

Accident Database

Report ID# 3160

Help

2009-07-23
Date
Jacqueline Nichole Underwood Mason
Victim
21
Victim Age
Bullpasture (Public Fishing Access
River
Public Fishing Access (Rt. 678) to Cowpasture River
Section
Dam near Rt. 220; Rocky Mount, VA United States Virginia, US
Location
Gage
High
Water Level
River Difficulty
Caught in a Natural Hydraulic
Cause

– PFD Not Worn or Present

Injury Type(s)

– Does not Apply

Factors

– Other

Private

Trip Type

Open Canoe

Boat Type

Group Info

Other Victim Names

Reported

Status

Accident Description

Monday, July 27, 2009

By MORRIS STEPHENSON - Staff Writer

The low-head dam on the Blackwater River at the Rocky Mount Water Treatment Plant has claimed the life of a second canoer within the past two months. Lt. Karl Martin of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, identified the victim as Jacqueline Nichole Underwood Mason, 21, of Ferrum. She drowned after her 14-foot canoe capsized about 10 p.m. Thursday as she and a companion crossed the dam.

Two other paddlers in a second canoe went over the dam and turned over just ahead of the second couple. James Willoughby, 27, of Roanoke, was in the canoe with Mason, according to Martin. Martin identified the other two canoers with them as Mark Thompson, 21, Ferrum, and Elizabeth (Betsy) Beasley, 20, of Roanoke. They were using a canoe owned by Matt Hodges of Rocky Mount.

No life jackets were taken on the float, according to Martin.

Conservation Officers Brandon Edwards and Joe Williams investigated the accident Thursday night.

said.

He said Thompson and Beasley crossed the dam first, flipped and were caught in a strong hydraulic in front of the dam. They managed to escape from the water and floated a short distance before reaching shore. They knew the other couple also had turned over and went back to assist, according to Martin.

When they got to the plant facility, Willoughby was caught in the hydraulic. Thompson used a throw ring with a rope, which the man was able to grab.

Willoughby was pulled to a slab of concrete on the plant side of the river. He managed to climb to the top of the concrete where he was sitting with a rope attached to him when members of the county's swift water rescue team arrived at the scene, according to the investigators.

After the death of a Union Hall paddler at the same location on June 6, the Town of Rocky Mount placed the throw ring, two ropes with small buoys and a grab hook with a long handle on a railing along a platform that is located above and just below the dam structure.

According to a member of the swift water rescue team, Thompson used the pole with the hook trying to locate his paddling companion.

The three survivors told officers that they only saw Mason surface once after the canoe flipped.

Rescuers found her body about 1 a.m. some one-quarter of a mile below the dam and in the first turn in the river downstream of the structure, according to Martin.

Hodges, a friend of the four paddlers and Mason's supervisor at Kworkin and Associates in Roanoke, lives with his parents on the Blackwater River. He was unable to make the float with his friends, but passed the "put-in" location on Grassy Hill Road and saw their vehicles.

"I knew they had left on the float. The river was high, really high when I saw it," Hodges said.

He also noted he had gotten Mason into canoeing about two months ago.

"After the first float, she loved it...absolutely loved it. In fact, she bought her Mad River (canoe) about a month ago. It's just like mine except mine is tan and she got a blue one," he added.

Hodges also gave some insight into what happened shortly before the accident.

"I was at home when they came floating by," he said. "I heard her yelling and hollering, 'Matt! Matt.' I had gotten a text message from her not long before. I tried to text her back, but I never got a reply," he continued.

Hodges placed the time between 9:30 and 9:45 p.m. when the canoers passed his home. "I first thought they may have decided to get out of the river at our place. But they must have decided to go on. That was the original plan. Her vehicle was parked at the Route 220 take-out," Hodges added.

Hodges said he became concerned when he didn't hear from them. Not long after, he heard about an accident on the river. "I just knew it had to be them."

Hodges said he went to the water treatment plant but they would not let him go down to the river. Instead, he went to the Route 220 access, left his vehicle and walked along the river from there back to the dam.

Hodges said he talked to his three surviving friends at the scene. "They told me they had only seen Nichole surface once after the canoe flipped."

