

Yosemite deaths: Americans may have lost respect for nature's risks

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK – Just three weeks after death laid a heavy hand on the Merced River, sweeping three tourists to their deaths over Vernal Fall, life went on for a new crop of visitors, some of them oblivious to the danger before them.

On Wednesday, children waded in a small eddy just 50 yards from the edge. Some playfully teetered on a log that separated the eddy from the river's torrent. Upstream, a man swam across Emerald Pool and back, crossing the Merced River current and ignoring warnings and prohibitions posted nearby.

It was just another summer day at Yosemite, one of many natural wonders in California that routinely tempt people to toy with danger.

The park has seen 14 deaths this year. That is about double the average for the season, but not record-setting.

There have been dozens of other deaths across the state, including ski and snowboarding fatalities during the winter, and numerous drownings in the months since, including two professional kayakers killed separately on remote Sierra Nevada creeks in recent weeks.

It is the kind of year that causes experts and casual hikers alike to question their relationship with nature. Are we underestimating the risks of commonplace outdoor recreation? Have modern Americans – taskmasters behind a steering wheel and in front of a computer – simply lost respect for nature's whims?

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