

Signal Devices For Kayakers

By Athena Holtey

Proper use of appropriate signal devices are an essential part of every kayaker's safety protocol. They let others know that you need help. There are Signal devices used primarily for emergency; and there are signaling methods used to simply assist paddlers in communicating to each other.

This article will help explain four essential things:

1. Do You Need Help?

How to judge that your circumstances warrant utilizing emergency signaling devices.

2. Visual Signal Devices

What emergency visual signaling devices are both necessary & practical to carry.

3. Sound Signal Devices

What emergency sound signaling devices are both necessary & practical to carry.

4. Using Your Paddle - See separate article here

What signal devices to use for simple communication between paddlers.

DO YOU NEED HELP?

Calling for emergency help when you are just tired and hungry can risk a rescuer's life unnecessarily. Signaling devices that are used to call the attention of rescuers should only be used when you are sure you are in a life-threatening situation. Know your own limitations and those of the people you are with and don't paddle beyond them. If the weather turns bad and you can back track into the lee of an island or a cove to wait it out, do so. This is also why it is a good reason to make alternative landings a part of your float plan.

On the other hand, if you are in trouble, don't be too proud or unprepared to get help:

"Ironduquote Stream is a beautiful, shallow, marshy water way hidden from the congestion of the city around it, attracting many casual day kayakers with nothing but a paddle and a lunch sack. It was on such a day that we came upon a grandfather and his two grandsons wet, cold and scared. The air was 75 degrees, however the water, only two feet deep, was 55 degrees and they had capsized; the kids, soaked by their heavy jeans, were shivering and crying. Although a neighborhood lurked above the trees, it was a steep climb for an old man and two little boys. They were a mile from the dock; their kayak was swamped and too heavy for them to turn over. As we helped to empty the boat, reassure the children and accompanied them back to shore, the grandpa said he was as embarrassed as he was scared. We all had a lesson that day on why to never underestimate the outdoors, no matter how unthreatening they may appear." Athena Holtey.

Here are the signaling devices every good kayaker should consider making a part of their personal safety protocol.

The Coast Guard minimum equipment requirements specify that all recreational vessels over 16' long must carry at least three day-use and three night-use signals, or three day/night combination signals. Also, all "human powered" vessels, regardless of length, must have at least one signal device on board. But when you are in trouble, more is always better. Good kayak shops should carry most of these; otherwise find them at a Marine Supply Store.

Items that can be shipped through the U.S. Mail may be in stock at **The TopKayaker Shop/Safety Gear.**

VISUAL SIGNAL DEVICES

These signal devices can be divided up into those most effective during the day; or those best seen at night; those seen easily at water level; and those seen best from the sky:

Day Visual Signal Devices:

1. Signal Mirror.

Every PFD should have one of these attached to it or in a pocket. They are the lightest weight device, the easiest to use, but are only good on a sunny day. They can be seen from above or at water level. Some have a small hole in the center to help you aim at your target. Flashes of three, if you can manage it, is a universally understood signal for help. Just remember S.O.S.

2. Orange Smoke Canisters.

These are effectively seen from air or sea, but only in the daytime. They usually smoke from 30 to 60 seconds, so make sure you are in the line of sight of a rescuer when setting them off.

3. A Sea Rescue.

This is a long, bright orange banner that floats out from your kayak. It is only useful to get the attention of a rescuer looking down at the water, from a cliff, large ship or aircraft, and only during the day; but it's duration of operation last up to the time of rescue, and can be reused.

Night Visual Signal Devices:

4. Aerial Flares.

Most effective for night use, but can be seen in daylight; these handheld devices can send a signal from 300 to 500 feet; enough to get the attention of a nearby ship or onshore rescuers, or someone overhead, so make sure you are in the line of sight of a rescuer when setting them off. Hold up and away from you and your boat.

5. Parachute Flares.

Most effective at night, but can be seen in daylight. Falls more slowly so can be seen longer than an aerial flare. Recommended for long distance, open water paddlers. Make sure you are in the line of sight of a rescuer when setting them off. Hold up and away from you and your boat.

