

OVERBOARD Though large rafts can handle even Class V rapids, spills can happen, sending occupants overboard. Water safety experts say wearing a life jacket greatly increases your chances of surviving any boating accident.



RANDY SMITH

A TURN FOR THE WORSE

Last year was the deadliest in a quarter-century for boating accidents. What happened, and how can such tragedies be prevented? **BY NICK GEVOCK**

In just seconds, Lanny O’Leary’s float trip down the Dearborn River in May 2008 turned from an enjoyable outing into a harrowing nightmare. Though the river was high, O’Leary and six friends in three rafts thought they could handle the Dearborn. After all, Jeff Rayman, who was manning O’Leary’s boat, was an experienced oarsman. But Bryan Golie, a game warden with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, says the group misjudged both the river and their abilities. “The biggest mistake was going

down the river in the first place,” says Golie, part of the crew responding to the fatal boating accident. “They had a false sense of security because some of them had gone down the Dearborn a few days earlier and didn’t think it would be too bad. But it had rained hard afterward for three days, and the Dearborn was at its peak flow, probably the most dangerous that river can be.”

The Dearborn, which rises from the Rocky Mountain Front, flows east through rolling foothills prairie, and then drops into

twisting, steep-sided canyons before meeting the Missouri River downstream of Craig. Boaters and anglers generally run the river when flows range from 200 to 600 cubic feet per second (cfs). Anything over 750 cfs is considered dangerous. The flow that day was over 5,000 cfs, the greatest volume recorded in eight years.

The trip began at the U.S. Highway 287 bridge, where the water was brown with runoff and overflowing both banks. The group launched anyway and bounced

through one turn after another before reaching a cauldron of rapids known as the Lunch Box. There, O’Leary said afterward, a “wall of water” knocked him, Rayman, and their friend Melody Alvestad into the torrent. The current pushed O’Leary’s body into one boulder after another before he could reach the surface, swim to an eddy, and pull himself onto shore. The 56-year-old Helena resident survived and was finally brought to safety seven hours later by a hovercraft that came up from the Missouri after a rescue

helicopter failed to reach him.

His friends were not so lucky. Alvestad’s body was recovered the next day. She was still wearing her life jacket. Rayman’s body was recovered a month later after the river had receded, in a patch of willows on the banks of the Dearborn, about a mile downstream from the accident. He had not been wearing his life jacket. According to O’Leary, Rayman had removed the safety vest early in the trip because he said it made rowing difficult.

Golie, who lives in nearby Cascade, had never seen the Dearborn raging as wildly as that day. “It was out of control,” he says. “You could actually hear boulders rolling down the river. I don’t know of a time when the force of nature has scared me that much.”

The Dearborn deaths were 2 of 14 boating fatalities in 2008, the worst year since 1983, when 19 people died, and double the average of seven per year during the previous decade.

Liz Lodman, FWP boating education

A Bad Year for Boating

14 people died in Montana boating accidents in 2008, the deadliest year since 1983. From FWP incident reports:

JANUARY 8

Location: Flathead Lake, Lake County

Craft: 16-foot fiberglass canoe

Victims: Male, age 64; female, age 62

Incident: Bodies of husband and wife found on south side of Wild Horse Island. Both victims died of hypothermia. Both found wearing PFDs (personal flotation devices, or life jackets). Air temp 42 degrees, water temperature 36 degrees. Canoe capsized for unknown reason.

MAY 25

Location: Dearborn River, Lewis and Clark County

Craft: 14-foot rubber raft

Victims: Male A, age 44; female, age 48

Other occupant: Male B, age 56

Incident: Raft capsized after hitting large rocks. Male A and female drowned. Male B suffered hypothermia and bruises. Male B and female wore PFDs.

A group of seven people in three rafts put in on the Dearborn River. River running 5,000 cfs after several days of rain (median flow: 250 cfs). Victims riding in middle raft capsized after hitting rocks in "Lunch Box" rapids 7 miles from put-in. Male A rowing raft at the time. Male A initially wearing a PFD but removed it, saying it hindered rowing. Female victim last seen floating face up and unresponsive in an eddy. Male B reached shore and was rescued by a hovercraft. Female victim's body recovered next day. Male A's body recovered June 20.

coordinator, can't explain last year's steep fatality increase. Much of Montana had above-average mountain snowpack that produced heavy spring runoff on the Dearborn and several other rivers where accidents occurred. But in most incidents, river conditions were no different in 2008 than in previous years. Boaters simply—and tragically—overlooked basic safety rules that could have prevented accidents or at least reduced the number of fatalities. "More than anything else, it's life jackets," says Lodman. "If people would wear their life jackets, they'd have a much better chance of staying alive."

