



Pitfalls and Pleasures of Personal Watercraft

by
Beau Beasley

Photos courtesy of M. J. Miller

Standing on a steep grade looking down onto a large crystal clear mountain lake in Oregon, I could easily see fish. I watched at least half a dozen trout rise, coming up like small porpoises diving on their prey. I had gotten directions to this secluded mountain lake from a guy who worked at the local hard-

ware store. Joe, “the fish guy” who worked at the hardware store part-time, was a fly angler like me. I had told him that I was only in town for a few days visiting with family and wanted to know about the local fishing. He had told me almost apologetically that my choices were limited to a series of nearby lakes, and that unfortunately they were “infested” with nothing but brown trout.

I did a double-take. Was he serious? Nothing but browns? I had scribbled down his directions. He had advised me almost as an afterthought to take a handful of parachute black ants with me because “that’s all they’ll eat.” At this point I had assumed that the guy was half nuts, but I was grateful for any leads; I had bought a few flies and thanked him. I had then headed out on what I had assumed would be a wild goose chase.

Much to my surprise, old Joe was

right—the lake was teeming with brown trout. As I descended the steep banks of the lake I realized, however, that old Joe had left out one important piece of information: The surrounding brush on the water’s steep banks made it nearly impossible to cast anywhere from shore. Here I stood, all alone, beside a lake full of feeding trout with nary a cloud in the sky nor a ripple on the lake save those the trout made themselves. And I had no way of reaching them.

I rushed back to the hardware store to ask his advice, but Joe had already left for the day. What to do? I wandered aimlessly around the store until I happened to look up and see the day’s salvation sitting on the shelf above me: a float tube. This stripped-down model was little more than a large inner tube with some cheap fabric sewn to it, but I didn’t care; I had to reach those fish. I bought the thing on the



These float tubes from Water Skeeter give anglers great access.

spot, drove like a madman back to the lake, and within minutes was in the water and having one of my very best days of fishing ever. I lost count of how many trout I landed, and, oddly enough, Joe was quite right—all they would eat were black ants. But I was able to put dinner right in front of them thanks to my float tube.

Float Tubes

Float tubes range from simple round tubes, like the one I used on the lake in Oregon, to fully tricked out models. Some are U-shaped, making entry and exit of the tube less taxing. Some come with cup holders and nets; others have zipped or velcroed pockets for all sorts of gadget storage. If the bells and whistles seem silly, remember: Once you're in the float tube, it's a chore to walk back to your car to get something.

The main advantage of fishing with a float tube is accessibility: It allows you to fish places that you could otherwise never reach. You can use a float tube to fish over deep water areas or near heavy cover. You can also use one to fish lily pads or remote grass beds that are perfect habitat for fish but that you may not be

able to reach from the bank. You can use a float tube with or without waders, depending on the weather (and on whether or not you are, like my wife, paranoid about that elusive but threatening freshwater shark or errant piranha). During the warmer months, you can get by with just a pair of shorts; for fall fishing, however, you'll want to remember those waders.

And the drawbacks to fishing from a float tube? First, you can only use one in still water. Even a light wind can blow you in a direction that you don't want to go. Second, you'll need flippers to move from place to place in the water. Flippers are an essential component of the equation if you're float tube fishing; for heaven's sake, leave little Johnny's toy pool flippers at home (how will you explain losing them in 30 feet of water anyway?) and get your own, preferably with a strap on the heel. Here is my recommended order of business to kick off your trip: Lay all your gear on a nearby bank, check and recheck it all, don your float tube on the bank, pick up your gear and stow it, and then enter the water. Finally, be ready for some shoulder soreness the following day. Casting from a float tube

takes some getting used to and may cause you to cast slightly differently than you do when you're standing onshore.

Pontoon Boats

Another favorite of outdoorsmen is the pontoon boat. Water Skeeter, one of the industry leaders in personal watercrafts, offers several different types of pontoon boat. These crafts allow you to cover some serious water at speeds unthinkable in a float tube or canoe, and with little or no effort. Hunters are as enamored with pontoon boats as are anglers. The pontoon boat has several advantages over a conventional boat: It is much more affordable, requires little or no maintenance, and can operate for hours on a few Snickers bars or whatever else you happen to be eating that day. It's silent: A pontoon boat is not only great for the environment, but it allows anglers and hunters to get closer to their quarry. The pontoon boat also allows the user to stand and cast—an unthinkable (or at least unwise) idea in a canoe or float tube. The icing on the cake is that you can hunt or fish and still remain dry and comfortable, which makes staying on the water and extending your hunting or fishing trip a whole lot easier and more enjoyable.

