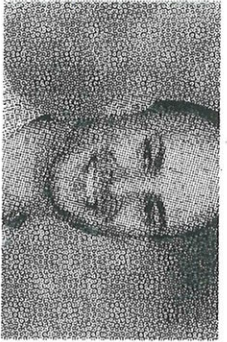


Peaceful day of kayak fishing yields many lessons

Shhhh . . . That's all we can possibly do. As the morning sun sheds a whitish tint over Perico Bayou, and a wispy fog curls in the distance, our kayaks creep across calm, shallow water in the Seven Pines area.

And then we spot tails. Dozens and dozens of red, hand-sized tails poking through the water, shaking and waving.

Hello, redfish. Overcome with predatory instinct, we flop out of our kayaks and slip into the water. Sinking into a spongy bottom, we nab our poles. Even at dawn, I can see Capt. Jim Nelson's face — it's flush and looks as if a school of 100-pound tarpon were ahead.



Nick Walter

Outdoors

I'm barely allowing myself breath.

"Shhhh," Nelson says as I wade forward. "Don't spook them."

The only sounds now are the "splish-splashing" from the slippery tails — dancing here and there as the reds plunge into a grass flat for crustaceans — and the

reverberating pulse of our hearts.

Soon, we're quite surrounded.

"I am so jacked right now," Nelson said.

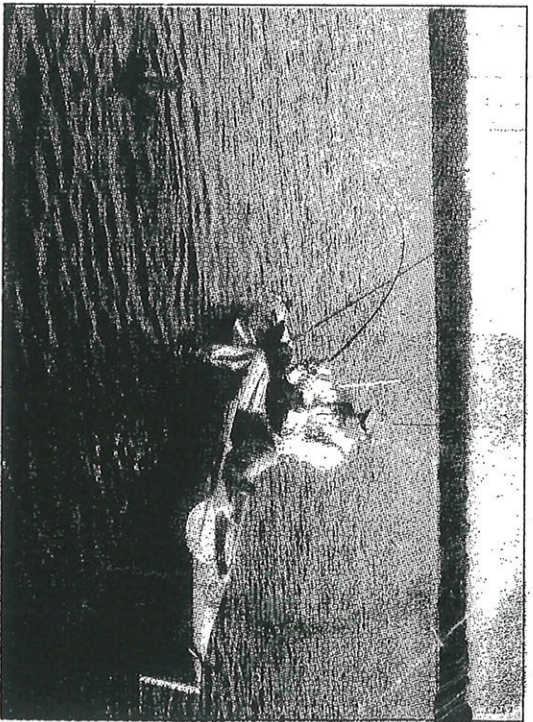
I am "so jacked" as well.

We cast around the tailing reds. We cast onto them. We cast again and sink our bait near their submerged noses. Each time, we retrieve fishless shad tails. I feel like screaming.

Nelson, meanwhile, is beaming.

"I was thinking, 'Wow ... that's amazing,'" he said later. "I'm just glad someone was with me to watch it."

WALTER TO 4D



Capt. Jim Nelson hooks a redfish from his kayak. The day's catch yielded seven redfish and two trout.

NICK WALTER/The Herald

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Capt. Jim Nelson takes an alternate approach to fishing by casting from a kayak.

NICK WALTER/The Herald

WALTER FROM 1D

That's about all we did — watch.

"If someone can get them to bite," Nelson said, "I want to know how."

After the reds finished feeding, and we could hardly cast again with inevitable disappointment, we glided on.

"Eventually, we're gonna get some reds," Nelson said. "And it will be glorious."

A couple hours later, when the sun envelops the bay, and the thick fog floats away, it is just that.

We face a swash which is a long, deep channel. This one has a sandy bottom. A high tide is pushing bait from the north, so we cast our weighted

shad tails to the north, into the swash. We retrieve them in the same direction as the tide's movement.

Thump-thump! Nelson reels in a trout. Thump-thump! Nelson lands a red. Thump-thump-thump! I tangle with something that is brute enough to yank line from my spool. It turns out to be a 20-inch red.

Not too shabby.

We wanted reds in the 30-inch range but settled for seven reds and two trout. Later on, we floated by the east-side shoreline, and Nelson's head snapped toward the water.

"Oh, my God," he said.

It was a snook, which, Nelson guessed, was around 42 inches.

Throughout the rest of the trip, I realized the advantages

of kayak fishing. First off, it's wonderful exercise. And unlike a boat, there's no chopping blade to disturb the fish, nor does a kayak produce harmful gas fumes.

The slender vessels can squeeze into places and float on shallow waters a boat cannot. It's cheating.

Moreover, they worm ahead, allowing gazes at scenery and the gathering of topographical information. Because you're in shallow water, you may notice — and have time to record — the location of swashes and pot holes, or the length of oyster bars before higher waters come.

Enjoy stalking prey? We did just that. Around 11 a.m., we spot a distant school of fish

rolling a roughly 75-foot section of water.

"Do you see what I see?" Nelson asks.

"I think it's coming at us," I reply.

We shift our direction and paddle to the side of the school, which could enable us to cast in. Of course, the school, seemingly random in its destination, turns away. Now it's maybe 50 feet ahead, and we pursue, leaning forward as if to lunge.

Each paddle is gentle. Each word a whisper.

Shhhh ... they're right ahead.

And then they're gone.

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