

As the weather warms up, officials are urging people to be safe out on the water, whether you're swimming or on a boat.
JESSICA NELMS | THE JOURNAL

Danger on lakes heats up

DNR officials: Safety first as the weather warms

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
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The drowning of a young man on Lake Hartwell last week has officials pushing the all-important message of water safety to those enjoying the local rivers and lakes.

Deaths on the water are painful reminders, but as the weather heats up, so do the chances of accidents on the lakes, according to Mike Willis of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources.

"This weekend is going to be the first weekend that a lot of boaters and swimmers will come out to recreate on the water," he said. "It's so important for people to sit down with their groups and talk safety. Some people think it isn't a big deal, but all it takes is a small mistake to change a life forever."

When it comes to boating, Willis said it's illegal and very dangerous not to have a life jacket on board for each person riding, including properly sized children's floatation gear.

In addition, having a fire extinguisher, sounding device for help, two-way communication and a floatation ring if the boat is more than 16-feet long is crucial for the overall safety of each passenger.

"Most boaters know this, as they are listed requirements, but the first weekend out, people are so anxious to get out there that they forget the necessities," he said.

Willis also mentioned having a "float plan" each time a boater goes out on the water.

"It sounds difficult to do, but it's very simple," he added. "All we suggest is that a boat owner tell someone they are close with where they are going and around what time they will be back. That way, if authorities are needed, we have a time span and a general location to make a search easier."

If a family takes to the nearby beaches, Willis said it's imperative to pay extra close attention, even if a child is a strong swimmer.

"We hear horror stories of adults watching kids out by the water and having them drown," he said. "Their response is, 'I just looked away for a second.' That's what we want to avoid."

Willis said 90 percent of fatalities on the lake could be avoided if the victim was wearing a life jacket.

"That's a huge percentage," he said. "There is no rhyme or reason to the number of deaths we have on our lakes each year. ... It's up to you to keep yourself and the ones you love safe out there."

The roads can become a dangerous place too.

"A lot of these trailers sit all winter long and aren't up to par," he said. "A loose tire or malfunctioning controls can cause an accident on the road easily and those percentages increase when the weather gets nicer."

jsibley@dailyjm.com | (864) 882-2375