

AMY CLARKE / Staff

Rough water and lightning are dangers storms pose for boaters.

Stay safe on the water

Experts' tips can help you avoid disaster

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It turns out that our hair standing on end really should have been an important clue.

The Internet is rife with warnings – and horror stories – about the imminence of lightning strikes when that happens. The National Weather Service's Lightning Safety website says the phenomenon is caused by the rise of positively charged particles collected by a storm.

"This is one of nature's warning signs that says you are in the wrong place, and you may be a lightning target," the site says.

The best way to stay safe around storms is to stay out of them, experts agree. Keep an eye on the weather and seek safe shelter before a storm reaches you. The NWS says if there are less than 30 seconds between the time you see a flash of lightning and hear the thunder, you're close enough to be struck.

The months of July and August are typically the most active for

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storms across the nation and are when the most deaths and injuries from lightning are reported. It's also the time of year when many people enjoy getting outside and on the water.

Boaters are at high risk from lightning because they are often the tallest object in a large, open space, the NWS reports.

"If you see it coming your way, don't wait and see what happens," said Cpl. Jon Anders, a law enforcement officer with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and a certified boating safety instructor.

"You better start going close to where you put in at so you can get off the water if you have to."

The biggest boating risks in a storm are rough water from the high winds, which can swamp or even capsize small watercraft, and lightning, he said.

According to NWS statistics, three people in South Carolina have been struck and killed by lightning while boating over the past 10 years. Most recently a 19-year-old man was killed in Columbia in July 2008 while riding a personal watercraft.

"The people in the most danger of being struck by lightning are fishermen holding up fishing rods," Anders said.

So stow the rods at the first sign of a storm. And always put on a lifejacket.

"That's really a no-brainer," Anders said.

"If you see a storm coming and the water's getting rough, even if you know how to swim, put the lifejacket on because boats can capsize," he said, or you can be thrown from the boat by a collision, rough waters or even a lightning strike.

If you can't reach the landing to get yourself and your boat out of the water in the face of a storm, Anders said seeking shelter under a bridge could provide some protection. Or, find a sandy beach to tie up your boat and head for land.

The U.S. Forest Service recommends getting at least 100 yards away from the shore in that case.

As a last resort, the NWS recommends boaters drop anchor and crouch down in the center of the boat, staying as low as possible without touching any metal.