On the downside, pontoon boats are often at the mercy of the river and at times the wind. You'll find it nearly impossible to go upstream if there is any significant current at all, and the wind can still push you around. Pontoon boats cast a fairly large profile; add an angler who is standing up to cast or shoot, and you've got a boat with a human sail. They can also be inconvenient to transport if you have to assemble and disassemble them with each use. There are of course smaller pontoon boats that can stay assembled all the time and can easily fit in the bed of a pickup truck. My father-in-law bought a pontoon boat over a year ago and he swears by it. In fact, he liked it so much that he bought a second one for my mother-in-law so that



Captain Cory Routh uses his kayak to go places other anglers can't reach.

she could join him in the water even though she doesn't fish. She loves hers, too.

Kayaks

The latest craze in the sportsman's field of personal watercraft is the kayak. With its sleek profile and light weight the kayak is gaining a lot of attention from fly anglers like Captain Cory Routh of Virginia Beach, owner of Ruthless Fishing and hands-down the best known fly angling kayaker in Virginia. Recently named the Mid-Atlantic Fly Angler of the Year by Extreme Edge Paddle Sports, Routh is a pro staffer for kayak manufacturer Wilderness Systems and says that he likes fishing from a kayak



because it can take him in water that's too shallow for larger boats. In his words, "Kayaks are the best pair of waders money can buy." Routh also uses his kayak in a unique approach to saltwater fly fishing: He motors with clients out to where he knows the fish are, and then he and his clients launch their kayaks and head where no mechanized boat can go.

Kayaks fall into two categories: "Sit on top" (SOT) or "sit in kayak" (SINK). Anglers like Routh use the SOT, whereas whitewater rafting enthusiasts prefer the SINK. Kayakers can get their rig tricked out with everything from fish finders to anchors; generally kayaks have plenty of room for just about anything you could need. The drawbacks to the kayak include its size and sometimes awkward configuration. These crafts are one-piece units and users have to adapt special techniques for loading and unloading their boat, particularly if they spend a lot of time on the water alone and thus have no one to assist them in loading their kayak. On the upside, you don't need a behemoth of a vehicle to drag your boat; instead, just strap your kayak to the top your car and away you go.

Whether you choose a float tube, pontoon boat, or kayak, a personal watercraft can seriously enhance your outdoor experience. After all, you never know when you're going to run across one of those pesky trout infestations, and you want to be sure that you can reach it when you do.

For more information on personal watercraft: Water Skeeter:

www.waterskeeter.com, 800-339-7261

Wilderness Systems:

www.wildernesssystems.com, 804-859-7518

Cory Routh, Ruthless Fishing:

www.ruthlessfishing.com, 757-403-0734

Beau Beasley is a regular contributor to *The Virginia Sportsman*.



JEFF EASTER
REMODELING

- DESIGN
- PLANS
- CONSULTATION
- ADDITIONS
- KITCHENS
- BATHS
- FULL RENOVATION
- CLASS A CONTRACTOR



Charlottesville, VA

(434) 295-9911

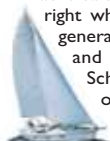
Since 1980



WE DROPPED OURS IN DELTAVILLE THREE GENERATIONS AGO.

While some boat dealers come and go with the wind, Norton's Yacht Sales is firmly anchored right where we've been for generations. Today Carolyn and her husband Ken Schmalenberger carry on the family tradition that began with Carolyn's grandfather, Ed Norton back in 1948. This is also the only place in Virginia where you will find

Jeanneau Yachts. And we're one of the world's largest Hunter dealers. Norton's backs up the sale with an outstanding service department that consistently wins top awards of distinction. We even feature a first rate ASA Sailing School and Sail Charters. Drop by the next time you're in Deltaville. We're anchored here to stay.



NORTON'S YACHT SALES, INC.



Deltaville, Virginia • 804-776-9211 • fax 804-776-9044
www.nortonyachts.com