

Dept. of Natural Resources: River safety starts with a life jacket

Posted on Friday, Jul 3, 2020

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

MADISON, Wis. – Summers make for long, busy days on the 84,000 miles of Wisconsin rivers as residents and visitors load picnics, canoes, kayaks and kids' toys for memorable fun along the shores and in the waters.

This season, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' conservation wardens, local authorities and first responders are urging attention to safety when planning activities near and in rivers. River safety tips stem from a foundational belief of having respect for the river and its shores. Be smart and stay aware because a river's potential danger is often not visible to the human eye.

These potential risks are why conservation wardens and area agencies stress the importance of wearing a life jacket – especially for children who find shorelines particularly inviting. The higher, fast-moving water can tax an individual's boating, paddling and swimming skills.

“What may look like a flat, inviting river or stream, may disguise a fast-moving current pulling debris out of your sight and under the surface – and could put you in danger without a lot of warning,” said Capt. April Dombrowski with the DNR Bureau of Law Enforcement.

The same life jacket tip applies to lakes, which also are subject to changing conditions often linked to weather events. However, rivers present continually changing conditions – most often choreographed by the ever-changing currents. Currents are powerful forces that can reconfigure shorelines, carry and hide debris and construct or destroy sandbars that otherwise look deceptively solid.

Life Jackets Are A Top Safety Tip For Boating And Exploring Shorelines

Wardens and authorities say their unified goal is to highlight the importance of wearing life jackets and how to be safe while having fun. There are many styles and sizes of life jackets, making them comfortable for any outdoor activity. Authorities say putting a life jacket on a child looking to play in the sand near the water is a must.

“Always wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket when venturing out on the water,” Dombrowski said. “Wearing one just might save your life.”

The sad truth is that most drowning victims on Wisconsin waterbodies were not wearing life jackets. Wisconsin rivers are safe and family-friendly places to spend a summer day or a few days, but safety and respect for the water should always be on your mind.

Life jackets will keep you on top of the water if you walk off an unexpected drop-off, a current overpowers you or you fall out of a boat. Putting on a life jacket before wading, playing along shores or getting in a boat gets you ready to focus on the fun.

Sandbars Are Not Permanent

Wardens and authorities say a river’s flow is always rearranging sandbars – which are not permanent islands. The water moves the sand, thereby strengthening and weakening these temporary islands.

That means a sandbar may hide a steep drop-off or a deep hole into the rapid current below. The best safety tip is to assume a sandbar cannot support a person’s weight.

Currents Can Overpower A Person Of Any Size

Authorities say a river’s current often is not easily noticeable to the person standing on the shore or even wading at the edge. However, it can be strong enough to overpower a person and make even the strongest of swimmers unable to swim against it.

Get your life jacket and plan your summer fun with recreational boating, paddling and swimming. For more information about portable flotation devices, visit the DNR’s [PFD webpage](#).