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MY NEIGHBOR

Local resident finds serenity through a canoe and paddle

By Pam Fleming
STAFF WRITER

Doc Fletcher may be the only canoeist who paddles with a digital audio recorder in his pocket.

That's because the canoeist is also an author who finds peace and serenity by spending time on Michigan's rivers.

"You hear the birds singing and the wind rustling through the trees," Fletcher said.

A veteran canoeist with more than three decades of experience on the state's waterways, the 20-year resident of Novi has a new book out about his canoeing adventures.

"Weekend Canoeing in Michigan: The Rivers, The Towns, The Taverns," has been published by Arbutus Press in Traverse City and is now available at local bookstores, including Barnes & Noble and Borders.

A soundtrack that goes with the book will be produced next year.

Working with Arbutus Press' Susan Bays, he's on contract to write another book on canoeing, "Rivers Less Traveled," to be published in late January.

He even paddled two rivers in one day this month — the Prairie and the Dowagiac. The next day, he canoed the Kalamazoo River in Saugatuck.

"There are actually six rivers you can take out of the town Three Rivers," he said with a smile. For the second book, he's

scheduled to paddle 20 rivers.

He's canoeing the Rouge River with the Friends of the Rouge River on Oct. 25, which should be fun and educational.

"I'm excited about going on the Rouge. I grew up in Detroit, and the Rouge was always the river to me," Fletcher said.

A man and his paddle

His longtime love of canoeing actually began with a trip he missed in 1977.

"I heard fun things about it — great exercise, see the outdoors — and I love the outdoors," Fletcher said.

Then, in June of 1978, he was free to go on a canoe trip, and joined his friends on an adventure on the Pere Marquette in Baldwin. He was hooked.

"I absolutely love the Pere Marquette River, and this year marked my 26th trip down that river," Fletcher said.

His wife, Maggie Meeker, has also been on many of the trips as well.

Fletcher's favorite stretch is on the Jordan River.

"The first 35 minutes are unbelievable," he said. "It's choppy, fast water, but never unsafe. You just feel good. It's a thrill ride."

Retired from Duracell

Fletcher has even more time to canoe after retiring after a 30-

year career as a Duracell account executive in October 2006, when he took a two-year buyout.

"I decided this would give me the opportunity to get more into canoeing, promote canoeing and the state of Michigan," Fletcher said.

The first book, which focuses on locations with canoe liveries, is for people who don't own their canoe.

"This book is more for the weekend warriors who just want to get away for a Saturday or Sunday," Fletcher said. The book, which has a lot of photos, explains how to get to the canoe spots, what stretches to take and who to rent canoes from.

"I talk a little about the nearby towns as well," Fletcher said.

Since canoeing is a summer sport, he also mentions the local Detroit Tigers' radio affiliate for each trip, so paddlers can keep track of the game while on the river.

Fletcher loves history as much as he does canoeing, so the book includes brief histories of the nearby towns.

"I look for the colorful characters and the interesting stories," Fletcher said. "There are a lot of references from the logging days of the 1880s and 1890s. What happened during those days really shaped these little towns."

Fletcher added that canoeing isn't really an expensive sport.

"You can rent a canoe for

about half the cost of a tank of gas these days," he said. Motels along the rivers are inexpensive too, as a lot of them cater to canoeists and hunters.

He plans to write a kids' canoeing book in the future that will feature some of the slower rivers in the state as well as some canoeing techniques and safety tips, although canoeing is a relatively safe sport.

"About the worst thing that can happen is you fall in the water," Fletcher said.

Fletcher has already had several book signings, was interviewed by Jayne Bower of WWJ Radio and was featured in the Aug. 17 travel section of the Chicago Sun Times.

He will also present a video at Michigan State University's Quiet Water Symposium March 7 that focuses on the canoeing industry.

A real canoeing war story

Stories are part of the canoeing experience, and one of the Fletchers' best ones involved the Little Manistee River — one the most challenging in the state.

On a 1987 trip, three inches of rain fell, which greatly impacted the river.

"We could not control our boats. We lost every pad, every cooler, some paddles, and we almost lost one canoe and a canoeist," Fletcher said. "His canoe tipped over coming around

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