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Lakes area's frozen waters never completely safe, authorities say

by Leslie Shepard-Owsley

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The lakes area is a wintry wonderland that serves up a snowy playground just right for ice sports and activities. Yet the potential for danger always exists. From family-friendly sports like ice skating and ice fishing to thrilling activities like tooling around in off-road vehicles (ORVs) and snowmobiles, accidents on the ice do occur and it's always wise to be prepared in case of an emergency.

According to Oakland County and Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) officials, no ice is 100-percent safe.

"Our position is that no ice is safe and you have to assume that," said DNRE Chief of Media Relations Mary Dettloff. "Avoid ice where rivers, streams or creeks enter the lake. That tends to be more unstable and thinner. Ice doesn't freeze uniformly due to the water current and other conditions."

Oakland County Sheriff's Department Marine Division Sergeant Matt Snyder concurs with Dettloff that no ice is completely risk-free.

"Every lake has different currents and different conditions and that's why our typical rule of thumb is there is no ice that's 100-percent safe," Snyder said.

He cited areas thick with seaweed or marshy areas that freeze at the onset, but can break down and weaken the ice. The presence of storm drain outlets can also be problematic.

"Anywhere you've got moving water there's a good chance it won't freeze," Snyder said. "That was the case a couple years ago when a Novi boy drowned on a pond near a storm drain."

Snyder said the Oakland County Marine Division has been deployed approximately one or two times each year over the last eight years for incidents on the area's frozen lakes.

"We have 450 named lakes in Oakland County and have more than that, not including rivers, streams and ponds," he said. "For the most part, we've been fortunate."

To help judge recreational use of clear, solid ice and help minimize risks, Oakland County officials advise people to never tread on ice under 5 inches thick for general use (fishing, ice skating, and foot traffic) or less than 8 inches thick for travel by snowmobile or ORV.

The Marine Division doesn't recommend taking automobiles out on the ice.

"The penalties are stiff if a motorized vehicle goes through the ice," said Walled Lake Police Captain Paul Shakinis. "The driver is responsible for the (retrieval) cost and (clean up of) any fuel spills, and insurance is null and void once you leave land."

According to the DNRE's Dettloff, fuel will dissipate quickly. However, the owner of the vehicle could incur a hefty cost to remove the vehicle.

"Not every towing company has the equipment to pull out a vehicle from a waterway," she said. "It's a difficult process and could cost upwards of \$1,500, so don't drive out there if you can avoid it."

Before venturing out on the ice, survey it; and keep in mind that ice conditions change day-by-day, lake-by-lake, and location-by-location on the same body of water. Some signs of changing ice conditions can be, but are not limited to: moving water near a stream, river, unseen spring or inlet; slushy areas; depressions in the snow; heavy snow; white "milky" or black-colored ice; and "frazzle" ice weakened by the freeze-thaw cycle. Frazzle ice is pocked with tiny air pockets and often looks like frozen slush.

"Also avoid snow- or slush-covered ice because it acts as a layer of insulation on ice," Dettloff said. "When we experience

really cold temperatures and then warm up, that thaw and refreeze results in spongy or honeycomb ice that's unsafe, as well."

Dettloff said one can't discern the strength of the ice by merely eyeballing it. The rule of thumb is that clear ice with a bluish tint tends to be stronger, whereas ice that appears milky is weaker.

Law enforcement officials underscore that people should never go out alone on the ice. Always take a partner or someone who can call 911 or go for help in an emergency.

It's wise to never make the first tracks on the ice. Check with someone who has experience with a particular lake or pond before venturing out on the ice, and always leave a travel plan with someone who can call for help and direct a search party if you don't return on schedule.

"We advise people never to go on ice until we've had a couple weeks or more of freezing weather," said West Bloomfield Fire Department Lieutenant Dan Brown. "If there's any open water, don't ever go on it. It might look solid by the shore, but it could get thinner as you go."

