

Dept. of Justice: DNR law enforcement save stranded boaters during dangerous summer storm

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During a dangerous storm on Lake Winnebago early this summer, Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Conservation Warden Tom Sturdivant and DNR Ranger Jeff Nieling braved treacherous waters to save a couple stranded on a disabled boat. With little regard to their own safety, Warden Sturdivant and Ranger Nieling continued their search even when the waves threatened to submerge their boat. The details of their heroic rescue are below, as told by DNR Chief Conservation Warden Todd Schaller:

At approximately 7:30 PM on July 19, 2017, Conservation Warden Tom Sturdivant and DNR Ranger Jeff Nieling received calls from Calumet County Sheriff's Department of a stranded 17 foot boat in the middle of Lake Winnebago. Strong thunderstorms were moving in and the wind was beginning to gust at 30 plus miles per hour. As you can imagine the waves were picking up and the couple on board the disabled boat were fearing for their safety.

Sturdivant and Nieling responded to the call with the DNR's 28 foot patrol boat (Intrepid) which is docked at High Cliff State Park. They departed the marina and headed south towards the GPS location provided by dispatch. They began searching for the disabled boat, but were unable to locate the boat at the last known GPS coordinates as the waves were so high they blocked the officers' view. They were provided subsequent GPS locations to check by dispatch and the boat occupants. The storm continued to strengthen and the patrol boat began taking waves over the bow and gunwale's. Fearing for their own safety Sturdivant and Nieling temporarily suspended the search and headed towards the west shore to ride out the very heavy seas. At one point the water in the patrol boat was over the officers knees.

The depth finder, search lights, dash lights all went out during the height of the storm. The officers eventually were able to tie the boat off to a private pier and rode out the storm (A huge thank you to the property owners and their neighbors who assisted in securing the DNR boat at the pier).

To quote Warden Sturdivant "Words cannot describe the mayhem on the water... I was honestly worried we were going down at times....and Jeff volunteered for this adventure."

After about 30 minutes the storm slowed enough that the officers felt it was safe enough to leave the safety of the pier and resume the search. The boat was eventually located about 3 miles south and east of Grundman road. The officers brought the very terrified couple onboard their boat. The disabled boat was towed into Grundman boat launch just north of Oshkosh and tied off at approximately 11:10 PM.

I [Chief Conservation Warden Tod Schaller] met the officers at the landing. As I assisted the female passenger out of the patrol boat and onto the dock she gave me a big hug. She was shaking and had tears in her eyes. She told me how grateful she was for the officers that risked their lives to save her and her husband. She said that this was an absolutely terrifying event.

Both Sturdivant and Nieling were exhausted upon their arrival at the boat landing and it was very clear to me that they gave it their all to save this couple. The patrol boat sustained damage to the props and gunwale during the search and rescue call. Another strong thunderstorm was heading towards Lake Winnebago so shortly after securing the disabled boat to the dock and assisting the passengers to shore Sturdivant and Nieling decided to limp the boat to High Cliff State Park. It began to rain again as soon as they finished tying up at High Cliff State Park.

In Wisconsin, enjoying our beautiful lakes and land is common practice during all four seasons, and law enforcement make it possible to do so safely. Thanks to the heroic actions of Conservation Warden Sturdivant and Ranger Nieling, two people went home safely at the end of the day, luckily, with only repairs needed to their boat.