RECOGNIZING LIMITATIONS

How did other boaters die last year? On Flathead Lake, a man age 65 drowned after falling from his sailboat. A 53-year-old man fishing the East Fork of the Bitterroot River fell into the water and drowned after his raft hit a logjam. On the Stillwater River, a 50-year-old woman drowned when the raft she was in wrapped around a bridge pillar, tossing all occupants into the water. A 36-year-old kayaker was found dead on the Madison River after his craft flipped and he was pinned against a downed log. (See side columns beginning this page for FWP incident reports for all 2008 boating fatalities.)

Some boating fatalities are unpreventable. "Sometimes people drown and there is nothing they could have done," says Lodman. But in other instances, floaters disregard a river's unsafe conditions and put

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PHOTOS BY RYAN HALL/GREAT FALLS TRIBUNE

themselves at great risk. That's especially true during spring runoff, when melting mountain snows swell streams and rivers into raging torrents.

Lodman says all boaters need to recognize the limits of their craft as well as know their abilities to read water and steer their boat in hazardous conditions. Another mistake boaters commonly make is overestimating their ability to swim—especially in rivers. "Even strong, experienced swimmers can be pulled by the current and held against a submerged log," Lodman says. "The force of moving water is incredible."

Water is also unpredictable. River flows can double overnight from heavy rains or snowmelt. New hazards constantly emerge. "Just because you floated

it yesterday doesn't mean there won't be dangers there today," says Ron Jendro, Recreation Program manager for FWP Enforcement. "You should always be looking up ahead for new obstacles." Many rivers contain logjams and downed trees that can knock boaters from their craft and pin them underwater. Submerged trees called "strainers" sit just under the water surface and can tip a boat.

Lakes and reservoirs also can change quickly, especially big ones like Flathead, Canyon Ferry, and Fort Peck. "You've got big expanses of water, long distances to shore, and open areas with big waves when winds come up," says Mike Korn, assistant chief of FWP Enforcement. "You're approaching conditions like those on the open ocean, and many

TO THE RESCUE An experienced kayaker is brought safely to shore after capsizing above Rainbow Dam on the Missouri River in Great Falls in April 2009. Cascade Search and Rescue, Black Eagle Volunteer Fire Department, Great Falls Emergency Services, and FWP contributed to the rescue.



people get out on our big lakes and reservoirs and are not familiar with those conditions. When something goes wrong, they often find themselves grossly unprepared."

Hypothermia is as big a threat to boaters as drowning. The condition is caused when internal body temperature drops so low that bodily functions slow and eventually stop. According to the International Life Saving Federation, cold water removes heat from the body 25 times faster than cold air. Boaters have died of hypothermia even in midsummer, says Lodman. Because many Montana rivers and lakes stay cold throughout the year, early summer is especially dangerous. Air temperatures can reach the 80s while river water fed by melting snowpack stays down in the 40s.

Hypothermia can take hold even if boaters don't capsize. Golie recalls one mild, late-spring day when two people became hypothermic while canoeing. Though the air was warm, the water was frigid, and the canoeists became wet as waves splashed into the craft. They began to suffer hypothermia and could no longer paddle. Another floater passed the stricken pair and called for help. When Golie arrived, the two canoeists were frozen nearly stiff. "They couldn't move their hands, they couldn't move their feet—they couldn't even talk," he says.

Boating officials have recently recognized a phenomenon called "cold water immersion" that also contributes to boating deaths. When suddenly immersed in cold water, people often hyperventilate and inhale water. The cold water can also rob muscles of their function, causing even strong swimmers to drown within minutes.

NEW LIFE JACKETS ARE SLEEK AND COMFORTABLE

A new generation of inflatable life vests is replacing the traditional bulky pillowlike models many boaters have used for decades. The new life vests are thin, comfortable, and don't restrict arm movement. The old orange puffy vests can be cumbersome and, unless fitted properly, rise up over the head of wearers in the water.

"These new models aren't your grandpa's life jacket," says Liz Lodman, FWP boating education coordinator. "People don't want to wear those uncomfortable traditional bulky life jackets. That's why the new ones are thin and sleek. You hardly know you have one on."

Most new models inflate when the wearer pulls a tab that opens a CO₂ cartridge. Some vests inflate automatically when hydrostatic water pressure engages the cartridge, which can save lives if the wearer is knocked unconscious. "Because the inflation happens after you enter the water, most of these new models are so light and slim you don't even know you're wearing them," says Lodman.

Prices for new vests, in styles and types customized for boaters, anglers, hunters, and paddlers, range from roughly \$100 to \$300.



