

Search and rescue training turns into recovery of kayaker

By Linda Fine Conaboy

MEYERS – Search and rescue volunteers know when they sign up for the job no two days will be the same, a generalization they discovered to be tragically true on Saturday during what was supposed to be a routine training exercise.

The SAR training cadre, consisting of Marcel Rowley, Terry Carroll, Nathan Smith, Chris Stanton, Bruce Donley, Sten Seeman, Charlie Powers, Brian Tupper, John Nugent, Mike Mullens, Matt Massie and Sienna Smith under the leadership of Scott Gabler and Deputy Greg Almos had finished a water rescue training class on the Upper Truckee River and had just arrived at Camp Richardson to complete their smooth water maneuvers.

According to Almos, suddenly a 911 call went out and the SAR team-in-training made their way to the vicinity of the Valhalla pier where a male had jumped off of a kayak and attempted to swim to shore.



El Dorado County search and rescue volunteers on June 2

train in the Upper Truckee River. Photos/Linda Fine Conaboy

“We had two boats in the water,” Almos, who leads the El Dorado County Sheriff’s Department SAR unit, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “The SAR volunteers ran to help and with the assistance of Camp Richardson employees, immediately pulled the victim out of the lake and started CPR.”

Almos said the SAR team continued administering CPR even after the medics arrived to start their advanced care procedures. According to Almos, rescuers were able to detect a pulse after performing CPR, but the Bay Area man died the evening of June 2.

The 31-year-old from Antioch has not been identified pending notification of family.

Almos, who is also in charge of the Office of Emergency Services as well as the boating program, said more adults than kids are rescued by the SAR team, mainly because adults are more daring and kids tend to be supervised, a fact that proved true on Saturday.

He said lake rescues happen fairly frequently, but not often in the rivers. “If someone is in distress in swift water, it’s tubists and sometimes it’s kayakers,” he said of river rescues. “This is a mild year because the water [in the rivers] isn’t so high.”

Saturday’s training class started on the Upper Truckee River where it flows through Meyers and passes the banks of the old Sierra Pines Campground. It is designed to give awareness and beginning insight into various types of water – standing or flowing waters, Almos explained.



“People need to understand that cold water can be very dangerous.” – El Dorado County sheriff’s Deputy Greg Almos

During a moving water rescue, ideally, there will be two people downstream to snag a victim who may have slipped by the upstream team. Rescuers communicate by a series of whistles; one blast is an attention getter; two blasts notifies people something is coming and to look upstream; three short sounds means something is happening downstream and three long blasts indicates an emergency, or that a rescue is in progress.

Almos cautioned that it’s important to do what you can do to rescue someone while you’re onshore rather than wading into the water – especially if you’re alone.

“You could attempt to use a throw bag (an inflatable attached to the end of a rope). Going in after somebody has to be well thought out. You need a support team for that,” he said. “Do what you can do from shore.”

The 11 people involved in Saturday’s rescue are all volunteers, ranging in age from 18 to 50 and are part of a larger group totaling 35 within the Lake Tahoe Basin in El Dorado County. There are about 100 volunteers located on the West Slope. They all have pagers and are on call 24/7.

“We run anywhere from 50 to 70 calls annually,” Almos said. “Although most calls are for backcountry rescue, all of the rescues are performed by the team.”

He added that the Placerville team handles between 20 to 40 calls each year.

“People need to understand that cold water can be very dangerous. Plan your recreation. Don’t be impulsive. Always have people with you and always have a life jacket if there is a chance you could be submerged. It’s all about safety and avoiding a problem,” Almos said.

Notes:

- The 2012 National Search and Rescue Conference is June 4-6 at Harvey’s in Stateline. The conference is a combined presentation by the Mountain Rescue Association and the National Association for Search and Rescue and features various exhibitors, speakers and workshops.
- The third annual El Dorado County Search and Rescue Appreciation Day is June 20 at Riva Grill in South Lake Tahoe from 5-9pm. More information is on the flyer.