'Look before you leap'

Be cautious swimming in undesignated areas

BY LADONNA BEEKER
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — The warm-weather months have started with at least five water-related incidents — including four deaths — in Oconee and Pickens counties since Memorial Day weekend.

While the Upstate counties are known for state and county parks and lakes with many outdoor water activities, emergency officials warn of the dangers of going into undesignated swimming areas and not wearing life jackets.

Oconee County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Director Phil Shirley said not all water areas in the county are created for swimming, and people who enter those waters to swim are taking a risk.

"You are never certain about what's under the water and how deep it is," Shirley said. "You may be in 2 feet of water and step off into a 10-foot hole. You need to be prepared for that (when swimming in undesignated areas)."

Starting Memorial Day weekend, a Georgia man survived a Sea-Doo Jet Ski accident when the watercraft exploded while he was on the water.

That same day, Jeffrey Scott Powell, 34, of Liberty, died after he fell about 30 feet from a waterfall at Rocky Bottom Creek in Sunset.

Then about two weeks later, Oconee County had two freshwater drownings in mid-June when Troy Jamal "T.J." Brown, 31, of Seneca, died at Chau Ram County Park on June 9. Four days later, on June 13, Jairo Rubio, 26, of Walhalla, was rescued from water at High Falls County Park, but later died at Oconee Medical Center after swallowing too much water.

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SWIMMING:

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On June 23, Randy John Osburn, 29, of Greenville, drowned on Lake Keowee when he suddenly went underwater and never resurfaced.

"We want folks to enjoy themselves and plan and make water safety a part of their planning process," Shirley said. "People should be aware of where they are going, who is with them, and who can swim and who can't swim."

KNOW YOUR WATER LIMITS

Preparation is key when planning for any outdoor activity, Shirley said, but in particular, when swimming in lake areas and parks, he said proper safety measures are recommended.

In designated swimming areas, like most lakes and state parks, Shirley said the water starts off as a "beach area and gradually gets deeper as a person goes out in the water." However, for most county parks without designated swimming areas, the water is not grated for a gradual step.

"The safest educational point we can have is if you are in somewhere you don't know the depth of the water, you need to put a life jacket on," Shirley said.

American Red Cross aquatic specialist Rocco Salinari said swimmers should look in the water before entering.

"We have a saying, 'Look before you leap,'" Salinari said. "There could be underwater obstacles that might have moved in rivers. People should swim in a designated area."

Salinari recommends people take swimming lessons and bring a flotation device to water activities.

"(Flotation devices) are easy to put on and there are different types," he said, adding people with heat exhaustion or any [illegible] should avoid the water until they feel better.

However, in the event a swimmer is in danger, Salinari said it's important to keep knees bent and yourself above water.

"If you hit bottom, push yourself back up," Salinari said. "Keep your knees bent to lunge up and try to get back up (above water)."

The advantage to swimming in designated areas, other than having debris-free water, is lifeguards are present.

"Lifeguards are trained to look for different levels of swimming and different levels of distress," Salinari said. "... If someone is making forward progress, that's an indication that they are OK. When a person is stationary in the water and making no forward progress, that person needs to be looked at very carefully to make sure they aren't drowning. ... Swimming is a skill and a skill that should be learned. It may look easy, but it takes practice."

Shirley said at least one park ranger is on duty at all times in county parks; however, they are not trained on diving and water rescue skills.

"Our guys will do whatever they can to deal with the incident taking place," Shirley said. "They can get themselves in danger by trying to do things they aren't trained for."

Shirley does not foresee park rangers learning dive skills because it will be "a lot of money," and the Oconee County Dive Team, he said, has arrived quickly to recent water-related incidents.

For more water safety tips, visit www.redcross.org/watersafety-tips.

ladonna@dailyjm.com | (864) 973-6684

WATER SAFETY TIPS

Always wear a life jacket if you are a non-swimmer.
Remember that knowing how to swim does **not** prevent drowning.
Keep an eye **on** friends who **are** not good swimmers.
Take a break from swimming **if** you become tired.
Only swim in designated areas, preferably **with** a lifeguard present.
Use a flotation device **if the** water **is** above your **head.**

Source: Oconee County Emergency Services



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Beth LeRoy and her son, Chase, 2, enjoy playing in a water area. Water and park officials recommend individuals use flotation devices when swimming in undesignated areas.