JUNE 15

Location: East Fork Bitterroot River, Ravalli County

Craft: 13-foot rubber raft

Victim: Male, age 53

Other occupant: Female, age 54

Incident: Male victim drowned.

Female suffered hypothermia and bruises. PFDs available but not worn. The couple was fishing and drifting when the raft hit a logjam and they fell overboard. Female was pulled underwater and then under a log. She was rescued by two bystanders. Male suspected to have hit his head and drowned. Body recovered 1 mile downstream.

JUNE 28

Location: Blackfoot River, Missoula County

Craft: 2-seat raft

Victim: Male A, age 27

Other occupants: Male B, age 31; female, age 38

Incident: Raft capsized at approximately 7 p.m. one-half mile north of Bonner, and Male A drowned. No PFDs worn. The female swam to shore. Male B stranded on a gravel bar and rescued. Male B stated that male A had a prosthetic leg and appeared to have difficulty getting to shore. The river was flowing at 4,020 cfs, 50 percent above median flow of 2,660 cfs. Body of Male A was recovered on July 10, 2008, on the Clark Fork River on a small island near Kelly Island after river levels had dropped.

JULY 14

Location: Stillwater River, Stillwater County

Craft: 14-foot rubber raft

Victim: Female, age 50

Other occupants: Five others

Incident: Raft capsized going over Beartooth Drop when the current forced the raft into a bridge pillar, where it wrapped. All occupants reached shore except a dog tied to the raft frame and the victim, who was held underwater for approximately 5 minutes and drowned. Witnesses saw her surface and float face down. She was recovered 3 miles downstream.

JULY 16

Location: Tongue River Reservoir, Big Horn County

Craft: 11-foot open aluminum motorboat

Victim: Female, age 47

Incident: Motorboat caught in foul weather and victim drowned. PFD available but not worn. Victim fishing when a strong storm with high winds, rain, and golf ball-sized hail set in. Unknown if boat capsized or swamped. Body recovered the next day.

AUGUST 15

Location: Flathead Lake, Lake County

Craft: Unknown

Victim: Male, age 70

Other occupants: Two others

Incident: Victim dove into the lake from the boat but never resurfaced. Body was recovered four days later at a depth of 251 feet.

AUGUST 18

Location: Flathead Lake, Lake County

Craft: Sailboat

Victim: Male, age 65

Incident: Victim appeared to have drowned. No PFD worn. Unmanned sailboat drifted to shore of Big Arm, where a homeowner called authorities. Pilot spotted victim in Big Arm Bay that evening, and body was recovered.

AUGUST 24

Location: Ennis Lake, Madison County

Craft: 19-foot fiberglass motorboat

Victim: Female, age 53

Other occupants: Male, age 56; female youth

Incident: Victim was waterskiing and, while boat was making a turn, crashed into rocks on shoreline, suffering internal injuries. No PFD worn.

AUGUST 31

Location: Deadman's Basin, Wheatland County

Craft: 12-foot aluminum motorboat

Victim: Male, age 54

Incident: Victim fell overboard and drowned. No PFD worn. Blood alcohol content of .313. Witness on shore observed the accident and recovered the victim's body.

LIFE JACKETS SAVE LIVES

Montana safety experts say most boating accidents share common elements. The biggest two are operator inexperience and inattention. "Either people didn't know what they were doing or they were distracted by something else and didn't see the danger," says Jendro. Alcohol also contributes to fatalities. Montana law prohibits anyone from operating a motorboat while intoxicated, but Jendro says drinking while boating is common. "People don't realize that alcohol on the water is like alcohol on the road," he says. "It impairs your balance and judgment, blurs your vision, and slows down your reaction time."

Should Montana do more to protect boaters from accidents and death? Lodman says many states require mandatory motorboat operator education, while Montana law limits education requirements to 13- and 14-year-olds (kids age 12 and younger may

“ People don't realize that alcohol on the water is like alcohol on the road.”

not operate powerboats alone). She says the Montana legislature could require that everyone in a boat wear a life jacket. (Currently there must be a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket in the boat for each occupant, but only children age 11 and younger are required to wear one.) Lawmakers could also require FWP to close rivers to public access during high

IN WAY OVER OUR HEADS

Last year when I read of the tragic rafting accident on the Dearborn River, I looked over at my wife, Lisa, and thought, "That was almost us."

In 2006, I'd made a similar error on the Dearborn that could have cost us our lives. Like the rafters last year, I'd underestimated the river's danger and overestimated my boating ability.

When we reached the Dearborn River put-in, the water was high, cold, and muddy, though not at flood stage. It had rained for about 24 hours straight, so that morning I'd checked the flow on the Internet: 944 cfs, more than three times nor-

NO PREPARATION FOR A MONTANA RIVER Canoeing a wilderness lake in Canada before the Dearborn accident. Note the unsafe absence of a life vest.



