



yourself dealing with one.

One of the best resources to learn from these mishaps is the annual Accident Summary Report compiled by American Whitewater volunteer and safety expert Charlie Walbridge. With the recent release of this year's report detailing the last six months of 2007, which reports 21 fatalities, the year's total for whitewater fatalities was 38, the lowest number since 1997 and far lower than the 57 deaths reported in 2006 and record 58 deaths reported in 2003. So the trend, for the time being, seems to be flowing down, just like the rivers where these mishaps occur.

"The whitewater fatality numbers are the lowest in a decade, and well below average for the last decade, which reflects on the drought experienced in many sections of the country combined with a leveling off in growth in whitewater sport," says Walbridge. "But there were also well over a dozen rescues made by well-trained paddlers which might have caused a fatality years ago. So improved rescue training is having an impact as well."

As well as the lowest total fatalities since 1997, 2007 also marked the fewest reported whitewater accidents since 1993.

2007 Accident Statistics:

Jan-June 4 K-1, 2 Canoe, 5 Comm Raft, 4 private raft

July-Dec 7 K-1, 6 Canoe, 6 Comm Raft, 4 private raft

'07 Total: 11 Kayak, 8 Canoe, 11 Comm Raft,

8 private raft

Total: 38

Accidents Reported top American Whitewater: July – December 2007

06-16 George Faycock, 63, Rental Raft, Middle Yough, Class II, Heart Attack

06-16 Raquel Stiles, 36, Comm Raft, Arkansas River, Silver Bullet Rapid, Class III

07-02 Dean Fairburn, Comm Raft, S Fork Payette, Staircase, Class III+, Leg Entrapment

07-04 Ronald Osborne, 23, Canoe, Sacramento River, China Rapids, Class II, No PFD

07-05 Lynn Marks/Bea Kovich, 52/55, Comm Raft, Arkansas River, Numbers, Class IV, Flush Drowning, head injuries

07-08 Unidentified, 26, Raft, Trinity River, Class II, No PFD

07-10 Lisa Walker, 44 Raft, Colorado River (Glenwood), Class III

07-13 Frank Archible, 49, Raft, Lower Guadalupe River, Class II, Strainer

07-14 Elaine A. Dier, 52, K-1, Esopus Creek, Class II, Strainer

07-15 Teresa Yawn, 43, Canoe, S Fork Flathead; Devil's Elbow, No PFD

07-17 Unidentified, Canoe, Kannanaskis R, Alberta, Class III, Snagged Bow Line
07-24 Kristi Adams, 20, IK, North Umpqua River, Class III, Strainer
07-27 Marvin Silver, 63, Comm Raft, Kern River; Miracle Run, Class IV
08-12 Pat Bortner, 51, Comm Raft, Upper Gauley; Iron Ring Rapid, Class V, Body Pin
08-12 Conrad Fournery, 48, K-1, N Fork Payette; Nutcracker Rapid, Class V, Body Pin
08-19 Kyle Stidham, 23, K-1, New Zealand; Kaituna River, Awesome Gorge, Class V, Strainer
10-06 Maxwell Lentz, 17, K-1, Upper Gauley; Little Z Rapid, Class IV+, Entrapment
11-08 Eric Simonds, 52, Raft, Honduras/Rio Cangrejal, Class IV, Flush Drowning
11-15 Vidmar Santos, K-1, Panama/Rio Chiriqui Viejo; Buen Dia Rapid, Class IV, Flush Drowning

A Summary of Reports from Jan-June 2007

Major U.S whitewater areas experienced drought or near-drought conditions last year, and river levels were unusually low. The result was fewer deaths than any year in recent memory. In the first half of the year 4 Kayak, 6 Canoe, and 11 Rafting deaths were reported. Two of the canoeing deaths involved rental craft and 3 of the rafting deaths were on guided trips. You'd have to go back to 1993 to see numbers like this. Many of the deaths came from the interior of the country, especially Texas, where heavy rains caused major flooding. Most of these accidents involved inexperienced people, with low-head dams and failure to use a life vest playing central roles

Kayaking Deaths

The year started inauspiciously on January 1st, on North Carolina's Rocky Broad River. Paul McKinney, 33, was with a group of four experienced boaters making the run. He ran second over Walker's Falls, a class V drop visible from the road, while a third member of his group set safety. According to an email from Paul Schulte, who started with the group but pulled out upstream, Mr. McKinney flipped and was pushed off-line. He broached against a small rock on river left, spun out, and was pushed deeply into a tight slot between two huge boulders stern first. He pinned vertically with only a foot of his bow visible above the water.

