

He Kayaks to Work

by Joanne Schwartz

A fantasy for many and a delightful reality for one. Awake at 6:25am, Doug Simpson gathers a bag of fruit and begins his daily journey on the back porch. He routinely dresses in Halley Hanson pants with a paddling jacket over his T shirt and shorts or jeans, sneakers on his feet. Yes, he keeps a spare set of clothes at work in case the ride is wetter than he likes. By 6:45am Doug has the bow of his Feathercraft sea kayak in hand and is heading down the quiet street of wooden houses six short blocks to the shore. Perched on a home-made set of wheels, the kayak follows like a dedicated pet on a leash. Doug sets his boat in the water at the edge of an old, man-made ramp of wooden steps, stows the wheels behind his cockpit, and slips into his kayak. He plays a game, especially when the weather is windy and the water choppy, to keep his tennies dry. Then he's off, paddle in hand. By 8:00am he arrives.

Doug and his wife Susan bought their home several years ago with this daily, year round commute in mind. They live in Vancouver and own a kayak manufacturing company tucked along the shore of the quiet east end of Granville Island. Doug designs and makes Feathercraft, a line of high-tech folding kayaks. Although he ships them all over the world for expeditions to remote areas, his most frequent trip is this solo round-trip commute. In the Summer he dons his Roller Blades a couple of times each week. But whenever the streets are wet, which is most of the year, he makes the trip in his kayak. What if it rains? He just adds a hat, and prepares to enjoy an extra measure of solitude.

Along the way he keeps a keen eye peeled for wildlife. Several harbor seals expect him and follow along at the same point in his voyage. During the past two years he regularly sees bald eagles. They watch Doug silently slipping along below their perches. And of course, during the Winter, there's a tremendous population of "ducks," actually grebes, scaups, geese and ducks. He still gets an excited tone of voice describing the Emperor Goose he once encountered and the magnificent Snow Geese he sees only a couple of times each Winter. Too, each morning he pauses during the prettiest section of his route to have a breakfast of several pieces of fruit. It tastes so much more flavorful here than in his kitchen.

Watching people is as interesting as the wildlife for Doug. As he glides along the edge of the Granville Island village, he sees the same folks walking to work every morning. He encounters many of them often enough to feel he knows them, though only glimpsing at their daily life. Like the young woman and man who flirt as they pass each other, one often waiting on a corner for their "chance" meeting. And like the mature woman who beams since she got her new hair piece. Maybe they have noticed him too? He feels like a seal or goose, comfortably blending into the waterway. Maybe not.

But Doug's real treat is at the end of some special days when Susan drops off Evan, now six years old, at work. Dad gets to paddle his son home with him. Evan is bubbling and alive as he drops into the cockpit. His excited utterings along the way often startle the seals and birds. For now Evan just sits in front of Doug, enclosed in a spray skirt designed so they can both share the cockpit. Now Evan has his own paddle and a little folding kayak of his own. There's much designing left for Dad, thought-food for his daily kayak trip to work.

Doug Simpson is the designer of many fine models of Feathercraft folding kayaks.

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<http://www.southwindkayaks.com>
info@southwindkayaks.com