

Potomac ALMANAC

Rescuers Advise: 'Respect This River'

As the weather warms, officials warn urge visitors to the river to use caution.

By Aaron Stern/The Almanac

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Karl Salberg works as a firefighter with Fairfax County Fire and Rescue. Based out of Station 412, he is often called in to assist rescues of kayakers, boaters, and hikers in and around the Potomac River. On one of those calls a couple years back his swift water inflatable boat was pulled into a whirlpool that to the untrained eye would have looked harmless.

"It got to where the water was coming up over the transom — it was spinning us around like a pirouette," Salberg said.

Salberg got out of that jam because he knew what he was dealing with: a river whose power and danger are equally deceptive. Most people underestimate the strength and danger of the river though and if the river can suck a boat under it can certainly do the same to a swimmer in a life jacket, Salberg said.

Five people in 2004 accidentally drowned in the Potomac Gorge — defined as the area between Key Bridge and just north of Great Falls — deaths that likely could have been prevented had the victims been fully aware of the threats posed by the river and its rocky surroundings.

IN THE WAKE of those five drownings the agencies that oversee river safety made a point to increase the levels of interagency cooperation. Those agencies — which include the National Park Service, the United States Park Police, Montgomery and Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Departments, the District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Harbor Patrol and the District of Columbia Fire & E.M.S. Squads — have also embarked on a public awareness campaign with the help of local organizations including the Potomac Conservancy and R.E.I. aimed at making the public aware of the dangers posed by the river as well as the hiking trails that line it on both the Maryland and Virginia sides.

The result has been, from 2005 to the present, zero accidental drownings have occurred in the Potomac Gorge.

Knowing that the river's current is much stronger than it often appears is crucial for visitors, as is knowing that swimming in the river is prohibited for just that reason, officials said.

"Respect this river," said Joseph Lawler, the National Park Service's regional director for the National Capital Region, during an annual demonstration to local media on Thursday, May 22 about river safety.

"This weekend [Memorial Day] starts the big summer [season] ... and we do see a very marked increase in the number of people who come to the parks," said Kevin Brandt, superintendent of the C&O Canal National



Photo by Aaron Stern/The Almanac
Fairfax County Fire and Rescue shift captain David Conrad, based out of Station 412, pilots a swift water rescue boat up a set of rapids in the Potomac River below Great Falls during a demonstration of river rescue equipment on Thursday, May 22.



Photo by Aaron Stern/The Almanac
This Cabin John Park Volunteer Fire Department hauls a swift water rescue boat on a trailer.

Historical Park. "Even at low levels the velocity of the river can surprise you."

THIS TIME of year is a common time for rescue calls as those eager to get back outdoors head to the river and cold water can lead to hypothermia in just minutes.

During Thursday's demonstration, a kayaker who had flipped out of her boat was brought back to shore by a rescue boat, shivering and wrapped in a blanket.

"The river can look calm at times," said Lawler. "It's very easy for visitors to be fooled. One misstep and in 15 minutes — hypothermia."

Many rescues in the Potomac Gorge are for inexperienced hikers who set out on trails without proper equipment like hiking boots and injure themselves, officials said, while many boating accidents and subsequent rescues are the result of people drinking while boating.

Rescues involving hikers usually involve those who make bad choices of footwear — high heels or flip flops or work shoes instead of hiking shoes and thick socks — and the rescues are typically done by boat or by helicopter because much of the Billy Goat Trail is inaccessible by vehicle.

"On the Maryland side they have a lot of issues with the Billy Goat Trail," said Fairfax County Fire and Rescue shift captain David Conrad as he piloted a swift water rescue boat — a rubber inflatable boat with an outboard motor — up a set of rapids.



Photo by Aaron Stern/The Almanac
Heading upstream: Maryland has jurisdiction over the water in the Potomac River, meaning that they take the lead in nearly all rescue situations and are supported by Virginia authorities. Cabin John Park Volunteer Fire Department stations 10 and 30 are usually the first to respond with swift water rescue teams.

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