His friends moved in quickly, using a rescue vest and ropes. Without the vest they never would have reached him. After 5-6 minutes of strenuous effort they were able to dislodge the boat. They pushed him and his boat to the river left bank, got him out of the water, and began CPR. Paramedics, summoned by a spectator, arrived ten minutes later with a defibrillator and oxygen. Mr. McKinney was life-flighted to Mission Hospital in Asheville where he clung to life for several days before he died.

Ten days later, on January 12th, Dennis Squires died on New Zealand's Waikaia River. Mr. Squires, a skilled paddler known for his "New York Exposed" river paddling guidebooks, was on a two month tour of the country when he ran the Class V Waikaia River at high water. Mr. Squires, 48, failed to appear below a steep gorge. When a paddle and knee pad

floated past, his companion searched for him upstream. After several hours of looking without finding any trace, he contacted authorities. Mr. Squire's body was found underneath a tree five days later.



While most whitewater kayak accidents involve experienced paddlers, this one did not. It appears that Ladd Fish and a friend decided to run a low-head dam below Nelson Island on the Kansas River near Kansas City on March 6th. This is a spot well known to local paddlers who use the area for training. No hydraulic forms at its base, but the sluice is rocky and is seldom run. Both men capsized at its base. One man made it ashore quickly but Mr. Fish, 34, was carried downstream by the fast moving, icy water. Nearby construction crews saw what happened and called 911. Rescue workers searched the area until late evening without locating him.

On June 7th A.C. Phillips, a 71 year-old kayaker, was found floating face-down in the Nantahala below Patton's Run. Because he was paddling this North Carolina river alone no one knows what happened, or if having someone along would have made a difference.

Idaho's Blackfoot River Canyon is a tough Class IV-V run with many complex, obstructed rapids. Teller's Tube is one of the hardest; a big drop with no margin for error. On June 24th Dr. Paul Abraszewski, 37, ran the river with five other paddlers. According to an excellent article in the Idaho State Journal he decided to run Teller's Tube while others set safety. He flipped in a big hydraulic, missed his roll, and swam. The current pushed him into a logjam and shoved him down under. It took his group an hour and a half to get him out.

Cheoah Claims One

On April 22nd there was a drowning on North Carolina's Cheoah River, recently liberated from dewatered obscurity by American Whitewater. Ashley Miller, 24, was paddling in a "Shredder" (two-person cataraft) with a small group of experienced rafters. In Takeout Rapid, the steep drop above the falls, they hit a hole and she bounced out of the boat. She was floating on her back, feet first when her shorts snagged on an underwater tree stump. The current pushed her forward, pulling her shorts down around her ankles and pushing her downstream. She simply could not keep her head above water. Someone, we're not sure who, jumped into the river and pulled her free. It could have been a member of her group or a spectator from shore. Then a group of paddlers from NOC arrived, pushed her ashore, and began CPR. The rescue squad was able to detect a faint pulse. She was life flighted to Knoxville, where she was pronounced dead.

Rivers like the Cheoah whose flows have been cut off by upstream dams inevitably suffer from the encroachment of vegetation. Trees and bushes growing in the river pose an added danger and those planning to run similar stretches must take this into consideration.

Deaths in Flooded Texas

Flooded Texas was the scene of three river paddling deaths this spring. A 19 year-old man who failed to wear a life vest flipped his canoe on May 15th during a high-water run of the Brazos River and simply disappeared. Then on May 28th Col. Clifford Walker and his 13 year-old son washed over Herff Falls, a 20' drop on the Cibolo River north of San Antonio. The boy survived, but his father did not. Both canoeists were wearing life vest and knew that the falls were there. Apparently they misjudged the speed of the water. There were many other tales of peril and salvation emanating from Texas as people were pulled from trees, homes, and automobiles by boats and helicopter. One rescuer, 28 year-old Game Warden Ty Patterson, flipped a john boat during a May 30th search for a missing 16 year-old girl. The young woman had been swimming in the Paluxy River in the North Texas hill country when she got caught in a pourover formed by a road crossing and was pulled under. Patterson's partner was rescued and briefly hospitalized.

