Sea Kayak Signaling Devices

It can be a real shock how suddenly alone one can be on the water. Your kayak sits so low in the water that you are often invisible to boats or people on shore seemingly just a short distance away. Your voice disappears easily in the wind and will be drowned out by surf. Waving hands or paddles can be camouflaged against an active sea. Without some type of signaling device you may not be able to get assistance if you need it. A simple accident could quickly turn into a disaster.

Below is a list of the most common signaling devices used by kayaks and a brief description of each.

- **Signal Mirror** – A small hand-held mirror that can be used to reflect light. Although any mirror will work as a signaling device we recommend finding a mirror with targeting device that helps you aim the reflection right where you need it.

- **Whistle** – Blow in one end and noise comes out the other. A whistle can be heard at quite a distance, but like your voice can easily be lost in the wind or surf noise. Some whistles although sold as safety devices don’t always work when wet. Some are so quiet as to be almost useless. Be sure to test your whistle in the conditions you plan to be out it. Don’t just trust it out of the package.

- **Flares** - Use light or smoke to attract attention. If you are going to be out in the Great Lakes or Ocean signal flares need to be part of your “signaling kit”. Many experienced sea kayakers have noted that about 1/3 of flares fail. Be prepared by having back ups. Check expiration dates regularly and replace as needed.
  - **Hand Held Smoke Flares** – Hold in hand, ignite Orange smoke better than white / cannot be seen at a large distance due to curvature of the earth / can be dissipated quickly in swirling winds.
  - **“Pencil” Flares** – Hold in hand, launch skyward Small, convenient aerial flare / some kayakers noted high failure rate / better for evening use
  - **Flare Gun** - Plastic pistol, Load shells and fire with trigger ability to aim / great evening visibility / fair day-time visibility / no recoil / red or white flares
  - **Arial Flares** – Hold in hand, launch skyward Great evening visibility / Recoil can hurt
  - **Parachute Flares** – Fire Into sky, slowly descends Great visibility / long burn time / expensive

- **Strobe** – Highly visible light attaches to PFD. A strobe is a simple blinking light device that attaches to your PFD. Keeps you more visible in poor weather and in case of rescue.

- **Dye Makers** – Put colored dye in water to be seen from above *Most often used by downed pilots, effected by water conditions
• **Rescue Flag** – Orange Flag recognized as symbol for needing help
  Wave flag or place on boat deck, visibility is a problem

• **VHF Radio** – Handheld two-way radio used to monitor weather and contact rescue agencies.
  * Although a VHF can be expensive this is probably the most important signaling device you can have if kayaking on “Big Water”. Look for waterproof model and ability to use easily with paddling gloves. Some brands have “Alert” button that will automatically take you to the emergency channel.

• **Cell Phone** – Common wireless telephone
  * Remember most cell phones are not waterproof. Also cell phones tend to drop off regularly and may not work in many areas where you may paddle. Worth having, but don’t rely on it.

• **EPIRB** – Emergency rescue beacons that transmit off satellite signals. Personal models are available but expensive. EPIRBs are the last choice when nothing else will work.

Although not directly signaling devices now is a good time to think about visibility in general. To that end you may also wish to think about

• **Reflective Tape** – Place along boat’s sides to increase visibility. Reflective tape can also be applied to paddle blades.

• **Deck Lights** – Deck lights can attach to your kayak for nighttime visibility.

• **Head Lamp** – Wear waterproof headlamp for visibility at night and in poor weather.

• **Bright Gear** – There is certainly something to be said for yellow, orange & red clothing & PFDs. Many modern PFDs also have reflective tape on the shoulders and other areas.

Comment - In the end this may seem like a lot of stuff. You may be thinking, “Hey I just want to go sit in the middle of my local lake, do I really need all this stuff?”. Well, No. At a bare minimum it’s worth carrying a signal mirror and a good whistle for small lakes. I would suggest a strobe as well. If you are going to venture out into larger bodies of water like the Great Lakes or an ocean then flares and VHF become more important. On a long expedition into less populated areas you may consider an EPIRB or at least have one in a group. Also remember that you can be separated from your boat. Signaling devises should be attached to YOU if possible. Safety gear is a personal choice but you may not get a second chance to learn from a mistake.

Ref:
- [http://www.uscgboating.org/safety/metlife/distress.htm](http://www.uscgboating.org/safety/metlife/distress.htm)
- [http://www.useakayak.org/signaling.html](http://www.useakayak.org/signaling.html)

- KayakWisconsin.net