‘If you make a mistake, you’re probably going to pay for it’

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San Francisco’s Kristen Struckmeyer, from left, Allie Epstein and Mac Malone enjoyed a relaxing day on the South Yuba River at the Highway 49 bridge this week.
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As temperatures rise and people continue to emerge from a months-long stay-at-home order, the South Yuba River is experiencing an influx of people looking to cool off and enjoy its wild beauty.
While the South Yuba River has plenty to offer those who make their way to its trails and shores, it also poses several dangers that can turn a fun day in the water into a life-endangering situation.

“The South Yuba is unforgiving,” said Washington Fire Chief Mike Stewart, who has 30 years of experience teaching river rescue in California as well as other western states. “If you make a mistake, you’re probably going to pay for it. That mistake may be a slip and fall and a bruise, a cut or a broken ankle. Or it could be your life.”

In a span of 10 days in June, emergency air operation crews have been called in to assist in a pair rescues at the river.

On June 18, near the Old Yuba River Bridge, a man was rescued by Nevada County Consolidated Fire and California Highway Patrol personnel after being trapped under water for several minutes. Due to the remote location, the CHP Air Operations helicopter (H-20) was called in. The man survived after life-saving treatment was performed by paramedics while en route to Sutter Roseville Medical Center.

On Sunday, the air operations crew responded to another call in the same area when a man fell onto some rocks, injuring his ankle.

According to The Union’s records, there have been 14 accidental deaths that have occurred at the South Yuba River since 2008.

**SCOUT, GRIP AND PROTECT**

When it comes to safety on the South Yuba River, longtime river safety educator and river scientist Katrina Schneider said there are three key things to remember — scout your location, be sure of your grip and protect yourself.

“Find a way to scout before you do something,” she said. “Don’t make an assumption, just because you’ve done it before. Really just take a look at it, assess it and know your own capacities.”

When scouting the location, Schneider suggests bringing goggles or a mask to look for any underwater dangers like “entrapment rocks” that may not have been in that location in years past.

“Probably the biggest hazard we have on the Yuba is entrapment rocks,” Schneider said. “A place where feet and body parts can get pinned in there, and it doesn't take much water flow to be pinned and held in, and the water can fold you over.”
“If you do slip in an area and start to get washed down where there are entrapment rocks, then you ball up. Bring all your body parts in when you’re rushing through it. Because when people try to shove their feet down in between the rocks to stand up, they put themselves at a really high risk.”

Another river risk is slipping, falling and suffering a serious injury in one of the many spots that has no cell phone reception.

“The granite rocks can get really slippery,” said Daniel Belshe, community engagement manager for South Yuba River Citizens League. “There are a lot of algae blooms this year, so you’re going to see a lot more of the “rock snot.” You can slip and break an ankle or a hip.”

Schneider noted when groups move along the rocks, water from their suits drips onto the rocks and makes an already slippery circumstance more dangerous.

“Just walk with three points of contact as you move along the rocks,” she said. “You can move so quickly and smoothly, and our bodies are super efficient with that extra grip and contact.”

As for protection, Schneider said the best way to do that is to be educated on the dangers of the river and what to do when confronted with one.

“If something does happen, you got to protect yourself,” she said. “Don’t dig your feet down and try to stand up in moving water. You want to keep those feet out of the water, balled up into you. Swift moving water with a gradient drop is a set up for entrapment.”

Schneider said overall there are many river-literate locals and it’s important for those who know the dangers to help educate those who don’t.

“We need to be bolder,” she said. “Especially with out-of-towners, when we see them playing in places that aren’t safe. It’s hard to do, because sometimes people don’t respond well to it.”

**THINGS CHANGE**

Schneider, Belshe and Stewart all noted the constantly changing dynamics of the river as a major risk factor river-goers need to take into account as well.

“A lot of people come to the Yuba in August and the water is 70 degrees or higher and the flow is 20-30 cubic feet per second, and they have a good time,” said Stewart. “Then they come back in the spring, and they’ve been cooped up all winter and now it’s April, and the water temp is 42-45 and moving 1,200-1,500 cubic feet per second
and they jump off the same rock they jumped off in August and expect the same result and it’s not going to be.”

Schneider added most people simply underestimate the power of the river.

“I think, overall, people don’t understand the power of water until you’ve had something happen,” she said. “… It looks like this soft element, but we don’t realize when you mix moving water, big rocks and a steep gradient, those three factors together creates a tremendous capacity to hold things.

“There’s all sorts of things that the river is meant to do with that power — shifting things, breaking rocks down and moving them down river — and we are engaging in a very powerful system. It doesn’t mean we can’t do it, it just means we have to be able to discern the spots.”

**IF YOU’RE SICK, SKIP THE DIP**

An added element to river safety this year is COVID-19 precautions, said Belshe.

“Tons of folks are headed down there, a lot of folks from out of town — I would say the majority of the people visiting the river right now are coming from out of town, out of the county — so we’re really trying to focus a lot of messaging and get it out to the community, even if you’re down there, bring a mask, keep 6 feet distance on the beaches and trails, and if you’re feeling sick, skip the dip.”

Belshe noted more signage about river rules and precautions will be going up at popular river spots this weekend.

**RIVER SAFETY STARTS IN PARKING LOT**

Packed parking lots coupled with cars parked illegally can make river rescues even more difficult than they already are, said Belshe.

“Parking lots are full and people are sort of illegally parking anywhere,” he said. “It’s causing issues getting emergency services down to the river.”

In addition to following parking regulations, safety rules and COVID-19 precautions, Belshe is calling on river-goers to be sure to clean up after themselves, noting trash, broken glass and pet waste being left behind.

“Most all the crossings, even on a weekday, by 9, 10 in the morning, it looks like a packed Memorial Day weekend. And, that’s at every single crossing,” he said. “We are telling people to really remember to pack it in and pack it out, and leave the glass at home. And, pick up after your pets.”
Stewart said he’d simply like people to have respect when they visit the river.

“Just have respect of the river, respect of the environment and respect for private property.”

For more information about river rules and safety, visit the SYRCL website: http://www.yubariver.org.

“If we have more of an ability to read the river, then we can make really wise choices,” Schneider said. “The river doesn’t have to be dangerous at all. The danger is us not understanding what it’s doing.”

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