Canoe rental clients accounted for two other river running deaths. On May 20th Corrie Fister, 30, was paddling with a group of 13 adults in 5 canoes on Ohio's Big Darby Creek. According to the Columbus, Ohio Dispatch Mr. Fister and another man were not wearing their life vests and had been drinking heavily. After their boat flipped the friend swam for shore while Mr. Fister held on to the canoe. He was carried downstream and drowned. On June 10th Jose Rivera and his wife rented a canoe to paddle New York's Hudson River below the Glen. The pair, who were wearing life vests, flipped in some mild rapids near an abandoned railroad bridge. As they tried to right their canoe in the pool below, Mr. Rivera's wife heard him sigh loudly and saw him go limp. His body was found floating face-down two miles downstream.

NO PFD's.....again!

Many people who die on whitewater rivers would have lived if they had worn a life vest. On May 20th Robert Muir, 36, was paddling a section of the lower Dolores River in a "one-person raft" without a PFD. When his boat hit a rock and flipped he was in serious trouble. His friends pulled him ashore and began CPR. He was alive then, but died later at the hospital. In another unfortunate incident Max Braune, 74, drowned on June 16th on Montana's Yellowstone River. According to the Bozeman Chronicle he was attempting to get off the river above Yankee Jim Canyon, a popular Class III run. Instead, his drift boat was swept into some rapids where it broached on a rock and capsized. Mr. Braune, like many drift boat fishermen, did not wear a PFD. He suffered head injuries when he flipped and could not survive the swim. His body was recovered by kayakers in a downstream eddy.

Flush-Drowning takes its toll

Flush-drowning occurs when a swimmer drowns in whitewater despite a PFD. It is a common cause of rafting deaths. On March 30th Mark Allred, 62, arrived at Crystal Rapid in the Grand Canyon with a group of six rafts and a kayaker. They scouted the rapid, then ran it. According to the RRFW Riverwire Mr. Allred's cataraft dump-trucked and threw him and another man into the top left hole. Although the rapid gets easier below, fast, cold water

continues for several miles. his companion swam ashore easily, but Mr. Allred was unresponsive when picked up by a downstream safety boat. The group began CPR and contacted the Park Service by satellite phone. Rangers arrived by helicopter and took Mr. Allred's body back to civilization.

We've all had the experience of choking on a small amount of water while swimming whitewater. Any water entering the throat can set off a laryngospasm, an involuntary muscular contraction of the vocal cords. This is a normal reflex that prevents fluid from entering the lungs. Breathing during laryngospasm is difficult or impossible; the spasms typically last less than 30 or 60 seconds but can go on longer. In cases of prolonged submersion this results in a so-called "dry drowning" and no fluid enters the lungs. Cold water seems especially effective in setting off this reflex and some people, especially those with asthma or a history of throat surgery, are more susceptible than others. It might be the cause of a number of "unexplained" whitewater deaths, especially when a person drowns in mild rapids while wearing a PFD.

A paddling doctor writes: "When laryngospasm obstructs someone's airway for a prolonged period of time (more than 30-60 seconds), you can usually fix it by providing positive-pressure ventilation, essentially the same thing as giving a rescue breath. This might be one reason that many drowning victims respond so well to rescue breathing. A "wet drowning" victim is less likely to respond and has a higher risk of delayed complications such as pulmonary edema and pneumonia." Voicedoctor.net says that those who experience this problem should breathe slowly and tilt their head back to facilitate the passage of air, but this advice may be better suited to a couch than a whitewater river. Another flush drowning occurred in Utah, on the Green River's Desolation Canyon. This is a mild whitewater run with a few Class III rapids, but it carries a good amount of water and is powerful in places. On June 6th a group of private boaters wrapped their raft on a big rock in Jack Creek Rapid. Everyone went in the water except for one person who climbed out on the rock. An unidentified 29 year-old woman was pulled from the water with no detectable pulse or breathing. CPR was ineffective. A short time later a trip run by Sheri Griffeth Expeditions arrived. They rescued the stranded paddler and used their satellite phone to contact authorities.