In preparation for changing weather conditions, dress appropriately in layers to protect all exposed parts of your body. Wear a personal flotation device (PFD) as part of your overall protective clothing or a flotation jacket or suit. Ice creepers attached to boots will help keep you stable on the ice and can assist in self-rescue. Tote along safety items such as a cell phone, a whistle, rope, an ice pick or awl, a screw driver, hand flares, a flashlight, or a throwable PFD.

Before walking out on the ice, check and double check the ice thickness with an ice spud, auger or cordless drill. If you discover a weak spot, retrace your route off the ice. Keep a distance between others in your group.

Should the ice crack or you detect unsafe ice, you should stay spread out and immediately lie down — an action that will distribute your weight across the ice — and crawl back to safer ice the same way you came.

If someone falls through the ice, don't run to the hole. First call 911 and get help on the way and then use a pole, a tree branch, rope or any other handy object which can be extended to the victim from a safe position.

"You should never go out on ice alone, and don't walk side by side," Snyder said. "It may be a natural instinct that if someone falls through to run and help them, but you could fall in also so use an object to pull them out. Spread your weight out by laying down and rolling away."

When falling through the ice, try not to panic since this will only hinder self-rescue actions. The best course is to call out for help and kick your feet while getting your hands and then arms up onto safer ice. An ice awl or screwdriver is helpful in this situation of self-rescue. Continue to "swim" up onto the ice far enough to crawl or "roll-out" to safer ice.

"Call 911 if you see someone fall through," Walled Lake's Shakinas said. "If you have a rope, throw it to the person or if a row boat or paddle boat is accessible, that's an option, but it's best to let the authorities handle it."

The Sheriff's Department Marine Division has cut back on patrols this winter, but still deploys its dive team for emergencies.

"We don't have somebody out there seven days a week doing patrols, but the dive team is in tact and still available in all kinds of weather and our full-time deputies are on the road with gear in tow," Snyder said.

He added that part-time marine deputies used to conduct all-terrain vehicle (ATV) patrols on the county's frozen waters, but that task is now undertaken by the DNRE.

Walled Lake Fire Department Captain Matthew Salow said hypothermia can set in within minutes of falling into freezing temperatures and the victim immediately begins losing their basic motor skills.

"It depends on how someone is dressed," Salow said. "People should not take anything off (after they fall through the ice) because the more insulated you are the better you'll be."

To retrieve a victim from the water, Walled Lake's policy is: "throw, tow, row, and go."

"We try to throw things to people to boost them out of the water, or we'll try towing them in or rowing out to them before going into the water," Salow said.

Orchard Lake Police Chief Fred Rosenau said he doesn't mince words when it comes to people risking their lives on ice-covered waterways.

"If you go out on the ice in our city, it's at your own risk," he said. "I won't tell anyone if a lake is safe. One point might be, but another area may not be."

Vehicles like snowmobiles and ORVs on the ice increase the risk of falling through, especially at night. Many accidents occur when operators are driving at a high rate of speed.

A case in point: A pair of friends were killed in a snowmobile accident on the frozen surface of White Lake on Jan. 3, 2010.

According to an Oakland County Sheriff's Department report, Milford resident Joseph Michael Richman, 21, and Highland resident Casey James Leavenworth, 20, were out riding snowmobiles on White Lake. Richman was operating a Polaris snowmobile southbound across the lake south of Ormond Road, and Leavenworth was operating a Polaris northbound at the same time. The two snowmobiles collided head-on. Both Richman and Leavenworth were pronounced dead at the scene.

In other instances, some vehicles are unable to slow or stop in time to avoid open water or unsafe ice.

"Never take an automobile on the ice or even an ATV," said Waterford Township Fire Chief Dennis Storrs. "It depends on how thick the ice is because the ice must be pretty thick to support that."

