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Rain-fed current creates river dangers

By **CATHERINE BAUM**
Staff Writer

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Raging currents and water levels twice as high than average for this time of year can mean deep trouble for boaters on the Connecticut River.

"You shouldn't be out there unless you have to be," said Massachusetts Environmental Police Lt. John Tobin. "It's not a good thing to go out and be recreating, because there's just too much debris."

The river's current in Holyoke was eight times stronger Monday than its average for that day and six times stronger upstream in Montague City, according to data collected by the Connecticut River Watershed Council in Greenfield. The river is overflowing its banks, with its current moving along at an estimated 15 to 20 knots, Tobin noted.

According to Michael Zabre, owner of Wildwater Outfitters in Hadley and a whitewater paddler for 31 years, most recreational paddlers can't paddle faster than three knots.

"The last week or so it's been really ripping out there because of all the thunderstorms," said Tobin, who has been on the job for 29 years. "We haven't had high water like this in this amount of time that I can recall."

High water increases erosion along riverbanks, causing logs, trees and even boat docks to wash into the river.

Saturday incident

An incident Saturday afternoon prompted Hatfield authorities to rescue two kayakers after their boat became stuck against a log and under tree branches on the river.

The kayakers clung to a small tree until help arrived.

That kind of scenario is typical for water levels this high, according to Zabre.

"Because the river is up so high, water is actually rushing through the trees and you can get stuck," Zabre said. "The trees act like a strainer and will stop the paddler - but at the same time the water is rushing through."

Bridge pillars create the biggest danger, Zabre said, because they are a prone spot for eddy currents.

An eddy is the swirling of a fluid and the reverse current when the fluid flows past an obstacle, such as a bridge pillar or submerged debris.

"If a canoe hits a pillar it acts like a parachute - it kind of wraps around the big bridge pillar," Zabre said.

"With a force of 3,000 to 4,000 pounds of water pushing onto the canoe ... there aren't too many people that are strong enough to push against that kind of pressure. That's how a lot of deaths happen."

Urged to stay away

Zabre said he and store employees advise customers to stay away from the river at the moment,



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noting that there have been deaths on the river at these water levels.

But not everyone will listen, he said.

"The sad thing is people see this and they get drawn to it because they think, 'Oh wow, what a ride,'" Zabre said. "People really just do not appreciate the power of flowing water."

Marina users have seen a different kind of boating season, many spending time on their boats at docks - and not leaving.

"The type of boating shifted this year a bit," said Clay Duda, general manager of the Oxbow Marina in Northampton.

Duda said this is the first year water levels have been this high during boating season.

"It's like every couple weeks we get a burst of flooding," Duda said.

Full-length trees, as long as 40 feet, have been spotted flowing down the river, Duda said, of which some parts are submerged.

Landmarks formerly used as navigational aids are flooded and unrecognizable, making it harder for boat drivers to follow a direction.

What's more, anchors aren't holding in excessive currents and increased water depths, leaving boats "in the water with nowhere to go," Duda said.

Debris has also damaged some boats, tearing off motors and parts.

"Your boat could sink if your outdrive gets ripped off," Duda said, referring to the part of a motor that is outside a boat's hull. "All boats are affected - one's not going to get less banged up than another."

The wet summer's impact on the Connecticut River's water level and current is unprecedented, Tobin said. While no one can be sure of what will happen next, the National Weather Service says it will rain for the next three days.

"It's not going down," Tobin said.

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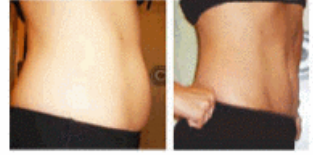
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