

Paddler Profile: Jeff Walaszek

by Bob Browning

Lives in: Mathews, VA

Real job: Recently retired, formerly worked for the US Army Corps of Engineers Research and Development Center.

Do you regularly attend a Piracy? Co-Pirate Captain of Pirates of the Occoquan with Jim Zawlocki. I picked up leadership of the Piracy when James Song moved out of the area in mid 2000s. It was then called the Pirates of Algonkian and was based out of Algonkian Regional Park along the non-tidal Potomac River. The Piracy migrated to southern Fairfax County where most of its members lived and began regularly paddling on the Occoquan Reservoir and tidal Potomac at Pohick Bay and Mason Neck State Park.

Number of years paddling: I started paddling canoes in the Midwest in the mid-70s out in the Boundary Waters Canoe area, along Illinois rivers, and later the Current and Jacks Fork Rivers in Missouri. In college I spent two summers as a Trip Director for a YMCA camp in Michigan taking kids on 8-day canoe trips on the Upper Muskegon River.

How did you get involved in sea kayaking? I was used to paddling tandem canoes and wanted something I could go out on my own. In 1999 I bought a Dagger Magellan thinking that would be the only kayak I would ever need.

What boats do you paddle? I now have five other sea kayaks: Valley Nordkapp and Avocet, NDK Greenlander Pro and Romany, and P&H Capella 169. All of these boats have unique features that make them valuable. I match the boat to the paddling conditions I expect to encounter to ensure I enjoy time on the water and the boat is a “non-event”. The boat is just a medium through which to enjoy the water and the surrounding environment.

Rudder or skeg? I’m clearly a skeg person for its simplicity. I find rudders irritating and just another unnecessary variable to contend with when on the water. If you know how to handle a boat you really don’t need either.

Type paddle used: I stick with the basic Euro paddle.

Do you do any other type of paddling besides sea kayaking? I am more of a rabid canoe guy than I am a sea kayak guy. Kayaks are fun but paddling canoes can be a truly magical experience ... especially if you’ve paddled places like the Boundary Waters. I also paddle “old school” whitewater kayaks from the late 80s such as the Dagger Crossfire and Perception Dancer when running rivers – usually on the headwaters of the James River.

Do you regularly do any other outdoor activities? I like to cycle and have three bikes. I prefer to ride “rail-to-trail” type routes along rivers such as the Greenbrier River Trail in West Virginia and the C&O Canal along the Potomac. Even when not paddling it is hard for me to stay away from the water.

How often on average do you paddle between May and October? I have a target goal of paddling at least 40 outings a year ... and keep records of it. I usually make it. If you don’t make paddling a priority, routine life duties often will get in the way of you doing it.

Do any winter paddling? I don’t do much of it. In the past I’ve only donned the drysuits and wetsuits when I’ve hit the wall with a bad case of cabin fever in mid-to-late winter.

Favorite local paddling location: Mathews County has over 200 miles of shoreline and 20 public launch sites along the Chesapeake Bay and its tidal rivers and marshes – it’s a paddlers Utopia. I often run the East River which is home to numerous historic homes dating back to the 1700s along with one of the few remaining tidal mills on the East Coast.

Favorite CPA trip you’ve ever been on and why: My primary CPA activity is the Pirates of the Occoquan. Circumnavigating Eastern Neck Wildlife Area and Wye Island with fellow CPA members were two of my favorite trips. I like paddling along natural and undeveloped areas.

Coolest paddling trip you’ve ever been on anywhere and why? Lots of



Jeff at Fountainhead

Photo by Susan Green

them. Hearing the chorus of loons in early evenings reverberating along the lakes of the Boundary Waters was wonderful. Running the 150 mile long wild and scenic stretch of the Missouri River along the White cliffs in Montana was a great trip. My butt sat on the same rocks that the Lewis and Clark expedition team sat on in their campsites. Seeing the exposed, brown rock cliffs of along Lake Powell in Utah during record low water was another fun and scenic three-day trip.

Scariest/most dangerous trip/experience and why? The dumbest thing I’ve ever done that could have turned into my scariest experience was on a weekend trip to the Apostle Islands in Wisconsin early in my sea kayaking days. A buddy and I were crossing a three-mile open stretch of water in Lake Superior with a fetch between islands running clear to Canada. The winds picked up in the afternoon shooting down the fetch. My buddy said at one point he saw my kayak going down a crest with the stern out of the water at a 45 degree angle. It was June, we were only wearing wetsuits, and while we both were experienced canoeists neither of us had practiced re-entry and rescues in sea kayaks. We made it across without incident -- but we were lucky.

Future bucket list trip: I will get back to the Boundary Waters Wilderness Canoe Area one last time before my body gets too broken down to handle the portages. I’ve been there four times and it’s worth going back again.

Three things you like most about paddling? 1) I love experiencing the natural, undeveloped environment. As paddlers we can get to places most folks will never see. 2) You really appreciate the power of water when your butt is sitting in it in the bottom of a canoe or kayak. I remember the first time I paddled a large swell on Lake Michigan and realized how insignificant I was as the water is a powerful force and would do whatever it wanted to do to me – it truly needs to be respected and be taken seriously. 3) I enjoy the workouts. Paddling pushes you physically if you are up to the challenge of longer runs and occasionally challenging conditions.

What do you like about CPA? Paddlers are just good, down-to-earth people.

One unusual, non-paddling thing other people find interesting about you: I’m pretty much a boring person, but I dabble in landscape photography and have over 35 photos printed and framed on my walls. People, especially paddling buds, think they are cool. ☺

We would like to know about you! Contact Bob Browning if you are interested in a being featured in the Paddler Profile or if you know of someone else he can contact. Contact Bob at: BBBrown-ing43@verizon.net