

# Accident Database

**Report ID# 39765**

Help

2018-10-08

Date

Matthew Hughes

Victim

35

Victim Age

Elkhorn Creek

River

Forks of the Elkhorn

Section

Jim Beam Old Granddad Distillery Dam United States Kentucky, US

Location

850 cfs

Gage

Medium

Water Level

III

River Difficulty

Injury Type(s)

- Does not Apply

Factors

- Other

Private

Trip Type

Kayak - Other

Boat Type

Group Info

Other Victim Names

Reported

Status

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## Accident Description

Time 1:39 PM Recreational boater, wearing a PFD. Portaged the dam but apparently set in too close and got pulled back in and recirculated. Rescue was attempted by the victim's friends, but victim could not hang on to the rope. Body later found downstream.

<https://www.state-journal.com/2018/10/09/kayaker-who-drowned-in-elkhorn-creek-identified/>

<https://www.state-journal.com/2018/10/08/drowning-reported-on-elkhorn-creek/>

**FRANKFORT, Ky. (WKYT)** - The Franklin County Sheriff's Office says one man is dead after a kayaking accident in Elkhorn Creek. Sheriff Pat Melton says the man drowned after he put his kayak too close to a dam. The current sucked the man underwater. The man's body was recovered near the end of Colston Lane.

"Tragic end to a beautiful day. Up to that point they did everything right. He was wearing a life vest, so he was doing everything he was supposed to be doing," Sheriff Melton said, "Just the water, as you can tell, it's flowing

Authorities have not identified the man who drowned. Kentucky Fish and Wildlife is handling the investigation.

FRANKLIN COUNTY

# Lexington man dies in Elkhorn Creek kayak accident

BY MIKE STUNSON

*Lexington herald-leader.com*

October 09, 2018 10:58 AM

A 35-year-old Lexington man died Monday in a kayak accident at Elkhorn Creek, according to the Franklin County coroner.

The man, identified Tuesday as Matthew Hughes, drowned after he put his kayak too close to the dam, Franklin County Sheriff Pat Melton told [WKYT](#). His body was recovered near the end of Colston Lane, [WKYT](#) reported.

LINKEDIN

GOOGLE+

Hughes died at 4:19 p.m. Monday and his autopsy was scheduled for Tuesday, the coroner's office said. The incident remains under investigation.

PINTEREST

REDDIT

PRINT

MORRIS Hughes drowned while kayaking down Elkhorn Creek, one of the state's longest creeks at 17 miles. He reportedly gotten sucked into the undertow after getting too close to a dam. After holding onto a rope for nearly two minutes, he went underwater. Elkhorn Creek photo by Charles Bertram [cbertram@herald-leader.com](mailto:cbertram@herald-leader.com)

FRANKLIN COUNTY

## Kayaker's death spotlights Elkhorn Creek's hidden dangers

BY CHANDA VENNO

*The State Journal (KPNS)*

October 22, 2018 06:22 PM

When 35-year-old Matthew Hughes launched into Elkhorn Creek on his kayak on Oct. 8, he had no idea it would be the last time he was on dry land.

Hughes and friend Ronald McCarty, both of Lexington, had gotten sucked into the undertow after getting too close to the dam.

McCarty was rescued by emergency crews. Hughes, whose family described him as an outdoorsman who was always up for an adventure, was not as lucky. After holding onto a rope for nearly two minutes, he went underwater.

His body was discovered downstream, in Elkhorn Creek near Colston Lane, by passing kayakers almost two hours later. He was pronounced dead by Franklin County Coroner Will Harrod at 4:19 p.m.

Despite taking precautionary measures, such as wearing a life preserver and kayaking with a buddy, Hughes fell victim to the hidden dangers of Elkhorn Creek.

According to Nathan Depenbrock, who, along with wife, Allison, co-owns Canoe Kentucky and has been paddling on the creek for the past 17 years, the stretch where Hughes went under is considered advanced — for more serious, educated boaters.

“They know the dangers of dams and do what is right and walk around it,” he said, adding that his business, the area’s premier paddlesports business, has only put 16 of its nearly 15,000 customers on that stretch this year. “It is much more difficult water to paddle.”

