



Staff photo by Doug Koontz

Someone anonymously spray-painted this inscription on a wall next to Scotts Mill Dam, a dangerous area for swimming.

Police try to prevent more drownings by patrolling area's 'trouble spots'

Two killed in Central Virginia in separate accidents in past two weeks

By Sean Coleman
Staff writer

In the past two weeks, two people have drowned in separate accidents and area police are watching known trouble spots to make sure no one else dies.

On Aug. 18, Henry Lee Napper of Arrington was pulled from Mill Creek Lake in the western part of Amherst County. He apparently drowned while fishing. Two days later, Henry Grubb of Bedford was found in the James River more than 12 hours after jumping off of a wall next to the Scotts Mill Dam to go swimming.

Grubb's death was more typical because the drowning happened in an area where swimming isn't allowed because of potential danger, said Capt. Arnold Coffey of the Amherst County Sheriff's Department.

Despite the ban on swimming in the James River near the dam, the area is crowded some days. Coffey said the area was closed off to swimming because of the danger involved to swimmers.

Dams along the James and other rivers are potential deathtraps, said Lt. Karl Martin of the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. The pounding of the water is so intense, it is hard to pull free

once sucked in. That was the problem in Grubb's case.

Even a life vest may not be much help if caught in the turbulence. The hydraulics of the dam cause the flow of water to be reversed in areas, which could cause a person to basically float in a turbulent circle, Martin said.

Coffey said his department has been able to cut down the number of swimmers at Scotts Mill Dam by making periodic trips to the area and making their presence known.

"It's worked somewhat, but I don't think it's really going to stop until the

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weather cools," he said.

At Smith Mountain Lake, Martin said most of the drownings involve alcohol-intensified bravado and an overestimation of how far a person could swim.

"A lot of people have too much to drink and then decide to swim from one bank to another," he said. "About halfway through, they discover they can't make it across.

"Unfortunately, when alcohol is involved, some people become invincible. It's too late when they find out they're not."

In Campbell County, there have not been many problem areas, said Capt. Mike Harris of the

sheriff's department.

"Our stretch of the James River is not really conducive to swimming or boating," Harris said. "We really haven't had many problems. The local farm ponds are more of a problem for us and even that's not too bad."

Nationwide, alcohol accounts for about 50 percent of all drownings. Martin said that figure holds up in this area.

To keep the number of problems down, Martin said wardens have become more vigilant in looking for alcohol and enforcing all rules. He said that has cut down the number of incidents at the lake.

In Amherst, Coffey said the sheriff's department has also

been doing the same thing at Scott's Mill Dam and other known trouble areas, such as Monacan Lake.

This is the first year the county has had a problem with people swimming where they shouldn't, Coffey said.

"Before, it was always a problem with fisherman," he said. "Before this year, we had never seen many problems with swimmers."



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