

From the Capitol Hill Times 5/5/2010

Discovering Seattle's coastlines

The view from a canoe is something rarely seen

By Myke Folger

Odds are you'll never meet Scott Schuldt on land.

He is an ex-engineer and a current canoeist, and he has seen Seattle like few others have. For two years now, he has taken his canoe out and paddled through the chop of Lake Union, the enclosure of Portage Bay, out to Union Bay, through the Ballard Locks to Shilshole Bay, around Discovery Park to the sandy edge of Magnolia Park.



□ Capitol Hill canoeist Scott Schuldt stands on the edge of Elliott Bay with his trusty canoe, an Old Town Penobscot. photo/MYKE FOLGER

And for two years, the Capitol Hill resident has been traveling in an Old Town Penobscot canoe he bought for \$500. He's made more than 240 canoe trips since, and on his travels he has seen sea lions, grey whales, otters, ducks, heron and, most recently, beavers.

"I'm tracking beavers now," he said as he docked his canoe on the southern shore of Magnolia, where Magnolia Park ends and where for some, life begins. "They have scent mounds they made at Union Bay."

Tracking wildlife

Schuldt has also seen otters off of Discovery Park and made casts of their footprints in the sand. He never knows what he's going to see during an outing — whether it be the first growth of spring cattails or migrating birds that signify the return of spring. So he brings with him his camera (wrapped in water-tight plastic) a laptop to write his blog as he goes and some plaster of Paris — just in case he finds some tracks that are of interest.

On this particular day, he showed off some molds of otter prints he found in the sand at Discovery Park's southwestern shore. In fact, one particular otter made quite the show as Schuldt paddled in.

Below is a passage from Schuldt's canoe-side report of the event.

"I set out from the south side of Elliott Bay in calm and sunny weather. The Salish Sea is big water and often too windy for an open canoe, so this day is a treat. The tide is falling, and most of the trip will be in 6 feet of water or less. Two Harlequin

ducks, the most beautiful ducks of all, escort me almost to Four-Mile Rock, where the first Goldeneye ducks take over. When I reach the shallow sand flats off of Discovery Park, I beach the canoe and make a quick walk-over to look for animal tracks. I've seen otter here before, but the tracks were poor on that day. It has to be a quick walk, though, as with the falling tide, my beached canoe rapidly moves away from the water.

"Finding little, I wade with my canoe out into the sea until, about 200 yards from shore, I spot a river otter coming in. It has a small flat fish in its mouth, and in the shallows it walks with its front legs only, letting the tail and hind legs float limply behind.

"Suddenly, it reverses direction, and just as suddenly, an immature bald eagle sweeps in and makes a grab at the fish. So, the eagle harries the otter, but seagulls and crows harry the eagle, and soon the otter escapes with its catch into water deep enough to submerge. When that is done, it is time to drop the pencil and take the paddle as two more inches of water have left and the canoe is almost dragging bottom. I wade on to deeper water.

"As I near West Point, I spot a wake in the water behind me, and soon, the head of the otter pops up. It passes me and I follow it, passing within 15 yards of three kayakers who are so busy chatting a storm that they don't see what I am so intensely following. It is not hard to follow as it leaves a trail of small bubbles, even when there is no wake on the surface. Just on the north side of the point, the otter takes to the beach and clambers up into the rocks under the lighthouse and, disappears. I beach the canoe and find a nice set of tracks to cast in plaster.

"Nearby, I find a second, slightly smaller set, and I make casts of them also.

"I have no inclination to return the way I came, so I continue north and then into the ship canal, passing through the locks and then portaging across Interbay from Fishermen's Terminal to Elliott Bay. I run into a newspaper reporter as I beach, and I tell him what I am up to, of course, and invite him to come out in the canoe — because only then is nothing lost in the translation.

Getting intimate with nature

So why canoeing? Why not rock climbing or bicycling? Actually, he's done that, too. Ever the outdoorsman and athlete, Schuldt was a Category 2 cyclist, which means he's good enough roll with Category 1 boys such as Lance Armstrong, though he never attempted the Tour de France. But he did knock out the RamRod at Mount Rainier in a matter of 7.5 hours. He's also toured around Iceland — twice.

Schuldt is also one of the premier artisans in the nation working with beads. He has shown his work throughout the nation at galleries in New York, Ohio, Arizona and throughout the West Coast. (You can see his handiwork at www.scottschuldt.com).

But Schuldt insists being a lover of the outdoors doesn't mean having to scale Mount Rainier or speed between volcanoes in Iceland.

"It's nothing to do with vastness. It's all about intimacy — my wife actually came up with that," he said with a wry smile. "You pay attention to every detail, rumbling in the brush. I've been so immersed paddling 120 days a year that I manage to...you almost never see the [state Route] 520 Bridge or Husky Stadium. That's not lying;

that's my perception."

Former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau encapsulated Schuldt's sentiments even further. Trudeau wrote in 1944: "What sets a canoeing expedition apart is that it purifies you more rapidly and inescapably than any other. Travel a thousand miles by train and you are a brute; pedal 500 on a bicycle and you remain basically a bourgeois; paddle a 100 in a canoe and you are already a child of nature."

So here, in the middle of a given week, is Schuldt, paddling alone in a canoe, sharing that wonder about Seattle's shores. Magnolians, he said, were fortunate. "Discovery Park, the shoreline — it's just cool, the greatest thing. They're lucky to have that."

A book about Schuldt's discoveries and observations may be in the offing — he's entertained the idea. In the meantime, you can catch up with Schuldt's travels at canoepost.blogspot.com.