

Feathercrafting in Fiordland

by Nora Flight from The Sea Canoeist Newsletter No.54, Dec 1994 - Jan 1995

Having spent half a year in Fiordland over a quartet of decades, Bevan can safely conclude that wilderness trips are only worth considering on a good weather pattern. March 1994 had a lack of any significant fronts bombarding Fiordland, so when my boss announced time off to anybody's request, the opportunity was seized. I'd always wanted a more detailed look in Dusky Sound without having the necessary goal of continuing up the coast nagging at our thoughts, to appreciate and explore those odd comers without looking over our shoulders towards the open sea. As it was, the 'go for it' mentality was hard to deprogramme, as we would casually circumnavigate an island with calm seas beckoning on the outside.

Waterwings at Te Anau charged \$550 for a floatplane to deposit us at Supper Cove. We filled the plane with the two of us and pilot, gear for three weeks, and folded and bagged kayak. Visibility was excellent and kayakers were seen on Lake Manapouri, probably a self-guided trip using kayaks from one of the two hire companies at Te Anau. During our time in Fiordland, we heard of two guided parties kayaking in Doubtful Sound. With the deer roaring season just starting, and a few trampers still around, the floatplane pilot reckoned he'd be flying to Supper Cove every third day. This would be our backdoor retreat from Dusky if the weather didn't co-operate. We hadn't assembled our kayak in company with sandflies before. They were especially frenetic as we fitted spray skirts and dug in those first inertia conquering paddle strokes. We pushed into a sea breeze through Nine Fathom Passage to Fanny Bay, named by Captain Stokes who surveyed coastal Fiordland in 1851, aboard the *HMS Acheron*. The native goose honked our arrival and camp soon was established on a clean gravel beach. The stage was set for our competition between the weather and our fire lighting abilities, as we enjoyed the first of our regular evening campfires. Fresh deer sign marked the beach, much preferred to bear or crocodile sign.

Typical Fiordland visibility and light rain came with the dawn. Into wet polyprops and sodden jacket, but dry socks sliding into dry gumboots. Yes, gumboot wearing in double kayaks elevates the comfort rating of our trips and seems a common practice in the U.S.A. Although we do wear wetsuit booties on days that could hold some chance of a can-out.

Fins zigzagged the water as we rounded into Cooks Channel. The five pound trevally played a 10 minute fight on Bevan's rod before it became tonight's dinner. Raised bony spines run lengthways along both its sides. A sleek powerful looking fish which hunts in schools. We sidled under ratas to make easier progress up Cooks Channel. The ocean swell was briefly felt as we rounded into Cascade Cove, a sheltered refuge for crayfisherman and kayaker alike. The main crayfishing season starts in June and goes through to January. So only the cray pots were present now, cached on the sea bed. Each cache was marked by a colourful buoy identified by equally colourful names such as *Abrolphos*, *Cyclops* and *Sole Command*. We weaved amongst tens upon tens of these buoys, perhaps hoping to connect with one of these boats just around the corner. However, only two empty barges floated listlessly on the empty cove. Fiordland seems very remote without its fishermen.

Heaving the Feathercraft ashore was made easier by a boulder free slipway constructed by sealing gangs for their longboats of 200 years ago. The vista at this place is certainly Fiordlandish, high mountains tinted with the evening sun seemingly

floating on the water. We climbed a spur directly behind the crayfishing base, following a deer trail. Occasional blaze marks of various ages hardly helped. The ridgeline was gained some 220m above the bushline, where we waited for the cloud to clear. Excellent views eventually were presented. Huge Dusky Bay glinting between so many darkened blobbish islands. Cape Providence to the south, had breakers along the way out to sea. To the southeast rolled easy alpine tops with precipitous valleys between. Heavy pugging of the ground immediately around us suggested deer numbers could be on the increase again. En-route to Duck Cove next day, we visited Pickersgill Harbour to wander the board walks and imagine the activity on this small point 220 years ago. Tree stumps covered with moss are historically significant enough to warrant protection by construction of the board walks. The site is perhaps an apt monument to the first astronomical determination of location in New Zealand.

We rounded the outside of Indian Island, enjoying the open ocean surge; then north-eastwards to Duck Cove. Resolution Island has two halves, with the cove being gouged out by ancient glaciers over the last two million years. A significant river drains sluggishly into the head of it, and since it was high tide, we paddled inwards. Rain forest leaned from both banks and eerie logs hid under the brackish water. Shallowness obliged a retreat after a 100 metres. This could be the easiest approach to the island's highest point, Mt Clerke.

A grassy clearing made for a comfortable campsite on the east side of the cove, just before the tidal flats. This was a base for deer meat recovery during the seventies as evidenced by rusting metal bits, deer netting and a cleared boat landing through the rocks. The deer are the only residents of the place now and plenty of them. Late afternoon a frustrated stag sent thwacking noises across the cove, as he thrashed a whippy sapling.

The west side of Resolution has a sheltering peninsula, joined only by a narrow neck of land 100 metres wide. We had an appointment to be at this 'neck of the goose' at 2 pm the next day, using the high tide. En-route we explored around the many islands and kayak sized passages of Resolution. A chance encounter with the only yatchies in Dusky, aboard *Longshot*, had us invited on board for a coffee. The husband & wife team were hoping to complete circumnavigating the South Island by April. Weather was the essential topic and according to their weather fax a northerly was due to hit tomorrow. Bidding each other good luck, we paddled northwards to Goose Cove and the *Longshot* motored southwards.

