

# FOLDING KAYAKER



**tips & insights on using & enjoying foldable kayaks**

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## New Companies, New Boats Point To Folding Kayak Innovations

*Some exciting  
new boats to  
consider*

The folding kayak world appears to be entering an interesting phase of innovation and development. Already launched, or well advanced on the drawing boards, are a number of new models. Most of these are not coming from existing manufacturers and they literally break the molds of tradition.

What this means for you as a folding kayaker is obvious. Greater choices and many desirable features. I am listing these developments in no particular order below. Future issues of *Folding Kayaker* will have in-depth reviews of many of these new models.

### FirstLight Kayaks

You probably have not heard of this folding kayak company from New Zealand. Yes, New Zealand! I first learned of this intriguing development about three years ago in its early stages. Sure, I was curious. A folding kayak weighing around 20 pounds that was easy to assemble and carry! Over the intervening years, I have had talks with the local venture capital company giving impetus to this exciting new product and with the inventor, Murray Bloom.

When Murray approached me for comments he originally envisioned this as a packable boat to hike with into remote lakes. My comment was that this was an interesting but limited market. Since then, the company's vision has expanded to

develop this as a seaworthy light folding kayak, which it is.

Here are dimensions to make any "go-light" freak drool. Weight: 18 pounds. Length: 13 feet 7 inches. Beam: 22 inches. All of it fitting into a comfortable bag with room to spare for gear.

What makes this low weight possible are two features. First is an ultra light frame of Kevlar-carbon composite long pieces and nylon crossribs. Next are an ultra-light urethane film hull and polyester laminate rip stop deck. The hull is clear, i.e. you can see through into the water you are paddling over. This may or may not be gimmicky but the hull appears tough. The whole boat is quite stiff and not at all floppy or flimsy, although the extreme lightness as you pick it up makes you wonder how anything so feathery can be good.

It is on a number of counts: clever, innovative features; some impressive ways of assembly; and its on-the-water performance. Let me start with the last point. For a variety of reasons, I was not able to paddle it when it was brought to the States. Randy Henriksen of NY Kayak who knows his folding kayaks did and reports to me that the boat was faster than a Feathercraft K-Light. However, Randy felt it was a bit small for him. So the boat looks like it is for someone under 200 lbs. I am scheduled to look at the boat for a formal review.

I was impressed with several aspects of this new boat. For example, I like the end pieces. Instead of having the frame go all

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## NEW BOATS (CONT'D FROM P. 1)

the way to the ends, the last 6 inches or so at each end is made of a rigid foam block against which the frame presses. Normally this is a high wear area on any folding kayak and therefore manufacturers beef up

the hull at that point with extra reinforcement strips or even, metal rails, as does Folbot. Besides low weight, foam has a bit of give to it to reduce abrasion since the skin is not being pinched against the direct hard surface of the frame.

I also was impressed with how the boat assembled. I will go into the innovations in this area when I review the boat. But one thing that almost knocked me over was the simple way the frame was extended inside of the skin. I

thought I had seen every conceivable way of doing this dating back to 1907 but this was unique. Hard to describe, even with photos. Since the long pieces are so flexible, you bend each long piece way to the side. This lays wide open a male/female connection point near the rear. There you slip on a half-round piece of tubing that locks that long piece in its extended position. This is a very easy boat to assemble with no force necessary.

The boat will be priced to be competitive with low end Feathercrafts (K-Light and Kahuna). Marketing plans are still in the works.

## FoldingCraft

You no doubt saw ads for this company's boats starting in early 2001 in popular paddling magazines. I know a number of people saw them and thought they were looking at Feathercraft ads until they realized it was something new. Well, not entirely new. FoldingCraft is the company that is importing Fujita folding kayaks into North America.

FoldingCraft, based in Everett WA, launched its business in June with an

interesting way of selling its folding kayaks. It will not use dealers but instead sell direct in two ways. One resembles what Folbot does. You purchase the boat and have a 30-day guarantee of returning it if unsatisfied and are out only shipping, around \$30-50 UPS (Folbot's customer satisfaction guaranteed policy has an undefined "reasonable" time period that can, and has, run longer than 30 days). The other way the boats are sold is via a rental-with-option-to-buy setup. You rent one of the models (\$30 a day for singles; \$40 for doubles) and you can buy the boat if you want within 30 days. If you do, the rental cost is deducted from the purchase price. You pay shipping; the meter on daily rental fee doesn't start until you get the boat (same when you return it if just a rental, i.e. you don't pay rental while in transit back to FoldingCraft).

The Fujita folding kayaks are almost totally unknown in the US but the Japanese company has been in business half a century and has about half the local folding kayak market in Japan. FoldingCraft is offering 8 models of folding kayaks made by this Japanese company. There are two models each in four categories: Aluminum series; Recreational; Light Touring; and Touring. Lengths vary from 12 ft to 16.5 feet. Weight from around 26 lb. to 40 lb. Prices from around \$1,300 to around \$2,800. Most models have fiberglass long pieces and wooden cross ribs. The hulls are electronically welded and have keelstrips.

FoldingCraft is headed up by Randy King who has several decades of experience in the outdoor product business. For example, he was a co-founder of Outdoor Research Products, a leading producer of outdoor gear and clothing. Randy has a solid reputation in the industry that should assure a good future for this endeavor.

While FoldingCraft is selling Fujita products, it is looking carefully at improving what it gets for the US market. For example, rather than use the standard Fujita rudder, which some people find clunky, FoldingCraft is adapting a better US

## Change In Issue

In order to deal with unavoidable delays getting out the newsletter, I have changed dates. This is the March/April 2002 issue. The last one published prior to this was July/August 2001. Subscriptions have been adjusted to reflect that change, i.e. the number of issues remaining in your subscription is not affected.

Thanks for your patience,



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