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## Ottawa's most unconventional commute to work

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For many, morning and evening commutes to work are necessary, but relatively joyless slogs. It can be a slow drive through traffic, or a cramped ride on the bus, or a bike ride through car traffic that seems intent on making your life miserable. And then you get to work, and your day begins in earnest.

Root Gorelick's daily experience is the opposite. For him, it's a time of serenity and calm, an opportunity to recharge on the way to work or back home, and to let his mind clear. Gorelick, an assistant professor of evolutionary biology at Carleton University, spent most of the last spring, summer, and fall canoeing in to work every day—and loving every minute of his time on the river.

“I can actually let my mind wander for a couple of hours of the day,” Gorelick says. “On the water, there's at least an hour a day where my mind just wanders, and I have lots of creative, novel thoughts. And there's also cool stuff to look at.”

One of the benefits of Carleton University is its natural setting, including its direct access to the Rideau River. But few, if any, Carleton staff had regularly used that river for transportation—at least, until Gorelick came along. He lives just south of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, which is also conveniently close to the river.

Before moving to Ottawa, canoeing wasn't a big part of Gorelick's life, and it certainly didn't factor into his decision to move where he now lives.

“I would go canoeing about once a year, and even then it was a relatively new thing,” Gorelick says. “The first time I stepped into a canoe was probably only a dozen years ago or so.”

Gorelick's commute doesn't start with his canoe, either. At the back of his bicycle is an 11-foot canoe trailer, so he can cycle right to the point at which he launches his boat.

“[The bike ride] is probably about 1.5 kilometres down to the river, and my put-in spot probably takes me further downstream than I want to be,” Gorelick explains. “If I put in right at the nearest spot in the river, it wouldn't be very pretty, and it wouldn't be very easy, so I actually go further downstream and I think it's about 3.5 kilometres paddling upstream in the morning.”

This past year, Gorelick was able to get started in May, despite the still-frigid water and hungry

mosquitoes and blackflies. And because of Ottawa's mild autumn, he was able to canoe all the way in to December. Although it's not the easiest commute—Gorelick himself describes it as “quixotic”—it's worth it for the biologist, from a personal and a professional perspective.

“It's my time alone, which sometimes we don't get enough of, at least as academics,” Gorelick says. “We're supposed to come up with new, interesting ideas, and yet we're not given time to think. So this is the time to think.”

Gorelick has his favourite spots on the urban river. “Just upstream of Billings Bridge, across from the [Billings Bridge] mall and the RA Centre, it's lovely. There's a whole suite of islands in the middle of the river and they shield you from the traffic”.

But it's not an experience entirely removed from city living. And maybe that's a good thing, if you're going to do it every day, he says.

“It's certainly not like my summer wilderness canoeing,” Gorelick says. “This isn't that at all. On the other hand, I suppose, if I dump the canoe and fall in at this time of year, maybe I'll be glad that there's all that traffic sitting there.”

The canoe trip into work might strike some as senseless—even Gorelick admits it's “probably somewhat insane”—but it's worth the trouble, he says. Next spring, keep an eye on the Rideau River when the city's roads are clogged with cars and buses. You might see beaver swimming, fish jumping, ducks diving, and a Carleton University professor paddling to work.

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