6. Flare Pistol.

These shoot higher and brighter than aerial or parachute flares. Most effective at night, but can be seen in daylight. Also recommended for long distance, open water paddlers. Hold up and away from you and your boat.

7. Strobe Light.

A bright white flashing light is universally recognized as a distress signal. Make sure it is waterproof. Night paddling as an intentional endeavor requires other light safety devices not covered in this article. See Article: **"Kayak Lights..."**

"We launched early to get across the lake from our camp to check out a portage to the Oswegatchie River. Fortunately, we moored our kayaks, deciding to hike it first; unfortunately, it had been a few years and an ice storm or two since our guide book was written. Four to five hours later, we returned to paddle back to camp on this beautiful October day, not realizing that when we reached the middle of the lake our eyes would have adjusted so well to the dark that a float plane taking off would not see us. It would be Tom, of course, who would anticipate this and the rest of us who would be surprised when he handed out lights on the beach to everyone to clip to their boats and PFDs before we launched." Athena Holtey

In concluding this section I need to stress the importance of PRACTICE in calm waters and safe circumstances with any visual signaling devices that you make a part of your kayaking safety protocol. Take special care that you notify the Coast Guard or other authority that you will be practicing with such things. Often, an outfitter or kayak club will have an annual event such as a "Safety Clinic" where they will supervise signal practice with the consent and support of the local authorities.

SOUND SIGNALING DEVICES:

1. Whistle.

Like the signal mirror, every PFD should have one. They come in many shapes, colors and sizes, but it is recommended that you look for a Coast Guard Approved whistle, plastic, preferably without the pea, for corrosion prevention. Three short bursts or blows on the whistle signal "Help!" Just remember S.O.S. Again, in many circumstances, signals in sets of three are a universally recognized call for help.

2. Foghorn or Air horn.

For low visibility paddling conditions, but can also be used in clear conditions to get the attention of a vessel when in threat of a collision.

3. VHF Marine Radio.

These important communication devices provide kayakers with an option of getting immediate recognition when in a life threatening situation. They have different channels used by the U.S. Coast Guard, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, the National Weather Service, and important marine organizations. They are not to be used on land & it is not a wise choice for casual conversation between paddlers. Channel 16 is a hailing channel, is used for distress calls, and is listened to around the clock by the local Coast Guard; and once the Coast Guard is alerted they will instruct you to change channels for rescue instructions.

4. Cell Phones.

Most of us paddle to get away from these things, but a Cell Phone can be a convenient back up for help. A simple 911 call is all it takes. Don't let a cell phone be a substitute for the more expensive VHF Radio, or more importantly for your use of common sense and proper planning. Just because you have a phone is no reason to take risks beyond your skill level.

The Coast Guard is your best friend, especially for Coastal Touring emergencies, while the best use of phones and 2-Way radios is for basic group communications. Use a dry-bag case for on water use or dry box for storage below deck.

5. Two-way Radios.

Most of these hand held, pocket size radios have a range of about 2 miles. Waterproof or water resistant (there's a difference) are available. They run on inexpensive batteries and are a good back up - not substitute for - your VHF radio and are excellent for contacting other paddlers in your fleet. We hook them on our PFD's.

Well, that's a good overview of the gear available and necessary to you as a kayaker. There are always newer, lighter weight, easier to use devices coming out all the time. Your local kayak shop or marine supply store can clue you in.

6. EPIRBs and Personal Location Beacons (PLB)

EPIRBs and Personal Location Beacons are dropping in price and becoming more user friendly. They emit a distress signal that is picked up by satellite and your signal is forwarded to the appropriate authorities. Those paddlers who venture into deep wilderness out of cell phone and radio range can benefit using these high tech devices.

Signaling devices can save your life, and are a necessary part of every kayaker's safety protocol. Remember to know your limitations; use emergency signals only in true emergency situations; never be too proud to call for help; practice with both visual and sound signaling devices in safe conditions and make sure they working, batteries are fresh, and that they are all packed properly for your voyage. An important caution: Do not rely on your partner or spouse to carry them for you. Enjoy the feeling of confidence that maintaining your own safety protocol can bring to your paddling adventures. Have your own whistle, mirror, smoke, flares etc; know where they are and how to use them.