

FROM THE COVER



Sarah Hughes (left), Maureen Rogers and Colleen Boland take care while floating along the Patapsco River after being warned not to go by Bloede's Dam. On Monday, a teen drowned below the dam.
CHRISTOPHER T. ASSAF [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

Officials stress water safety after drownings

DROWNINGS [From Page 1B]

grabbed by the swirling currents underneath.

Maryland's Vital Statistics Administration recorded 47 accidental drownings in 2004 and 51 in 2005. At least a dozen people have drowned so far this year — and that number is sure to increase through the summer, officials warn.

On Monday, 16-year-old Ryan McCurley of Halethorpe drowned in the Avalon area of the Patapsco Valley State Park below Bloede's Dam, in an area where authorities say swimming is prohibited.

The incident is similar to one in June last year in the same area, when 28-year-old Pedro Peralta of Baltimore was sucked under the dam after deciding to wade in and cool off while picnicking and fishing.

"The other day, a park person came by and told us not to go by the dam, but she said that tubing was OK," said Colleen Boland, 19, of Catonsville, who swam in the Patapsco yesterday about 100 yards south of the roaring structure. "My dad told me not to tube today because of all of the rains. So we don't go out any farther than about 4 feet deep, because then it drops off."

Some incidents, including several this year, took place in areas that are off limits.

On Thursday, Adam Klank and Justin Smith, both in their early

20s, from Shrewsbury, Pa., died after Smith swam across Prettyboy Reservoir, saw Klank struggling and jumped back in to rescue him. Both men went under a few minutes later. Their bodies were recovered there.

On Sunday night, Keith Alan Cannon of Edgewood slipped off of a ledge at the Loch Raven Reservoir. The 17-year-old could not swim.

Reservoirs can be tempting. Often, nothing in the water appears to be moving; beneath the surface, however, currents of a river, several streams or runoff from the watershed all flow into the bowl and toward the dam at the reservoir's lower end.

Depth is another reason why swimming is prohibited in Baltimore County's reservoirs and the three managed by the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission. The largest of the sanitary commission's reservoirs, Rocky Gorge, is 120 feet deep.

"Signs are posted, and we have a 14-officer police force," said Lydia Wilson, a spokeswoman for the commission. "We've never allowed swimming. It's just too deep."

And even relatively shallow water can be hazardous.

Ricky Ricketts, 51, is a fisherman who visits Prettyboy Reservoir dozens of times each year. He said he recently saw a young man dive in the water there — only to come up injured seconds later.

"His leg was cut," said Ricketts, a

Dover, Pa., resident who was at the reservoir yesterday. "It's very easy to get tangled in the water with the submerged rocks that are 10 to 12 feet under. ... And when you're diving, it's very easy to reach that depth."

Riverbeds below dams can also be unpredictable. Yesterday, some parts of the Patapsco River were swollen, and currents roiled along the river's top. But in other areas, sandbars seemed to halt the river's flow entirely. The water would just reach an adult's ankle.

At Bloede's Dam yesterday, the only visible "No Swimming" sign was painted on the dam with a white background and black letters. The sign, which is difficult to spot, instructs people to call 911 in an emergency.

But as McCurley's family discovered Monday, cell phones do not work at bottom of the valley. Rescue crews found McCurley's body about an hour after his mother first screamed for help — and after other park visitors rushed out to where they could make a call.

Even areas where swimming is permitted require caution. In 2000 and 2001, two people — one of whom was a competitive swimmer — drowned at Beaver Dam Swim Club, a popular quarry in Cockeysville.

Last month, a 7-year-old autistic boy drowned in a city swimming pool in West Baltimore after he wandered away from his nearby school and somehow scaled a

10-foot-high fence to get to the pool. Other children were believed to be in the area with him.

Also last month, a 5-year-old Davidsonville boy drowned in a Crofton swimming pool moments after a relative removed his life jacket so that the child could go to the bathroom.

Weather conditions also can create dangerous situations. Two teenagers died in Little Pipe Creek, near the Carroll/Frederick County

line, after telling one of their parents that they were going to "play by the river" a few miles from their homes during recent flooding.

Sgt. Ken Turner, a spokesman for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources Police, pointed to a 2005 Harford County drowning in a relatively shallow creek at Rocks State Park to show how easily accidents can happen and how they often are caused by carelessness.

"It was 2 a.m., the water was up and four people were jumping in the stream, body surfing down the rocky shoals," Turner said. "A female's leg got caught under a boulder, and the force of the water kept her under. It doesn't take much."

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Sun reporters Nick Shields and Jorge Valencia contributed to this article.

Family rescued after getting lost on hike

[ASSOCIATED PRESS]

MARLINTON, W.VA. // A Maryland family reported missing during a hike in a remote public hunting and fishing area was found yesterday by state helicopter crews.

Todd and Cathy Robinson, both 43, of Bethesda and their two children, ages 3 and 5, spent the night along a lake at the Handley Wild-

life Management Area near Marlinton after becoming disoriented during their hike Thursday, the state Aviation Division said yesterday.

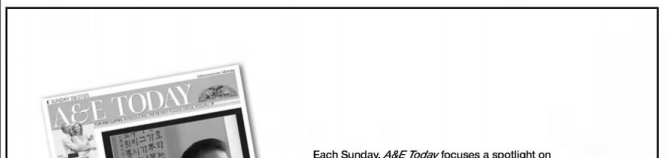
Overnight temperatures were in the mid-50s, and the family built a fire to stay warm, the agency said.

The family was on a camping vacation in the area when they decided to hike at Handley.

Cathy Robinson and the cou-

ple's 5-year-old son were taken to a local hospital for treatment, the agency said. Their conditions were not immediately available yesterday afternoon.

Police helicopter pilots Trooper S.A. Cruickshank and Sgt. S.M. Coleman, along with Aviation Division helicopter pilot Howard Mehninger, located the family after an hour-and-a-half search of the area.



Each Sunday, A&E Today focuses a spotlight on