

Uneducated boaters dominate workload for officers on Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Speeding watercraft, life vests, distressed boaters and trapped raccoons – all things the men and women who patrol Lake Tahoe must contend with throughout the boating season.

With the lingering winter weather, summer on the lake is really starting this weekend. The empty moorings bobbing in the water and vacant slips indicate either a slow start to the season or people don't have the money for this sport.

This isn't a leisure ride for the officers as they motor around in their boats. While multiple jurisdictions are on the water, there are no real lines delineating boundaries. They help each other help those on the water.

An urgent call comes across the radio about 5:30pm Friday. A 30-foot boat is taking on water near Cave Rock.



Coast Guard
Petty Officer
Kyle Rahn,
right,
inspects Kelly
Rogers' boat.

Photos/Kathryn

Reed

South Lake Tahoe police boat patrolmen Steve O'Brien and Dave Gottlieb are closer to Emerald Bay than to Cave Rock. Still, when an "urgent marine information bulletin" is put out, it means everyone responds.

With the throttle down, they arrive first. Close behind are the Coast Guard and Placer County boats.

Kelly Rogers of Reno seems relaxed for a man whose boat is supposed to be sinking. It turns out the bilge is able to pump out the water that keeps coming in, but he doesn't want to start the motor for fear of doing some serious damage to it.

He's told no one there can tow him per Coast Guard regulations because he is not in imminent danger. He's told to call Vessel Assist. It's like the AAA of the water. He balks at the fee.

O'Brien and Gottlieb let the Coasties take over – they are the senior guys on Lake Tahoe. An inspection of Rogers' boat turns up the required life jackets, but he doesn't have a fire extinguisher.

Before arriving at the scene, the South Tahoe guys had been dealing with a couple celebrating their 17th anniversary lounging in an inflatable boat near Ski Beach. Their tranquility was disturbed when the two were told they must have a lifejacket on board.



Officer Steve

O'Brien gives a couple life vests before they paddle to shore.

That's the rule. All boats must have life jackets for the people in the vessel if more than 200 feet from shore. Anyone 12 and younger must be wearing the vest at all times.

The couple from the Sacramento area handed vests and told to paddle to shore. The vests are then returned to the officers.

Earlier on the Nevada side the two check out the buoys where the barge will be tied up for the Fourth of July fireworks that are shot off on the South Shore. That barge used to be the original Dixie paddle-wheeler.

It's the boat patrolmen's job to keep a 1,000-foot perimeter around that barge and the three tied to it so no boats get near where the pyrotechnic display originates. Between 500 and 700 boats are on the lake each July 4.

O'Brien and Gottlieb say it can get a little crazy with people not used to boating at night and many having been drinking for hours.

While in the area on Friday they meet up with Jim Hill and Jim Warne on the Douglas County sheriff's boat.

"We saw two boats with obsolete two stroke engines. We were on other calls and couldn't get to them," Hill said of the serious polluting machines. "So the people doing the boat inspections are not checking engines."

A week ago the Douglas County boatmen made a felony arrest. A guy at Secret Harbor was threatening people with a blow gun.

It's not just people that are problems.



Officers Steve
O'Brien and
Dave Gottlieb

Puttering around the homeowners' area of the Tahoe Keys a guy on a boat waves down the officers, asking what to do about the raccoon that is trapped on his boat in a compartment. He is told to call Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care.

The El Dorado County sheriff's boat comes by. They are headed back to the lake after towing in retired Superior Court Judge Jerry Lasarow. Deputy Mike Sakau and Sgt. Bruce Rosa are going to investigate a report of a log near Rubicon Bay.

South Tahoe has two boats on the lake this particular day and will do the same through the Fourth. Hours and days vary for the various departments.

Most boat programs in California are funded through a grant from the state Department of Boating and Waterways. SLTPD's boat patrol has existed since the 1970s. It's reserves or retired officers on the water.

The three main functions are enforcing the law, education, and search and rescue. Last year there were three deaths on Lake Tahoe – one at Camp Richardson, one at Sunnyside, and another on the North Shore.

This aluminum craft has a hose on it that allows water to be pumped from the lake in case the crew needs to fight a fire. Flipping a switch allows the hose to extract water from a sinking boat.

Much of this particular day is talking to people about slowing down to at least 5 mph in no-wake zones and ensuring people have Coast Guard approved life vests. Everyone on a personal watercraft must wear a vest.

These two say the lake appears 5 feet higher than it was a year ago. Water is under docks and piers – a sight that hasn't been seen for years. Kiva Beach doesn't have much sand. Beaches appear more full than they really are because there is so much less space than years past.

O'Brien is emphatic in wishing there were some sort of license for people to be allowed to operate a boat. Anyone 16 and older can do so. People 13, 14 or 15 can drive a boat if someone 18 or older is on board.

It's not just boaters the patrol units keep an out on. At Timber Cove Pier a couple boys are playing on the steps and in the water. O'Brien asks them what the sign says. They read it. "No swimming or diving." They get out.



Despite a lecture from Officer Dave Gottlieb and saying he understood, the teen keeps going too fast for where he's at.

Lake Tahoe is 60 degrees now. It doesn't take long for hypothermia to set in.

Bob Hassett, who operates the concession at Timber Cove and most of the South Shore marinas, chats with the officers.

"Our biggest challenge is the cold water. We educate people how serious it can be," Hassett said.

The officers work in tandem with marina owners and their employees. At Ski Run an 18-year-old on a personal watercraft is going faster than he should be. He's not listening to O'Brien and Gottlieb. The two tell a marina employee the teenager needs to have the keys taken away. She says she's on it.

The officers move on to the next incident. There is always something to do when patrolling Lake Tahoe.