Safety urged on area's lakes

Boating deaths may top last year's total

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Five people have died so far this year boating on South Carolina waters, state data show, and the weather is just warming to pleasant levels for family outings.

At this rate, 2012 could outpace the 19 boating deaths reported by the state Department of Natural Resources for 2011.

Craig Keese, of Simpsonville, knows what it feels like to stand on a lake shore while divers search for bodies. He lost his son and grandson in a boating accident two years ago when a sudden storm came up and their 14-foot fishing boat capsized.

They weren't wearing life jackets, and he doesn't know why. They usually did, said Keese, whose family foundation, in partnership with several other groups, recently funded a new loaner life jacket kiosk, where people can borrow life jackets for the day at no cost at South Cove Park on Lake Keowee.

Loaner life jackets also are available on Lake Hartwell at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer's office at the Hartwell dam.

Few recreational boaters encountered by GreenvilleOnline.com on Lake Hartwell one recent morning were wearing life jackets, and reasons can vary from comfort to odor, but when something happens, there's often no time to put one on.

"The big-time fishermen, the tournament guys, always wear their life jackets," said Adam Roach, manager at Portman Marina. They care about safety and promotion of safe boating practices, he said.

Lake traffic is picking up a little earlier than normal, said George Bramlette, project manager for Lake Hartwell, which, with an estimated 10 million visits a year, consistently ranks as one of the corps' three most visited lakes in the nation.

With that many visits, safety is a priority. Bramlette is to the point with his safety advice.

Always swim with somebody, swim in designated recreation areas, and be familiar with the physical features of the swim-

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ming area, Bramlette said.

"Absolutely don't consume alcohol or any other drug and hit the water," Bramlette said. "Be familiar with the equipment you are using in the boat. Use life jackets and kill switches. Always use caution when traveling outside designated channels."

In addition, as lake levels recede, boaters should be aware of submerged objects getting closer to the surface of the water. The corps uses special buoys to marks water hazards, Bramlette said.

In 2010, the U. S. Coast Guard counted 4,604 boating accidents nationally that involved 672 deaths, 3,153 injuries and approximately $35.5 million dollars of damage to property.

Nearly three-fourths of those fatalities were due to drowning, and of those, 88 percent weren't wearing life jackets, according to Coast Guard data.

The Coast Guard ranked operator inattention, improper lookout, operator inexperience, excessive speed, and alcohol as the top five primary contributing factors in the accidents.

Operator inattention is the top cause of accidents; alcohol is the top cause of deaths, according to Coast Guard data.

The 2010 fatalities include 325 in open motorboats, with 213 of those deaths due to drowning.

Perhaps surprisingly, canoe and kayak deaths were second, more than cabin motorboat, personal watercraft and pontoon deaths combined. The Coast Guard reports 141 canoe and kayak fatalities, with 128 of them due to drowning.

"Always wear a life jacket when you are on the water in any vessel," said Jim Rudy, public affairs officer for the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 25 based here in the Upstate.

People "feel safe and secure" in kayaks and canoes without the complications of motors, gas, electronics, and sophisticated equipment found in many power boats. "However, accidents happen, and people die in canoes and kayaks, most unnecessarily," Rudy said.

The Coast Guard Auxiliary flotilla and the Golden Corners Power Squadron are offering a Paddle Smart course and canoe and kayak safety inspections at 9 a.m. until noon on May 19 at High Falls County Park on Lake Keowee.

Course cost is $25 including manual and supplies. Registration on May 19 starts at 8:30 a.m. To preregister, contact Power Squadron member Marlyn Stroven at 864-985-0788 or by email at mjstroven@bellsouth.net.

The Power Squadron also is offering a five-week safety class for sail and power boats on Wednesdays beginning April 18 from 7 to 9 p.m. in the Tower conference rooms at Oconee Medical Center. Cost is $32 including the manual and supplies, and $5 for each additional family member. The course will satisfy requirements for teenagers between ages 14 and 16 who want to operate personal watercraft, said Stroven, who is the pre-registration contact for this class as well.

Wearing properly fitting life jackets is rule one for Sgt. Ron Winegard, an enforcement officer with the state Department of Natural Resources, who recently demonstrated the importance of a proper fit using his 9-year-old daughter, Caroline.

Life vests come in various sizes specifically for children. A child can easily slip out of a life vest that is too large, Winegard said, as he pulled a well-fastened adult life vest up and over his daughter's head, illustrating how an adult-size life jacket can float off and over the head of a child sinking below the surface.

"Just because you have a life jacket, you need to make sure that it's the right size for them," Winegard said. "Make sure they are snug and put on properly. We encourage everyone to wear a life jacket regardless of if you're in a boat or just swimming. The lake is not flat, you cannot see. Once they go under, it's over with. We encourage everybody that gets in the lake, whether you're a child or an adult to wear a life jacket."