Another major cause for many near drownings or deaths are pets that venture onto unsafe ice. If a pet ventures out onto the ice, law enforcement officials advise people to resist the urge to go out after them. Instead, pet owners should stay at a safe position on shore and persuade their pet to come back to safety.

There is no need to worry about other wildlife that ventures onto unsafe ice. Wildlife such as deer are strong swimmers, prepared for cold weather and typically find their own way off the ice. Most often, wildlife discovered in the water are injured and succumb to injuries from predators or natural forces.

Many municipalities provide their rescue units with wet suits and inflatable boats to reach victims.

Shakinas said Walled Lake's unit used drug forfeiture dollars last year to purchase a four-wheel drive ATV to access the lake during the winter months. The vehicle fits four officers and has a cargo area that accommodates a stretcher.

The Walled Lake Fire Department has a large armory of equipment, several reels of rope, a rescue swing to help pull victims out, numerous throwables, eight life jackets, a modified stokes basket (metal wire or plastic stretcher to load victims), and clamp-ons, which are spikes that help rescue personnel walk over the ice.

The Waterford Fire Department also equips its firefighters with ice water suits, ice picks, stokes baskets, ropes and pulleys.

"We also do a lot of rope technique training for ice rescues," Storrs said. "We have no ice safety policy, per se, but have standard operating procedures that we tailor to each event."

Every firefighter is trained in ice safety, even volunteers and high school cadets, according to Waterford Fire Department Training Officer Gene Butcher, who said there have been no incidents of people falling through the ice for six years.

"We get called out but by the time we reach the scene the person is out of the water or it's a false call," Butcher said.

White Lake Fire Department Captain Ted Lilley said his department has cold water emergent suits, a rescue sled that can traverse thin ice, and throw ropes on hand for ice emergencies.

"We do any surface rescue in cold water environments, but do not do sub-surface rescues," Lilley said. "We immediately call the (Oakland County Sheriff's Department) and they would get dispatched with us."

Brown said the West Bloomfield Fire Department's ice rescue suits, complete with ice clamps, enable personnel to climb into freezing water. He that last year department personnel were called out a few times for pet rescues.

"We've had to rescue several dogs because if we don't do it the owners will," Brown said.

He also recalled an incident when a deer fell through the ice and couldn't climb out on its own.

"We pushed a board out to it and since she was so tired we were able to slide it onto the board and push her toward shore," he said.

Shakinas said Walled Lake has been fortunate enough to report no ice emergency incidents over the last few years. To mitigate a potential problem, Shakinas assigns two officers to monitor any organized event on the lake.

Salow said the Walled Lake Fire Department may be called to the scene, but by the time firefighters get there, the victim is usually already out of the water.

"Kids like to play on smaller retention ponds that aren't that deep," Salow said.

White Lake's Lilley cited one instance last week where two teens fell through the ice while walking across a pond near Ford Road, south of M-59, but bystanders rescued the pair prior to firefighters' arrival.

"It's early in the year, but it happens," he said.

Ice fisherman must take the same precautions when putting up and taking down ice shanties. The DNRE mandates these temporary shelters to be removed by March 1 each year, but doesn't dictate when to put them on the ice.

"It depends on local conditions that vary according to water current and the size of the lake," Dettloff said.

Every shanty must display the owner's name and address on all sides of the shanty in 2-inch letters or larger.

If a shanty isn't removed by March 1, the owner is issued a \$100 citation. Should a shanty fall through the ice, it's the owner's responsibility to fish it out of the lake at his or her expense.

"More fines could follow depending on the judge or magistrate," Dettloff said.

The Oakland County Sheriff's Department Marine Division suggests bringing some of the following equipment when venturing out on the ice:

- Boots or grippers to provide traction when venturing on ice by foot;
- A compass or GPS system;
- Dry towels;
- Extra gloves;
- A first aid kit for emergencies;
- Ice picks or awls;
- A personal flotation device to be worn under your coat;
- Rope; and
- A sled to transport all your ice fishing or other gear.