Three commercial rafting guests perished after tough swims. Charles Bointy, 52, died in the Royal Gorge of Colorado's Arkansas River on May 20th. His guided raft flipped in Wallbanger Rapid at 2140 cfs, a medium flow. The Salida, CO Mountain Mail said that a heart condition probably contributed to his drowning. On June 9th Jed McKnight, 36, died after being thrown from a guided raft on Colorado's Clear Creek. According to a post on Mountainbuzz.com one of the three rafts had previously flipped and Mr. McKnight's boat had picked up a number of swimmers. It was heavily loaded when it hit the big hole in Hell's Corner Rapid and capsized. When Mr. McKnight was pulled ashore downstream, he was dead. Lastly, Saffin Virani was on a high water guided trip down British Columbia's Kicking Horse River. He was in the first of five boats when it flipped and was the only guest who did not swim safely to shore. When he was rescued minutes later, he was dead.

Two Professional Guides Die

Two Western commercial guides made up part of the death toll this year. Brian Kirkwood, a 47 year-old guide trainee, died during a swimming drill in Brown's Canyon on Colorado's Arkansas River. The incident occurred in Pinball Rapid, which safety correspondent Dane Patterson called "the most difficult place to drown I can think of." Resuscitation efforts began immediately, but were not successful. The cause of death is not clear but a heart attack is suspected.

On July 2nd Dean Fairburn, a 45 year-old Raft Guide from Garden Valley, Idaho, was taking a group of guests down Staircase Rapid on the South Fork of the Payette. According to a post in www.kayakidaho.com Mr. Fairborn's raft broached on a rock and spilled him and his guests into the river. He was swimming aggressively upstream when he flushed over Split Rock and caught his leg in the crack. A group of kayakers arrived moments later. One of them was able to grab a sling that Mr. Fairborn was wearing around his waist but could not pull him free. Two other boaters, one of whom worked with Garden Valley Search and Rescue, were able to attach a rope to the sling. When they got him loose he had been under water 15-20 minutes, which was much too long. Detailed descriptions of these accidents can be found in the AW Accident Database.

Low-Head Dams Prove Dangerous

Low head **dams** once again proved dangerous to river travelers. On April 29th six people washed over Holtwood **Dam** on Pennsylvania's Susquehanna River after their powerboat's engine failed. As they washed towards the brink all hands quickly put on life vests. Five of them survived the 55 foot plunge and were rescued from midstream rocks by a State Police helicopter. Nicole Barlow, 16, could not be found. A life vest, torn from her body, was found downstream. In a similar incident a family of four washed over a **dam** on the Upper Mississippi near Dresbach, Minnesota on May 12th. Their prop apparently got caught in an anchor line and stalled the motor. No one wore life vests, and no one survived.

Back in the paddling scene, Jonathan Hill, 26, and Drew Goodknight, 22 died at Alden **Dam** on the Iowa River on April 29th. The pair and a friend, who were not wearing life vests, had portaged the structure but put in too close on the downstream side. They were pulled into the hydraulic and all but one of them perished. On May 19th another person was killed at a **dam** on the Colorado River near Palisade, CO. Ricky Crewse, 29, was rafting with his girlfriend and her two children when their raft capsized. The woman and her children swam ashore while Mr. Crewse, who was not wearing a PFD, stayed with the boat. His body was found downstream. The accident occurred near the Price-Stubbs Diversion **Dam**, the site of a strong effort by local paddlers and businessmen to convert this hazardous structure into a whitewater play park.

The Western Headworks Weir on the Bow River in Calgary, Alberta is probably the best-protected low-head **dam** in North America. The weir was completed in 1975 and eight people drowned there in the first seven years of its existence. **Dam** managers formed the Weir Safety Committee in 1982 and it designed the current protective measures. There had

been no deaths since then and the program served as a model for dam managers everywhere. Warning signs (both verbal and using pictures) were been placed on shore and on nearby bridges. Above the dam two sets of buoys direct boaters to a side channel cut into the shore. There a short portage trail awaits them.

On June 10th the buoys were gone, washed away during a period of unusually high water. A group of nine friends from Quebec decided to float the river in two small rafts. No one was wearing a life vest. Four of the group managed to swim ashore above the 8' drop; five went over. Of these, three people washed free and two 28 year-old men died. This shows that even an ideal combination of warning signs and buoys do not offer complete protection. This year construction begins on the Harvie Passage, a project that will convert this dangerous structure into a whitewater play park. Named for a local philanthropist who provided the funds, the project will further reduce the risks posed by this facility. It will be combined with strong enforcement of city rules requiring the use of PFD's on the river.

