Watercraft warnings

Boaters urged to be alert during July 4th weekend

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KEN OSBURN / Staff

Safety is a concern as families gear up for a busy Fourth of July holiday weekend on Upstate lakes.

SAFETY COURSE

The U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary will teach a one-day recreational boating safety course on Oct. 29 at Duke Energy's World of Energy Visitors' Center. Participants must pre-register. The cost is $30 for books and materials.

For more information and reservations contact Tony Quesada at (864) 226-8546 or by email at tqcgaux@gmail.com or contact Jim Rudy at (864) 972-2085 or by email at jimrudy@bellsouth.net.

Corps: Safety should be at forefront of boaters' minds when relaxing at the lake

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Pontoon owner Mary Lewis of Anderson tends to worry when boat traffic is heavy on the lakes, and this holiday weekend is expected to be the busiest of the summer.

"For the most part, when I pass a boat I wave and they wave back. But when it gets crowded, you're hoping they see you," Lewis said. "You do worry about safety when it's busier."

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers ranks the Fourth of July weekend as the busiest on its three Upstate lakes, and that's likely to be the case this year with temperatures expected to soar into the high 90s.

Boaters need to pay extra attention on crowded water, said Detective Rusty Ables, who in addition to being a detective also heads the Anderson County Sheriff's Office marine patrol unit.

So far this year, nine people have died in boating fatalities in South Carolina, according to state Department of Natural Resources data.

"Gathering at the lake to enjoy America's great outdoors is a gratifying way to celebrate this special time, but safety should always be at the forefront of our minds while recre-

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ating at the lake," said Col. Jeff Hall, commander of the Corps of Engineers' Savannah District.

"The number one point for boating safety is to wear your lifejacket," said Brett Witt, DNR spokesman.

"Boating accident statistics compiled by the U.S. Coast Guard indicate that 90 percent of the people who drown in a boating or water accident would be alive today if they had been wearing a life jacket at the time of the accident," Witt said.

Also wear the lanyard attached to the kill switch so the boat and propeller will stop if the driver and riders are thrown overboard, Ables said.

Ables said he's already seen one fatality and one serious injury in two separate boating accidents this year he believes could have been avoided with a kill switch.

Although not required by law, "it's every bit as important on a boat as a seat belt is in a car," Ables said.

Sandra Magee, a Duke Energy spokeswoman, reminds boaters not to drink while operating watercraft.

Magee adds another word of advice — stay off the cell phone when driving a boat.

As when driving a car, inattention while talking on cell phone can cause accidents, and texting is even more dangerous because the operator's eyes leave the water, Magee said.

While talking on a cell phone or texting while boating isn't illegal, operators could be cited for negligent operation, Witt said. "Anyone piloting a boat needs to remain attentive and not get distracted," Witt said.

Also be sure any cooking fires are put out, Magee said.

There have been several recent flare-ups from fires not completely extinguished on islands and at access areas on lakes Keowee and Jocassee, Magee said.

Camping on islands in the Duke lakes has been a problem this year, Magee said. Overnight camping is not allowed on islands in Duke lakes.

The sheriff's marine patrol and DNR will be out on the lakes in force over the holiday weekend, Ables said.

So check to be sure there's a life vest for everyone, obey the rules on the water, focus on safety — and watch the weather.

When Jim Rudy hears a distant boom or a far away flash, he immediately pulls up his fishing gear and heads for the ramp.



PAUL BROWN

Officials say boaters can expect to see intensified safety patrols on Upstate lakes across this holiday weekend.

"If you wait too long, those violent winds may catch you out on the water," said Rudy, a member of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 25 that also will be on safety patrol on Lake Hartwell through the holiday weekend.

Ramps get busy, and boaters can be left waiting in the water for 30 minutes or more in heavy rain, wind, and lightning, Rudy said.

Violent storms also wash trees and limbs into the lakes, Rudy said.

"Boaters need to slow down and be particularly observant of debris in the water on the next day or days after these storms," he said.

With operator errors accounting for 70 percent of boating accidents, according to U.S. Coast Guard data, the Corps of Engineers advises boaters to take a boating safety course.