Per Canoe Kentucky policy, it will only rent boats for that area when the water is at very particular levels, which is a small window, according to Depenbrock. Boaters also must have already traveled that stretch with staff on a previous trip.

In fact, the shop also cuts off rentals any time the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) gauge at Knight’s Bridge, on Peaks Mill Road in the northern part of the county, goes over 5 feet. On the day and time Hughes was kayaking, the gauge height was 3.9 feet, which means caution is needed when paddling.

The dams become more dangerous at higher levels, Depenbrock said, explaining that the boil line, which is created when water comes over the dam and goes to the bottom, then drifts downstream before emerging as what appears to be boiling water, is farther downstream as well.

of,” he added.

Higher water levels can move the boil line 20 feet to 30 feet downstream, making it easier for paddlers to end up in the dam’s recirculation. While there is a sign warning of the dam’s dangers, Depenbrock estimates that the majority of boaters on the creek are not properly educated on proper paddling conditions or how to dress, among other issues.

“Canoe Kentucky accounts for about one-fourth of the users, if not less. That means the more people (on the creek) that are not educating themselves, the more accidents we’ll have,” he said, adding he has noticed an influx of people paddling in unsafe conditions this year over previous years.

With 2018 being one of the wettest on record, water levels have been higher than normal. Even if it rained in Lexington or Georgetown the day before, the creek could come up in an instant. “It takes almost 24 hours for water to get to Frankfort from Lexington, so a water rise can happen out of the blue,” Depenbrock said.

While he recalled a paddler’s death occurring on Elkhorn Creek in the early 1980s, Hughes is the first Depenbrock remembers ever getting pulled into the re-circulating hydraulic, although roughly 5 years ago a low-head dam claimed the life of a fisherman.

On July 7, 2013, a 28-year-old Georgetown man, who was fishing with a friend near a low-head dam on the creek near Forks of Elkhorn, slipped into the water, which was 8.6 feet deep at the time, and drown. The current sucked Buford J. Barron III toward the dam where he briefly resurfaced before he was submerged.

He had fluid in airways, nasal sinuses and other areas, which led caused his death, despite the fact that he also suffered blunt force trauma to his head in the fall, which was a secondary cause, Harrod said.

A Scott County Sheriff’s Office helicopter spotted Barron’s body in the creek near Jim Beam’s Old Grand-Dad Plant the following afternoon, but rescue crews were unable to recover his body until the next day, when it was found about 200 yards downstream.

Whether fishing or boating, it is always best to exercise caution near any body of water.

good at all stored inside your kayak or strapped to the deck of your boat. It only works if it is on and properly fitted. Not only does it float you and, some will float you face up even if knocked out, but they also act as a pad between you and the creek or river — allowing protection of your vital organs. They also insulate you, so when immersed, they will keep you warm, and when you get out of the water, they will hold some body heat in.

Talk to the folks at a specialty shop, not a box store. Find a shop that knows the local water and can educate you on it.

Take a class. Numerous local shops, outfitters and clubs offer classes. These will get you off on the right foot.

Join a club. There are numerous ones for all sorts of paddling. Bluegrass Yak anglers (statewide), Elkhorn Paddlers (Frankfort), Bluegrass Wildwater Association (Lexington) and Viking Canoe Club (Louisville) are a few. These are great resources and offer classes and trips.

Buy a decent boat. Boats have a cost for a reason and a good boat will last longer and be more suited for a safer experience. There are numerous things on good boats that make them safer and many things on cheaper boats that make them less safe.

Buy good gear — especially clothes.

Never wear cotton, it gets heavy when wet and pulls heat away from your body

Dress in layers. You can always take clothing off.

Wool, fleece, micro, synthetics, are all great choices.

Hands and feet get cold the easiest, so plan ahead.

Cover your head in colder months

A good rule of thumb is when the air temperature and the water temperature added together equal 110 degrees or less, you must dress and be prepared for hypothermia. If you plan on paddling in those conditions, please buy appropriate gear to be ready, like neoprene wetsuits, dry suits and tops.

Know the weather and water.

Don't paddle when storms are near. Get out of the water for at least 30 minutes when lightning strikes. Know how to tell what upstream water will do to the creek.

A good rule is if the water is brown, turn around and don't drown.