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IDNR, conservation police urge life jacket use and sober boating

SPRINGFIELD – Memorial Day weekend is the unofficial kickoff to the summer boating season, and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) and Illinois Conservation Police are urging people to wear life jackets anytime they're on the water and to only operate boats while sober.

National Safe Boating Week is May 16-22, the week leading up to the Memorial Day holiday weekend, to raise awareness about safety on the water.

“As boating season gets underway, IDNR’s Office of Law Enforcement reminds everyone that protecting safety on the water is a community effort. Everyone who heads out on Illinois waters has a part to play in maintaining a safe, enjoyable environment for all,” said **Jed Whitchurch, director of the IDNR Office of Law Enforcement**. “Knowing and following boating laws – such as navigation rules, required safety equipment, respecting no-wake zones, and staying updated on weather – are keys to a positive experience.”

In 2025, there were 81 reportable boating accidents on Illinois waters, resulting in 12 fatalities and 37 injuries, according to statistics compiled by the Illinois Conservation Police. Prior years’ statistics:

- 2024: 63 boating accidents with 15 fatalities and 32 injuries
- 2023: 70 boating accidents with 12 fatalities and 37 injuries
- 2022: 52 boating accidents with 6 fatalities and 40 injuries
- 2021: 93 boating accidents with 16 fatalities and 28 injuries

(Annual boating accident statistics are compiled based on the federal fiscal year Oct. 1 through Sept. 30.)

Statistics indicate most boating accidents occur between noon and 6 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays between June and August. Conditions are usually clear with good visibility, light winds, and calm water. Most accidents involve operators between the ages of 20 and 40 who have more than 100 hours of boating experience but little or no classroom boating safety instruction. They also usually involve open motorboats cruising in a careless or reckless manner, culminating in a collision with another boat.

IDNR offers free boating safety courses that provide a review of boating laws and regulations, as well as instruction on the safe and attentive operation of watercraft. The department encourages boaters of all ages to take a safety course. Anyone born on or after Jan. 1, 1998, must pass a course and have a valid Boating Safety Certificate to operate a motorboat (with over 10 horsepower). State law also requires boating safety education for people ages 12 to 17 to operate a motorboat.

Free safety courses are taught by volunteer instructors and are available throughout Illinois. Find a schedule of courses [online](#). For a fee, online boating safety courses are also available.

Avoid boating under the influence

As part of the Illinois Conservation Police boating safety enforcement effort, officers strictly enforce laws regarding operating under the influence (OUI) for boat operators. Operating a boat under the influence is in some ways riskier than operating a motor vehicle under the influence. On waterways, there are no lane markers, boats have no seatbelts, and there is little protection for occupants should a collision occur.

IDNR emphasizes the dangers of alcohol use while boating, noting that operating a boat under the influence significantly decreases safety for everyone.

“Illinois Conservation Police will actively monitor waterways and take enforcement action against impaired operators to help keep everyone safe,” Whitchurch said.

In 2025, conservation officers arrested 72 Illinois boaters for OUI. Of the 12 boating-related fatalities in the state in 2025, seven involved alcohol or drug impairment. Previous years’ OUI arrests:

- 2024: 84 boaters
- 2023: 72 boaters
- 2022: 81 boaters
- 2021: 65 boaters

State law requires life jackets on board. Wearing a life jacket is the most important action boaters and paddlers can take to ensure their safety and that of others on board.

Illinois law requires that personal floatation devices, or PFDs, be available for each person aboard a boat or other watercraft. The law also requires Illinois law requires everyone to wear a PFD while operating a personal watercraft or jet ski.

Under the Boat Registration and Safety Act, no person may operate any watercraft unless an approved and appropriately sized wearable U.S. Coast Guard approved personal flotation device is being properly worn at all times by each person under the age of 13 on the deck of a watercraft or in an open watercraft. However, this requirement shall not apply to people who are enclosed in a cabin or below the top deck on a watercraft, on an anchored watercraft that is a platform for swimming or diving, or aboard a charter “passenger for hire” watercraft with a licensed captain.

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About IDNR

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources was established in 1925 as the Illinois Department of Conservation, bringing under one umbrella oversight of fish and game, forestry, public works, and lakes. Today, IDNR’s work encompasses management of about 400 sites across Illinois, including state parks and historic sites; wildlife, fisheries, forestry, and natural heritage; Lake Michigan water allocation and coastal management; conservation police; mines and minerals; oil and gas; issuance of licenses, permits, and numerous grants; the World Shooting and Recreational Complex in Sparta; and the Illinois State Museum. Visit <https://dnr.illinois.gov> and follow us on [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and [LinkedIn](#).