

Paddler Profile: Al Larsen

Interview by Bob Browning

Lives in: Arlington, VA

Real job: Leads Office of Counsel and Office of Congressional and Public Affairs for EPA Inspector General

Do you regularly attend a Piracy? PoGs (Pirates of Georgetown)

Number of years paddling: Kayak, 10; Canoe, 50.

How did you get involved in sea kayaking?

For years, I was an officer in my cross-country ski club, the Ski Touring Section of the PATC. One year at the officers' planning meeting at my house at the end of summer, Ralph Heimlich, who was the editor of our newsletter, showed up with a kayak on top of his car. I asked him all about it, and of course he told me about CPA. I thought my wife and I need to try this sometime, but I didn't act then as it was the end of summer. Next June, we went to Mathews County, VA with our canoe and bikes. While there, we decided to rent kayaks for an afternoon. We were hooked. Bought our kayaks down there at Mathews.

What boats do you paddle? Eddyline Fathom LV (16') and Eddyline Night-hawk (16'). Fun fact: We stopped in at the Eddyline "factory" in Burlington WA on our way to Puget Sound and the San Juan Islands. It's a small operation, with everything made by hand on-site. Talked to the guys making the boats, and observed all the different steps in creating one. I'm happy to support such a business.

Rudder or skeg? Skeg.

Type paddle used? Werner Camano. Interestingly, this summer we saw Camano Island, the namesake for the paddle, which is near Whidby Island in Puget Sound. Also, Greenland paddle, made at the CPA workshop. Little experience but great instructors/helpers yielded a very fine paddle.

Do you do any other type of paddling besides sea kayaking? Canoe—Old Town Penobscot, which is a Royalex canoe, a material that optimized tradeoff between durability and weight. While I kayak more than canoe these days, I still think canoes just feel right for outings on the rivers and lakes in Maine and in the ADK. Other paddling: big-water whitewater rafting in the West.

Do you regularly do any other outdoor activities? Bicycling (I used to bike to work every day when I lived in Portland, OR); still do here but not so often (when I do, it's via the C&O canal). Also, road biking and mountain biking, xc skiing, and hiking. When we lived in the West, I did mountain climbing, but given the size of the peaks here, what I do now would be called hiking.

How often on average do you paddle between May and October? Weekly.

Do any winter paddling? Nope—see above. To me, winter is for xc skiing. When water turns to crystals, I like to glide on top of it.

Favorite local paddling location? Potomac River is about a half mile from our house, as the crow flies, so Potomac between Stubblefield Rapids and Little Falls (Lock 10 put-in) and Fletchers Cove for the stretch below Little Falls. Also Pohick Bay, Bull Run, and the Piscataway. Stretching the definition of "local," we love Mathews, VA. There are so many options and such variety. We go for 3 or 4 days, and can go out on the unprotected main bay, the well-protected interior rivers, Winter Harbor, Gwynns Island, Horn Harbor, the lighthouse.

Favorite CPA trip you've ever been on and why? Toss up—the multiday kayak camping trips, such as Pax River and Potomac (with paddle-in overnight

at Pohick Bay), and Wye Island Circumnavigation. I like the vast variety in a single outing at Wye Island—sheltered channels and big-water surfing coming across a long fetch by the main bay.



Coolest paddling trip you've ever been on anywhere and why? Solo kayak camping trip in the St. Regis Wilderness in the Adirondacks. I counted it as 9 ponds with 8 portages. It was mid-week, and I saw virtually no one else. I had a campsite with a huge, flat tilted rock that gradually went right into the lake. It was my spot for morning tea, meditation and watching the sun rise, my evening pipe tobacco, wine and contemplation. It was my kayak ingress and egress and swimming jump off. Paddling around silently was wondrous. That, to me, is the magic of the ADK—the scenery is great, the water wonderful, but living in the DC area, I am most of all in awe of the silence.

Scariest/most dangerous trip/experience and why? It wasn't in a kayak; it was in a canoe. I paddled the St. John River in Maine, going down just after ice-out, which is the only time there is enough water to run it. So, the water was very cold, and we ran it in open canoes, through Class III and IV rapids, which are at the edge of my

ability in an open canoe. No spills, but plenty of rock dodging at high speed with no room for error.

Future bucket list trip(s): Milford Sound, New Zealand; Baja California; Quirimba Archipelago, Mozambique.

Three things you like most about paddling? Nature, nature, and nature. Kayaking provides access to places most people never see or enjoy. You see water in many forms—peaceful, challenging; big, small; fresh, salt, brackish; ocean, pond, bay, river, creek; group or solitary. I find it very meditative—in the moment, in the rhythm of the body of water I'm on. I have a Native American art piece that says, "Like the salmon, I need the river to take me home." That's me. My CPA forum tag line is a quotation from Siddhartha (i.e., Buddha) by Herman Hesse: "The water flowed and flowed, and yet it was always there. It was always the same and yet every moment it was new."

What do you like about CPA? First of all, starting as an absolute neophyte, I learned from longer-time paddlers in CPA about safety, technique, venues, and equipment, all of which made paddling more fun and safer. Next, the folks in CPA are my kind of folks. I enjoy being with them because we all tend to have that love of nature I mentioned and tend to be interesting people, but not full of ourselves. When we moved here from Oregon, my wife urged me to find a group for paddling and a group for xc skiing. As I said, I had been canoeing forever, but not kayaking. First I went to the annual gathering of the Canoe Cruisers Association, a group based relatively close to us. Let's just say it was a very different crowd, not at all welcoming. A guy I talked to told me that the cliques were set, and those folks basically just paddled with their set groups. Not what I needed as a new guy in town. CPA is the opposite—reaching out and welcoming. I consider CPAers to be among my best friends.

One unusual, non-paddling thing other people find interesting about you? When I turned 40, instead of buying that car of my teenage dreams, I bought the Hammond B-3 organ I never had. That's the organ that rockers, bluesmen, and jazz artists all had—think, Booker T, Greg Alman, Jimmie Smith. I play that thing a lot, and it knows me. It knows when to launch a full-out joyous jam, or a quiet reflective number, Green Onions, Truckin', Season of the Witch, Just Like a Woman or Summertime. ♦

Do you know a paddler who would make an interesting profile?

Contact Bob Browning at:

BBBrowning43@verizon.net