

Lowhead Dam has claimed four lives in 10 years

Obstacle can be challenging for novice boaters

by Allison Dyer Bluemel
Mail Intern

Originally built in the 1950s to collect water for the Mount Shavano Fish Hatchery downstream, the Lowhead Dam north of Salida can create a challenging obstacle for novice boaters.

The dam was used primarily to collect water for the fish hatchery before the outbreak of whirling disease, said Tom Waters, Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area operations manager.

After the outbreak, the hatchery switched to collecting its water exclusively from a ¾-mile spring water pipeline that runs between the Mount Ouray Hatchery upstream and Mount Shavano Hatchery.

However, in the past 10 years the dam has presented a hazard to inexperienced boaters, resulting in four fatalities.

"People need to remember that if they are not familiar, or are novices, they need to be knowledgeable before going, or go with someone who does know that section," Waters said.

Of the four deaths, two occurred in 2010 and two occurred this year, with the body of the latest victim recov-

ered Wednesday. All wrecks were private raft trips, he said.

While all four fatalities were the result of private rafts going over the dam, Waters said most of the non-fatal wrecks involve inflatable kayaks.

Similar to the rafting wrecks, the majority of kayaking wrecks at the dam are private trips.

Inflatables may go over the dam more frequently in part because of the popularity of that stretch for kayakers and because people approach the section as if they need less experience to navigate it, he said.

Due to the dam's hydraulic current base, Waters said the base of the dam pulls swimmers below the water and resurfaces them downstream near the boil line. Unlike other rapids, however, once swimmers resurface at the line, the current pulls them back toward the base of the dam.

Although the dam was rebuilt in 1988, AHRA has begun looking at ways to rebuild the dam to make the area safer for boaters, he said.

Waters said the current signage is "more than adequate,"



Photo by Allison Dyer Bluemel

The Lowhead Dam, upriver of Salida and Mount Shavano Fish Hatchery, was originally built in the 1950s and completely rebuilt in 1988. The dam provided water to the fish hatchery before the outbreak of whirling disease, when its headgate was closed, said Tom Waters, Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area operations manager.

but people looking to navigate the dam should take advantage of the information provided by outfitting companies and the AHRA office before getting on the water.

Boaters should observe the signs beginning a mile before the dam to move over to river left for the boat chute. There they have the option to either portage around the dam or take the boat chute to the left

of the dam, Waters said.

Compared to other rapids within the management of AHRA, Waters said, the dam does not stand out as being more difficult.

However, when looking at the number of accidents, it begins to stand out from other parts of the river. This is partly because of increased traffic due to the growing popularity of water sports in the area, he

said.

"With the greater number of boaters, there's a greater chance of accidents," Waters said.

With challenging white-water throughout the river, "people need information and experienced guides river wide," in addition to proper safety equipment such as personal flotation devices, clothes and helmets, he said.