

Coasties hope to avoid deadly Tahoe boating season



Safety is a concern for motorized and non-motorized boat users at Lake Tahoe. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Terra Breeden

Summer weather has finally arrived in Lake Tahoe and with it, recreational users are heading to the lake, rivers and beaches to enjoy the water. But this past winter, with its record-breaking snow accumulation, has caused extremely low water temperatures, high water levels and hazards where previously there was none. Users of motorized and non-motorized vessels should be extra cautious this season.

“Lake conditions change quickly and that’s something to understand. Water temperatures are rather bracing and altitude also plays a part in how people feel in the water,” Carol Chaplin, president-CEO of Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

It is important to exercise caution on the water whether

conditions are different or not. But this summer, cold water temperatures may last longer due to the vast amount of snow lingering in the upper elevations.

“Recreational users such as boaters, rafters and beach-users should remember that snow melt water is very cold and hypothermia can develop quickly if exposed to it for even short periods of time,” Lisa Herron, with the USFS Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, said.

According to the U.S. Coast Guard, the water temperature in Lake Tahoe will remain frigid until late July, making it dangerous for recreationalists. Last year, there were nine boating fatalities on Lake Tahoe. Seven of those victims were on kayaks or paddleboards.

Nationwide from 2015 to 2016, deaths increased 12 percent from 626 to 701, injuries increased 11.1 percent from 2,613 to 2,903, and the total number of accidents increased 7.3 percent from 4,158 to 4,463, according to the Coast Guard.

“The No. 1 cause of fatality was water-shock and hypothermia,” Luke Berghuis, petty officer first class of the Tahoe City Coast Guard, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Most of the fatalities last year were in less than 10 feet of water, and the water temperature is going to remain colder this year due to snow melt. It’s going to take a long time for this snow to melt off.”

According to Berghuis, paddleboarders are a main concern of the Coast Guard because often they don’t wear life jackets or leashes.

“Paddleboarders are our highest fatality rate on the lake,” Berghuis said.



Safety and advice

Beach users

- Plan ahead – Check out beaches ahead of time so you know what to expect and whether or not your favorite area is open. If you can't get to your favorite place, think of it as an opportunity to explore new areas.
- Arrive early – In order to secure a spot for your outing, you may want to arrive early, particularly on busy weekends. Have a backup location in mind in case some areas are too crowded.
- Check out – California State Parks and Lake Tahoe Nevada State Parks for advice about what to

expect when visiting their locations.

Boaters

- If you are on a kayak or paddleboard, always wear a lifejacket.
- Have a float plan.
- Know where you are going and where you are on the lake. If you need to be rescued, it is important to know where you are and have familiarization with the area.
- Make sure your radio or cellphone is charged. For cellphones, put in a dry bag to keep it operable in case you do fall in or capsize.

High wind and choppy waves can knock a person off of a paddleboard and make it nearly impossible to get out of the freezing water. Lake Tahoe is well-known for its windy afternoons, and when the wind picks up, the Coast Guard receives a high volume of emergency calls, usually between 4 and 6pm.

According to Berghuis, watercraft-borne authorities such as the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department will be issuing tickets to paddleboarders and kayakers who don't have a life vest. The fine can be up to \$350. They don't have to be wearing it, but it needs to be close at hand, easy to reach.

"The sheriff's office will be pushing that this year because of the high number of paddleboard fatalities last year," Berghuis said.

Another danger boaters should be aware of are obscured boulders in the water. The water level of the lake is currently at 6,228 feet, that's 5 feet above the natural rim. While high water levels are great for a lake recovering from a

four-year drought, huge boulders which were once exposed in places like Sand Harbor and Logan Shoals are now completely under water, some just inches below the surface. Boaters can easily run into rocks in many areas and should scan the water carefully when boating near the shoreline.

The rising water has also diminished Tahoe's beaches, eating up the shoreline and everything on it. Logs that were previously on the shore are now bobbing in the water, creating more hazards for boaters to be wary of.

"All of the dead trees that used to be on the beach are now floating, so there's a lot of debris in the water," Berghuis said.

But there is some good news for Lake Tahoe boaters: every one of the launches and marinas on the lake will be open this summer. Last year, only three launches were fully operating.

However, the Coast Guard anticipates that there will be less boating activity on the lake than in previous years.

Lake Tahoe isn't the only lake in California with high water levels, all of the lakes and reservoirs are overflowing with water, and brimming lakes such as Folsom Lake are expected to draw visitors away from Lake Tahoe.

"Because all of the lakes are full, people will stay down in the valleys and recreate in reservoirs. We hope that will cut down on Lake Tahoe visitors this year," Berghuis said.

Whitewater is a danger for river rafters and hikers exploring the backcountry. This year, Lake Tahoe's rivers and streams are swollen and flooded with high water moving at breakneck speed. Recreationalists should exercise care when rafting or crossing the rivers.

"Avoid areas that are flooded, especially if the water is flowing fast, and try not to cross swift-moving rivers and

streams. Water levels can fluctuate rapidly, so a stream crossed earlier in the day may not be able to be crossed later in the afternoon as the temperature rises," Herron said. "In the backcountry, hikers may encounter snow bridges across rivers. Be sure to test them thoroughly before crossing as they might collapse under you weight."

But for adventure-seekers, the rushing water in Lake Tahoe's rivers and streams adds fun and spectacle to their experience.

"On a positive note, waterfalls are impressive right now and the rafting season may be extended longer than in previous years," Herron said.