

FOX23 viewer warns of drowning dangers at popular swimming spot

By **Shae Rozzi, FOX23 News** July 18, 2022 at 4:11 pm CDT

COLCORD, Okla. — A waterfall formed by a low water dam underneath Highway 412 in the Colcord community of Delaware county is a popular place for people to swim and escape the intense Oklahoma heat.

Chasity Chapman drove from Sapulpa to enjoy the water with friends.

“I jumped off the dam a couple of weekends ago,” she said. “The water is kind of low right now but it’s a lot of fun.”

Nick Henley also enjoys the area. “It’s a lot of fun to jump off,” he said. “You just have to be aware of the current.”

When the water is higher and current is stronger following heavy rain like we had this spring, Brad Wilson of Broken Arrow says it’s dangerous.

He says he nearly drowned there years ago while enjoying the water with his kids. “I was trying to show off as the cool dad and go over the waterfall on the raft,” Wilson said. “As soon as I did, I fell out of the raft, into the water, and tried to hang on to the raft but the force of the water and the turbulence sucked me under. It actually sucked the shoes off my feet and it was so powerful that it drew me under and I entered this kind of underwater vortex and I couldn’t get to the surface.”

“I felt that I was drowning,” Wilson said. “I felt, ‘oh this is it, it’s game over.’ And as soon as I relaxed, I popped back up again but the force of the water drew me back toward the waterfall.

”He says he was able to grab onto the raft and a branch his son extended out to him, which ultimately saved his life. Hearing about other drownings over the years has

bothered him. He reached out to FOX23 News to share his story to help warn and educate others after the most recent drowning in May.

According to the Grand River Dam Authority, the agency that oversees the waterway, a 42 year old man drowned at the low water dam in Flint Creek Memorial Day weekend. Authorities say his son drowned in the rough water underneath the dam, the man jumped in to save his son and got caught up in that current as well.

Witnesses pulled them both from the water and tried to save them but only the son survived. "There should be something done to warn people of the hazard there," Wilson said.

FOX23 did not see any signs under the highway bridge warning people about any swimming hazard.

Just upstream from the dam, the Flint Creek Water Park has signs posted that read, "No lifeguard on duty. Swim at your own risk."

The park's owner, Everett Cross, says he's not sure signs at the dam would help.

"I remember one year GRDA had this closed off," Cross said. "It was not safe to even swim, I was even closed. This was on a Saturday and people were still going underneath the GRDA thing."

FOX23 Investigates requested the number of drownings in the area in recent years from the GRDA. Besides the father's death in May, a 10 year old girl drowned in 2021 and a 3 year old girl drowned in 2018. In that incident, the GRDA says her 2 year old brother also drowned but was revived.

Brad Wilson fears there will be more drownings unless something is done.

The owner of the gas station that sits next to the water park says so many cars pack into the place on a weekend, it's been difficult for first responders to get in when there is an emergency.

While GRDA patrols the water, the property where the low water dam is located is owned by the Oklahoma Department of Transportation as it sits under Highway 412.

FOX23 Investigates asked ODOT Spokesperson T.J. Gerlach whether the agency has considered placing hazard signs in the area to warn swimmers of the danger, Gerlach sent the following statement:

“The Oklahoma Department of Transportation shares in the concern about the tragic drownings and about swimming safety in the waterway. The Department emphasizes that Oklahoma Statute §47-11-506 forbids access to any part of a bridge for recreational purposes. In order to prevent inconsistencies across the state, the Oklahoma Department of Transportation has no plans to install signage on its rights of way along US-412 near Flint Creek. The installation of signage at this location could mislead people into believing access to similar rights of way without signage may be permitted.”

Pictures Flint Creek Water Park owner Everett Cross shared with FOX23 show crowds gathered where ODOT says they are not permitted, right underneath Highway 412 along the banks and in the water of Flint Creek.

Cross says he’s jumped off the dam hundreds of times. “I’m out here every weekend and I see hundreds of people jump off it hundreds of times. So relatively, it’s safe but certain times you probably need to stay away. Like whenever it has been under heavy rain or something.”

A different danger is present right now following weeks of high heat and lack of rain, the water is much more shallow. Some swimmers are hitting the bottom when they jump in.

As for the danger presented by the current created by low water dams, dam safety officials call them “Killer Dams” and “Drowning Machines” according to damsafety.org. A diagram depicts the danger the current can create. The “vortex” similar to what Brad Wilson described.

According to statistics posted on weather.gov and damsafety.org 149 people lost their lives in incidents around low water dams across the country from 2018 to 2021. At least 16 deaths have already been reported in 2022.

Wilson who is also a science teacher wants to educate swimmers as well.

“People don’t realize water is heavy,” Wilson said. “If you’ve ever tried to carry buckets of water, it’s heavy. So, water has a lot of mass. And it has a lot of force. So, it doesn’t matter how good of a swimmer you are in certain conditions, water can overtake you, and you just don’t have enough power to fight against it. Within a matter of seconds you can be in some serious trouble.”

It’s something most families don’t think about when they’re out on the water looking to cool off and have fun.

FOX23 Investigates asked Oklahoma Task Force One Rescue Coordinator Terry Sivadon how to get out of an eddy current or boil created by a low water dam waterfall. He says if you can, “when a swimmer is pulled under they should push off the dam with their legs and swim away from the dam as aggressive as possible. This may break them out of the boil.”

For Brad Wilson, relaxing his body helped him get to the surface but he still needed assistance from his son as the current tried to pull him back under.

Safety experts say swimmers should always wear a life jacket when swimming in open waterways.