



May 31, 2009

Common sense is best water safety device

By Sara Callender
ECCENTRIC STAFF WRITER

If you want to be safe in the water this summer, use common sense.

"Most accidents can be prevented," Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard said. "Education is a big emphasis. It's important to take time to learn the rules and check things out."

There are 450 bodies of water in Oakland County, including 26 lakes in West Bloomfield. Boating season starts around Memorial Day weekend and the Fourth of July is right around the corner so Bouchard said it's a good time to remind water enthusiasts to be safe.

The Oakland County Marine Division, which patrols the county's lakes year-round, regularly works the largest and most densely populated lakes, including Cass and Orchard Lakes, and jump crews in smaller boats can be transported to any of the other lakes if needed.

The first safety tip is that boaters should be familiar with equipment. Bouchard recommends boaters check for maintenance issues before hitting the water, especially if it hasn't been used all winter.

"It's a very equipment intensive recreation," he said.

Through Michigan's Boater Safety Course, the marine division certifies more than 5,000 boaters annually. Instructors also teach boater's safety at middle schools, focusing on safety and water rules and regulations.

Some of the most common infractions are lack of personal flotation devices, no boater's safety cards, being too close to swimmers and operating water craft after hours.

All children under age 6 must wear a life jacket at all times while on the boat. According to Michigan law, there must be a personal flotation device for each person on board.

"Everybody should really wear them," Bouchard said. "They don't do any good when you're sitting on them."

Lack of life vests and alcohol use are the two main factors in boating accidents. Last summer, more than a dozen people drowned in southeast Michigan.

One person drowned in West Bloomfield last year after jumping off a pontoon boat in Upper Straits Lake.

Keego Harbor also has its own marine division, which includes two officers who patrol the lakes on the weekends and holidays. So far, it's been successful, Officer Jim Cote said. "The marine patrol has rescued swimmers near drowning, people injured on the sandbar and others whose boats filled up with water," Cote said.

The Tri-City Fire Commission, which serves West Bloomfield, Sylvan Lake and Keego Harbor, purchased a rescue board for training and emergency responses last year. It isn't being used for regular patrol.

Additional Facts

On the water

The Oakland County Sheriff's Department offers the following boating safety tips:

- Be weather wise.
- Bring extra gear you may need (cell phone and a first aid kit).
- Tell someone where you're going, who is with you and how long you'll be away.
- Ventilate after fueling.
- Stay dry and warm.
- Anchor from the bow, not the stern.
- Take a safe boating course.
- Be ready for trouble when a powerboat passes you in a narrow channel.
- When changing seats, stay low and near the center line of a new boat.
- Always carry distress signals on board your boat.

For more information and safety tips, log onto www.oakgov.com/sheriff.