On Thursday night, the river was running at about the same level as it was on June 6, when Chris Odum, 36, Union Hall, lost his life. His canoe flipped as it crossed the dam and he was caught in the hydraulic. Friends were unable to save Odum despite repeated efforts.

The Callaway section of the county received as much as 4 inches of rain in a 3 a.m. storm on Thursday. The Blackwater River forms in the Callaway mountains.

The U.S. Geological Survey gauge revealed the river was running just over 2 feet (above normal) before the storm. However, at about noon, the water level had spiked at almost 5.5 feet. Gauge records show the canoers entered the river when it was running at about 3.5 feet.

Game Wardens Edwards and Williams entered the river about 1:30 a.m. They had difficulty turning Mason's canoe over. They pulled it to a 10-foot embankment where it was hoisted to the top by Martin, Hodges and his father, Ricky. They had to use a long rope Mason had connected to one end.

Martin said he could not stress enough the importance of thinking safety first when planning a float trip.

"Our rivers rise fast after a big rain and also drop just as quickly. When our small rivers are running full, the water is very powerful," he said, adding that it would be smart for all paddlers to avoid rivers with any type of dam when the water flow is above normal.

Life jackets in the boats are required.

"Wearing a life jacket and a helmet is the way to go. A person can hit their head on a rock and get hurt, especially if caught in a hydraulic or 'boiling' water," he added.

Hodges said he has not found his canoe nor has anyone called about it. He planned to paddle a kayak down river to see if he can locate it. His telephone number is 243-0438.

07-23-09

WIRTZ, VA Low-head dam claims second victim

Thefranklinewspost.com (07-24-09)

A Ferrum woman drowned Thu. night (07-23) while canoeing on the Blackwater River near Rocky Mount's water filtration plant in Wirtz. Jacqueline Nichole Underwood Mason, 21, is the 2nd drowning victim at the low-head dam in less than 2 months. Two couples were in 2 canoes on the river around 10 p.m. when they approached the low-head dam, according to Lt. Karl Martin with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF). James Willoughby, 27, of Roanoke was in the canoe with Mason. Mark Thompson, 21, of Ferrum and Elizabeth Beasley, 20, of Roanoke were in the other canoe.

The couples were unable to make it to the bank before going over the dam. Both canoes capsized. Thompson and Beasley got out immediately and were able to rescue Willoughby, using a rope throw and flotation device that had been installed at the site by the Town of Rocky Mount after the previous fatality there. Mason, a 2006 graduate of Franklin Co. High School, was found around 1 a.m. about 1/4 of a mile downstream. VDGIF is in charge of the investigation.

<http://www.thefranklinewspost.com/article.cfm?ID=14128>

On 7/23/09 at 9:52 pm, the Franklin County E-911 center received a call stating that a canoe had capsized in the Blackwater River, near the Town of Rocky Mount water treatment plant. The location of the incident is off Shady Lane north of Rocky Mount. The caller stated that there were 2 people in the canoe and that one of the subjects was last seen in the water and was presumed to have drowned. Fire and EMS units from Franklin County Rescue Squad, Boones Mill Fire and EMS, and the Franklin County Dept. of Public Safety were dispatched to respond. The Franklin County swift-water rescue team was notified to respond as well.

the canoe with him when it capsized. Both subjects were swept over the dam. The male subject was swept passed the hydraulic of the dam while the female victim was caught in the hydraulic. The male subject stated that he saw the female victim briefly surface in the hydraulic and did not see her again. Two other boaters in a separate canoe ran to a nearby residence to get assistance. The male subject continued to look for the female victim. The swift-water rescue team conducted a rope rescue of the male victim from the base of the dam. A state police helicopter also responded and began an aerial search of the river downstream of the dam.

Once the male victim was rescued, the swift-water rescue team conducted a search downstream of the dam to attempt to locate the female victim. The 21 year old female victim was located, floating in the water, approximately ¼ mile downstream from the dam. The cause of death is pending the results of an autopsy. There were no other injuries to any of the other subjects. No one in the group had a life jacket.

This is the second fatality at this low head dam this summer. The name of the victim is being withheld pending notification of the family. The paddlers were newcomers to the sport and had limited experience on the water. The water level during the event was highly likely the highest and fastest water they had ever paddled. The event also occurred after dark.



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