According to the Begg Brothers (authors of *Dusky Bay*), a southerly roll can bottle-neck into Goose Cove, creating an exaggerated wave. However, the good weather of the previous few weeks meant the roll had lost its punch. A sand spit cuts off the last 2 km of the cove, with a shallow lagoon behind. The bar into the lagoon is not open directly to the south. Surrounding beaches comprise fine white sand from wave action against the rock on the inside of the peninsula. Perhaps because of the sun shining, the lagoon seemed far removed from the harshness of 'proper Fiordland'. A lunch stop on the spit allowed time for the tide to peak and for us to browse for treasures. An intact deer trap was at the western end. It appears that deer trapping suddenly became uneconomical and a lot of wire and warratahs were abandoned.

We paddled up to the neck of land right on high tide. The slight rise and low vegetation enabled the easiest portage we've attempted. Within an hour we had made 3 trips each, carrying gear; and on the fourth, the kayak. A fat eel eyed our booties as

we sloshed in the shallows. Just as well for him we'd been well fed on cod in recent days.

Paddling out of Woodhen Cove to the open coast was highlighted by a balmy afternoon with bright sun and a 1.5 metre roll. The coastline was steep and edged with jagged raw rocks. No chance of landing anywhere along here. The spectacular western rib of Breaksea Island soon came into view, backed by the continuing cliffs of the mainland heading northwards. An impressive contrast from the lagoon we'd left behind. Conditions looked so good as to raise our hopes that Doubtful could be on for tomorrow, despite the forecast. As expected, the following roll seemed to double in size as we pushed into Breaksea Sound against the current. Where fiord meets ocean, the sea bed rises from a deep glacial gouge to a shallow lip and drops away more gradually under the ocean. We tented for three days on a grassy platform above the steep shingle beach of Disappointment Cove. The northerly bore down full force, detaining us as it had Captain Cook. However, an excellent location to deplete our reading supply and use up Alison Holst's scone mix. The storm departed on the fourth day and the bull kelp was all ready for a folding kayak seal launch. This involves a thick layer of the slippery seaweed just above the ocean surge and right up to the kayak bow. I sit in my regular bow position with paddle ready, and at the appropriate surge, Bevan gives the kayak a nudge. It rockets seawards like greased lightning with Bevan neatly splaying himself on the aft deck. Even on very bouldery beaches, this has proved a fail-safe method of launching without knocking the boat about.

Out of the shelter of Breaksea Island we headed northwards into a confused sea. A northerly roll still remained from the storm, and this combined with the southwesterly roll that had been present prior to the storm, had the kayak bucking about with a lot of air underneath. Regularly two waves would crest, shooting the kayak skywards and forwards, waterspouts exploding about. A haze hung over the beach at Coal Bay, indicating a big surf - not for landing at today. On a previous trip, Bevan had been forced to land here as a northerly squall bore down. The Coal River must have been flooded today, the sea surface suddenly colouring a milky aqua. We ground onwards, about one kilometre out from the near vertical cliffs and hillsides. Many waterfalls cascaded off mountain tops or over ravine edges. A large white cruise ship calmly floated past about 3 km to seaward. I fed the fishes and immediately felt better for it. Thus 25 kilometres of open coast lurched by in a quick four hours.

We learnt later (from the *Waterwings* pilot) that the entrance to Dagg Sound is notorious for big seas with certain conditions. We were expecting the normal swollen rolls, but the walls of water that eventuated were quite a surprise. These were not breaking, but certainly caused eyes to boggle when throwing glances over the shoulder. Also, this glacial shelf zone seemed to stretch over a longer distance than normal.

A notch on the north side of the Dagg entrance, north-west of Adieu Point, had been a good landing and campsite for Bevan on a previous trip, but today was shrouded in haze from smokers. So we continued inwards another 4 km to a steep bouldery beach on the south side. A stream was dammed at one end and solid rock made for good fishing perches. The sun shone, transforming the wet drabness to a place raw with beauty.

Rain, and later wind, accompanied the next day. At the head of Dagg is the 1 km long portage to Crooked Arm. The track was clear, but climbs about 30 metres, winding amongst ancient lacebarks and through numerous streams. We decided it was quicker

to disassemble the kayak in 10 minutes flat, and lug it across on our backs and reassemble it after a further 30 minutes. Three other trips to carry our gear across had us completing the portage in 4 hours. Definitely something of a marathon. Pitching the tent at the head of Crooked Arm had us guessing as to where the tide would reach. This came to a few centimetres of the door allowing dishes to be washed from the comfort of our wee sauna. No, not much choice in campsites here. Out in the bay lay a low slung launch housing a half dozen deer hunters from the North Island. Haunches of dark red meat hung under a tarpaulin, tenderizing. Mike emerged from the bush just on dark, the last hunter to reconnoitre for the day. Rolling a Pocket Edition with thickened fingers, he yarned awhile, bemused by our large bundles supposedly being an ocean going craft.

To travel Crooked Arm admiring the sheer mountain faces plunging into the sea, made the portage we'd left behind seem worthwhile. During calm, cold winter weather, the surface fresh water freezes right across the arm, from one mountain wall to its opposite.

Rounding into Doubtful Sound, a 10-12 knot wind was steadily blowing inwards. We hoisted our Genoa sail and had an exciting ride into Deep Cove.