Event promotes personal watercraft safety

BY MIKAYLA KREUZBERGER
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SENECA — Operators of personal watercraft (PWC) vehicles often are considered pests when zipping across the water and trailing closely behind boaters in heavily trafficked areas of Keowee, Jocassee and Hartwell lakes.

"They get in the way and a lot of them don't know the rules," said Golden Corner Lakes Sail and Power Squadron member Wanda Glover. "Instead of downing them for not knowing the rules, we figured we should embrace and educate them on boating safety."

Glover said the Golden Corner Lakes Squadron is hosting its first PWC event Friday at 10 a.m. at High Falls County Park in Seneca.

According to Oconee County Sheriff's Office Cpl. Jay Freeman, who serves as supervisor for the Marine Unit, a PWC includes any kind of two- or three-seat watercraft only allowed on the water from sunrise to sunset because it does not have lights.

"That could mean a Jet Ski, WaveRunner or Sea-Doo," Freeman said.

Freeman is speaking at Friday's event, which includes a brief safety education course and a day filled with free family events, such as an island-hop Scrabble game and no-money poker run.

"People come to the lakes, and most of them have never rode a Jet Ski or even been on the lake," Freeman said. "They just don't realize there are laws and regulations on the water.

"Our goal is to promote education and water safety, and to make sure that you come home from the lake in the same condition as when you arrived."



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Jim Hublou, administrative officer for the Golden Corner Lakes Sail and Power Squadron, rides his personal watercraft recently. The squadron hosts a free safety education and activity day at 10 a.m. Friday at High Falls County Park.

Freeman, who supervises a seven-person team, said the most common problem with PWCs on area lakes is common courtesy.

"For every 100 boats on the water, there are probably 25 that are pulling someone behind it on a tube, ski, wakeboard, etc.," he said. "It's really dangerous to jump the wake of a boat pulling someone – it's not against the law, but it's courteous to avoid it."

He said the most important laws for PWC operators to know are:

- a PWC operator cannot jump the wake of a boat unless at least 200 feet away from the boat,
- and a PWC should be in idle speed within 50 feet of a moored boat, a person or a dock.

"These are laws because the problems arise when you have a personal watercraft that can reach 70 miles per hour, but the person driving it doesn't know it doesn't have breaks. And, the only way you can steer a Jet Ski is if you give it power," he said.

So, to avoid hitting something or someone while driving at high speeds, the driver must apply speed to turn away.

Freeman said this year there have been no deadly boating accidents in Oconee County.

Glover said the Golden Corner Lakes Power Squadron, one of 40,000 U.S. Power Squadrons, has delivered more than 600 brochures on personal watercraft safety to docks around Lake Keowee.

"That's only one-tenth of the lake," she said. "There are so many more people that could benefit from learning about water safety."

Friday's event begins at 10 a.m., and Glover said she's hoping families will come out to enjoy the lakes and learn how to protect oneself and others from danger.

"We learned that 50 percent of personal watercraft riders are adults – it's not just teens – so we're encouraging couples with children or people with relatives visiting to come to High Falls to learn," she said.

She said guests can ride their PWCs to the designated water area at High Falls and proceed to the open pavilion at the park, where everyone will be served a free lunch.

Scrabble and poker games that include traveling to various islands for clues last throughout the day, and prizes will be awarded. The top prize is a four-person Big Bertha inflatable tube donated by Strickland Marina in Seneca.

PWC operators will be required to provide a name, email address and driver's license or certified boating certificate. Those under 18 years old must have a release signed by a parent or guardian – call (864) 888-4366 for information.

State law requires that persons less than 16 years of age do not operate a PWC unless they complete the approved boating safety course. For information about safety courses, visit http://www.boat-ed.com/southcarolina/. To contact Glover about the event, call (864) 886-8947.

The U.S. Power Squadron promotes safety and offers boating classes for all levels of boating experience – for information about Golden Corner Lakes Sail and Power Squadron, visit http://www.boat-ed.com/southcarolina/.

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