BEACHED Boating fatalities often occur when operators overestimate their ability to handle the craft or misjudge changing conditions such as high winds on large lakes and reservoirs. Above: A boat operator lost control and slammed into the shore of Holter Lake. Right: A boat ran into a dock at Flathead Lake before flipping.

water. Lodman doubts any of these measures will happen soon. "The overall attitude in Montana has been that boating involves risks, just like with many other outdoor activities, and people need to understand those risks and take responsibility for their actions," she says. "As for mandatory motorboat education, more than half our fatalities are from rafts, kayaks, and other nonmotorized boats, so it would miss a large share of Montana boaters."

Is there anything boaters can do to reduce the chance of becoming a fatality statistic? "Know the water you're going to be on, know your abilities, and wear your life jacket," Jendro says. "Those things could prevent 75 percent of our fatalities." According to Virgil Chambers, director of the National Safe Boating Council, most of the roughly 700 people

mal. I had only limited experience canoeing rivers, but I'd paddled large wilderness lakes for years. I figured we'd be fine.

By the third bend in the river, I could tell the Dearborn was wilder than anything I'd canoed pre-



who die throughout the United States in boating accidents would likely survive if they wore a life jacket. "When people fall in a lake or river unexpectedly—I don't care if they can swim well or not—it's the element of surprise, and they often go into shock," Chambers says. "With a life jacket on, you can stay on top of the water, right yourself, and get out of the water or get rescued faster."

The tragedy of a man who fell into Deadman's Basin last August near Harlowton is an example. The 54-year-old had been drinking heavily, with a blood alcohol content more than three times the legal limit, when he fell from his boat into the lake. By the time someone watching the incident reached the victim to help, he had drowned.

"The intoxication was likely a huge factor, but I

viously. On the seventh turn we shot through 3-foot-high standing waves, took water over the bow, and had to bail the canoe. Lisa, who also had never paddled a river so rough, asked, "Are we okay?" By then we were several miles into the 17-mile trip. I figured we had no other choice but to continue. I lied and said everything was fine.

With each turn it got harder to keep the canoe from slamming into the limestone cliffs or swamping in rapids. After managing to get us through a particularly turbulent turn, I knew that if conditions worsened I'd be unable to keep the canoe afloat. Then we heard a dull roar ahead and rounded a bend to see 200 yards of boiling river known as the Boulder Garden. I had no time to pull to shore before the canoe plunged into 5-foot-tall waves that crashed into Lisa's chest, knocking her into the river then upending the canoe. Gasping from the

think if he'd been wearing his life jacket, he would have floated long enough for the other guy to save him," Lodman says.

Life jackets also insulate against cold water. The U.S. Coast Guard now promotes what it calls the "50/50/50 Rule": A person in 50-degree water for 50 minutes has a 50 percent better chance of surviving with a life jacket than without one.

Life jackets are especially important on moving water, Golie adds. When someone in a raft or canoe is thrown into the water, a life jacket can help the person get to the surface and swim toward calm water along the edge, where they can at least keep from getting sucked under or pulled downstream. "A life jacket is the seat belt of a boat," says the game warden. "It at least gives you a chance to survive." ■

—Tom Dickson, Editor

SEPTEMBER 13

Location: Madison River, Madison County

Craft: 8-foot kayak

Victim: Male, age 36

Incident: Victim fell overboard, was pinned on a log, and drowned or died of trauma. PFD was worn. Victim and another paddler put in on the Madison River below Earthquake Lake. River was flowing at 3,200 cfs (median flow: 850 cfs). At Earthquake Rapids the victim rolled his kayak over and tried several times to roll upright. Unable to do so, he pulled his kayak skirt and began to swim. He missed a number of throw bags deployed by people on shore. Victim was swept into a vertical log in midstream. While pinned there, he was stripped of his helmet, spray skirt, and PFD. His paddling partner exited his kayak and tried to swim toward the victim. Before the partner could reach the log, the victim was swept downstream floating face down. He was recovered downstream in calmer waters.

OCTOBER 6

Location: Flathead Lake, Flathead County

Craft: Personal watercraft

Victim: Male, age 43

Incident: Details unknown. PFD use unknown. Victim fishing by himself and may have drowned. Body found on shore at Woods Bay.

LEARN MORE ABOUT BOATING SAFELY

FWP provides an on-line guide containing everything you need to know about boating laws and safety. Look for "The Handbook of Montana Boating Laws and Responsibilities" and boating safety courses at fwp.mt.gov/education/outdoorrec/boated.html.

