

knox news.

TENNESSEE

Blount County drowning points to dangers of swimming near low-head dams



Tyler Whetstone

Knoxville

Updated June 1, 2018, 11:25 a.m. ET

The Blount County Sheriff's Office [called off the search for a possible second drowning victim](#) at a popular swimming hole in the Walland area Thursday.

That was after one person, 33-year-old Ty Christopher Berry of Maryville, [was pulled from the low-head dam at Perry's Mill Dam Wednesday night](#). Berry was pronounced dead at a local hospital. According to a witness, two men were seen swimming in the area, but search and rescue crews were unable to find a second body.

Berry's death highlights the dangers of the peaceful-looking, low-head dams.

Friday marks the [one year anniversary of the death of 29-year-old Cocke County mother, Anna Last](#), who died saving two of her sons at a low-head dam on the higher-than-normal Nolichucky River in Hamblen County.

Dangerous dams

According to the late Bruce Tschantz, a former University of Tennessee professor and low-head dam expert, [the dams are death traps](#).

In an interview conducted with Tschantz last June, he said low-head dams kill approximately 24 fishermen, rafters and boaters in the United States every year, a number that's likely to climb as water sports become more popular.

Per Tschantz's research, some 400 people have died on low-head dams since the mid-1900s and "scores more" have died, but the information to be able to document deaths accurately is hard to come by. He estimated there were somewhere between 100-200 low-head dams in Tennessee alone.

“It’s no secret that low-head dams are probably the most dangerous type of structure on the planet. Hundreds of people die on these things in small counties, small towns all over the country and all over the world,” he said.

The dams are picturesque, and the water, before moving over the dam, is oftentimes quiet. But as soon as it flows over the dam, the water moves swiftly, falling into a cycle where it flows away from the dam and towards the surface before getting caught in the recirculating current which brings that same water back towards the dam as it is hit by the water flowing over the dam. The water is forced down towards the bottom and the cycle repeats.

Craft stuck in this vicious cycle either buckle and fall apart from the water and pressure or sit in one place, revolving in a cyclone like a toy when the bathwater has been let out of the tub. Individuals hardly stand a chance.

According to Tschantz and a low-head dam guide entitled ‘[Drowning Machine](#)’ published by the [Minnesota Department of Natural Resources](#) in 2012, low-head dams can kill people a number of ways.

- The recirculating waters will trap even the most experienced swimmers (including would-be rescuers) and disorient them in the thrashing water as if they are in a washing machine;

- The water has low buoyancy due to all of the air bubbles making life jackets all but useless;

- The water pushes, pulls and dips individuals in an infinite number of ways where rocks, rebar, concrete and other debris from the river are waiting;

- The rivers and streams are filled with cold water and can lead to hypothermia even in the summer;

- The dams are usually made of vertical concrete or masonry, which make climbing out nearly impossible.

The best way to protect yourself, Tschantz said, is to do research and know the dangers of the waters you want to trek.

One year later

Anna Last, 29, [died saving two of her boys when they got caught up in the low-head dam on the Nolichucky River](#) in Hamblen County.

Last was one of two adults rafting that day with five children. Her son Dillion was in a kayak, as was his girlfriend, Sara Loyd. Anna, her son Silas, friend Crystal Banks and her two children were in a raft.

More: [An imperfect hero, Anna Last put her children first](#)

Banks and friend Kelly Saylor declined interview requests and asked for privacy on behalf of the family.

On the afternoon the group was rolling down the river, the water was flowing at nearly 3,000 cubic feet per second, or twice its normal flow, according to emergency personnel.

When Anna’s body was found, she wasn’t wearing a life jacket. But experts don’t think that would have made a difference.

“The way the water goes over it, it just starts rolling,” Hamblen County Sheriff’s Capt. Hugh Moore Jr. said a few days after the accident. “Once it grabs you, you ain’t coming out of there until it decides to let go of you. No, you get caught in that, a life jacket’s not going to help.”

TVA and dam safety

In a news release issued Thursday, the Tennessee Valley Authority pointed to National Dam Safety Awareness Day, observed May 31.

All of TVA's dams are considered "vital components of the Tennessee River and its tributaries" and the day is observed to recognize the importance of dam safety. The date marks the worst dam failure in this country, the 1889 South Fork Dam failure in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, which killed more than 2,200 people, according to the release.

This week, TVA dams helped prevent and control flooding from Subtropical Storm Alberto across the Tennessee Valley.

But TVA warns to be safe around dams by:

- Recognizing the potential dangers caused by changing flows, and staying clear of waters near stations and dams;
- Staying a safe distance outside of warning signs, buoys and barriers;
- Obeying all warning signs near dams;
- Wearing a life jacket.

.