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IDNR and Illinois Conservation Police urge life jacket use, sober boating ahead of busy Memorial Day weekend on the water

SPRINGFIELD – Memorial Day weekend is the unofficial kickoff to the summer boating season, and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources 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 18-24, the week leading up to the Memorial Day holiday weekend, to raise awareness of boating safety.

"Life jackets save lives, and the best thing you can do for your friends and loved ones is insist they wear a life jacket anytime they're in or near the water," **said Illinois Conservation Police Lt. Curt Lewis, the state's boating law administrator.** "The best life jacket is the one you wear, whether you're on a fishing boat, a pontoon, a canoe, a personal watercraft, or a paddleboard."

In 2023, there were 70 reportable boating accidents on Illinois waters, resulting in 12 fatalities and 37 injuries, according to statistics compiled by the Illinois Conservation Police. Of the 12 fatalities, eight who died were not wearing life jackets or vests.

Prior years' statistics:

- 2022: 52 boating accidents with 6 fatalities and 40 injuries
- 2021: 93 boating accidents with 16 fatalities and 28 injuries
- 2020: 81 boating accidents with 21 fatalities and 36 injuries
- 2019: 72 boating accidents with 14 fatalities and 42 injuries

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

Statistics show 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.

“With boating season upon us, everyone who heads out to enjoy Illinois’ beautiful lakes and waterways should make safety their first priority,” **said Cody Gray, safety education program administrator for IDNR.** “IDNR’s mandatory boating safety classes are free, and what you learn may just save someone’s life.”

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, Lewis said. On waterways, there are no lane markers, boats have no seatbelts, and there is little protection for occupants should a collision occur.

In 2023, Illinois Conservation Police officers arrested 72 boaters for OUI, an 11% decrease from the previous year. Previous years’ OUI arrests:

- 2022: 81 boaters
- 2021: 65 boaters

Two of the 12 boating-related fatalities in Illinois in 2023 involved alcohol or drug impairment.

State law requires life jackets on board

Lewis stressed that 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 – which are life jackets or life vests – 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 state law, 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 by each person under the age of 13 on the deck of a watercraft or in an open watercraft at all times in which the watercraft is underway. However, this requirement shall not apply to persons 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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