorful" comments about the condition of the trail and the difficulty of portaging canoes along it. Needless to say it took longer than expected to complete our hike.

We arrived at our kayak while it was daylight. I could tell that our return trip across the lake would end in twilight, still not in complete darkness. So I started handing out flashlights and Cyalumes to my comrades, who thought I was joking, with instructions to turn them on when the sun went down. At about half way across the lake the sun had set and visibility was significantly decreased. One by one the kayakers turned on their lights and each boat was marked by a point of light or two.

It seemed that just as the last paddler lit their light that a sea plane came out of a hidden cove and powered up to full throttle in a run across the glassy surface of the water to become air bourn. While we were safe, presumably because of our lights, it was still a little too close for comfort as the plane took off, possibly as close as 200 feet.

Our lone stay-behind member took note of our late arrival. He lit a lantern and hung it on the shoreline in front of our campsite. Good thing he did, as I cannot remember charting a compass bearing to follow in. It was easy to spot, a solitary light in the wilderness, and a perfect guide for weary paddlers. When we landed we were even greeted by a big pot of hot chili cooking.