Near Misses:

As always, there were a number of near misses reported. SwiftH2O News, a Yahoo group for river rescue professionals, reported a dozen instances of whitewater paddlers being rescued from dams and islands on various rivers. Some were experienced; most were not. In one case a tuber on the Stillwater River near Billings, Montana snagged his PFD on a tree branch. Friends ran to a nearby construction site and a worker called 911. Responding firefighters cut the boy free; he was taken to the hospital in serious condition.

In northern New York an experienced kayaker ran an "8 to 10 foot waterfall" on the Saranac River and got caught in a hole. A friend rescued him and got him to an island in terrible shape. The man left him there and went for help. Responding firefighters had to set up a line system to bring him ashore. Had he spent the night on the island he would certainly have died of hypothermia.

A potentially deadly scene unfolded at North Carolina's Class IV Wilson Creek on January 7th. A kayaker drifted into a ledge drop at high water with no forward speed. He was caught in a powerful hydraulic, bailed out, and was recirculated in the hole for several minutes. Finally one of the many ropes thrown to him wrapped around his foot, allowing him to be hauled clear of the hole. No pulse or breathing could be detected when he was pulled to a rocky island. His companions rolled him on his side and pounded on his back. He vomited. Four rescue breaths were given. He vomited again and started breathing. Somebody flagged a vehicle on the riverside road. A second group ferried a rope across the river so the victim could be pulled across, supported in the arms of one of his friends. Lacking cell service, they drove the man to the nearest fire station. Treatment started here and an ambulance was called. He was taken to a nearby hospital where he thankfully has made a full recovery.

A **dam** rescue training session on the Great Miami River was nearly fatal to a 32 year-old Hamilton, Ohio firefighter. Boats performing a "two-boat tether" flipped, throwing four men into the water. Three men were recovered quickly, but a fourth was pulled into the hydraulic. His PFD and helmet were pulled off and he disappeared for minutes at a time. Extricating him took all the skill and training that the group possessed. The rescued firefighter was taken to a hospital where he remained in critical condition. A second firefighter had to be hospitalized with a head injury. Both are expected to recover fully.

Michael Blair, 32, was a novice kayaker with big ambitions. On the early evening of April 19th he was paddling alone when he decided to run 20 foot Mine Falls **Dam** in Nashua, NH. He flipped at the base of the drop and bailed out, only to be shoved into a log. Mr. Blair, who was wearing a life vest, wetsuit, and helmet, held on for a while before he let go. He ended up on an island in the middle of the river. His girlfriend, who had been talking with him via two-way radio, was having dinner in an apartment overlooking the river when she saw his paddle float by. She called firefighters who found him on the island shaking uncontrollably. He was hospitalized with severe hypothermia.

On May 31st the Spencer Heights section of Colorado's Poudre River was the scene of a very close call. Veteran kayaker Kevin Domby found himself pinned vertically in a steep slot when his creek boat nosed under a log. He was stable, but trapped, and it took a lot of energy to stay upright. His friends threw him a rope, but his legs were caught and he could not get free. Then one of them paddled out to the log and attached a rope to it. They pulled hard, the log broke, and the kayak washed free. Mr. Domby, who was very cold and tired, was swimming now. He caught a well-aimed [throw bag](#) and was pulled to safety. You can read the full account of this and other near-misses on the AW Accident Database.

This report, and others like it, depends on paddlers like you who send us information on whitewater fatalities, near-misses, and rescues. I'd like to thank Slim Ray, Dane Patterson, Margaret Weise, Chris Aidnan and many others who took the time to correspond with me. Many accident reports were in SwiftH2O News, a Yahoo group. Others were found in a newsletter published by the Paddlesport Industry Association. It's easier than ever for you to contribute. Go to www.americanwhitewater.org, click safety, and bring up a report form. You can cut-and-paste newspaper stories or internet postings or write your own account. All the material you send in is available on-line and will be forwarded to the AW Safety Committee for review. You may also correspond directly to me at ccwalbridge@cs.com.

—Charlie Walbridge