

Safety necessary; Tahoe can be deadly



The importance of wearing life jackets is being emphasized by officials at Lake Tahoe. Photo/Provided

By Carole Bernardi

INCLINE VILLAGE – Summer at picturesque Lake Tahoe is officially in full swing once the Fourth of July holiday kicks into gear. Boats line the shores, paddleboards compete with kayaks, and swimmers maneuver their way in between.

This year the long holiday weekend presents unlimited opportunities for water activities as healthy snowfall has allowed Lake Tahoe to rise slightly above its natural rim. It's a recipe for fun, and pending risks.

People often believe hypothermia is the greatest risk of drowning in cold water, but it's not; it takes hours. In Lake

Tahoe, water temperatures can be anywhere between 68-70 degrees by mid-August in the shallower coves. Go down another 4 feet plus and it's easily 10 degrees cooler. By the time you reach the thermocline (a thin, distinct layer where temperature changes more rapidly with depth than layers above or below) it's a steady 45 degrees. This degree of shock can kill.

Cold water shock kills in minutes due to an involuntary gasp reflex caused by sudden immersion in cold water. Symptoms are rapid breathing, gasping, fainting, muscle failure, lungs fill with air and an immediate risk of drowning.



Loaner life jackets are available at Sand Harbor.
Photo/Carole Bernardi

Officials from multiple state and district agencies (including Coast Guard, sheriff, state park, wildlife and TRPA) are monitoring Lake Tahoe and are bracing for possible fatal accidents during the crowded Fourth of July holiday. They are also out on the lake most other days of the summer.

Water safety is relevant in several situations from boating, paddleboarding, kayaking, Jet Skiing, swimming, diving off a boat or even walking into the lake.

“Your best inoculation against cold water shock is a life jacket. It will save your life,” Edwin Lyngar of the Nevada Department of Wildlife said.

Lyngar has helped spearhead a campaign called Wear it Nevada that unites these agencies in order to impress the importance about life vests. A personal flotation device (PFD) is the most important piece of equipment, so much so that “life jacket loan stations” are now located at Nevada State Parks (15 locations and growing). A grant with the U.S. Coast Guard provides these jackets. One is at Sand Harbor.

Once a life vest is on, there are a few other important tips to consider. Have you adapted to the altitude? Are you drinking plenty of water and staying hydrated? Are you walking into the lake after hours of sun exposure (body temp)? The most obvious for those in a vacation state of mind, what is your alcohol consumption level?

Nevada laws mandate that children 12 and under must wear a life vest, and 13 and older must have one in their possession. Even business owners renting water devices are obligated (insurance liability) to review, with each and every customer, the Coast Guard Navigation Rules and are responsible for providing each customer with a PFD.

“It’s all about team work and everyone’s jurisdiction having the same goal and responsibility to everyone on the water,” said Deputy Rob Buonamici of Douglas County Sheriff’s Department. If a water patrol boat approaches a paddleboarder or kayaker, with no life vest on their body or strapped to their water device, it is a \$90 citation.

“Just like a DUI for road violations, a boat operator or person using a water device can be cited for an OUI, which is

operating under the influence with an alcohol level of 0.08 percent," Deputy Ron Skibinski of Douglas County said.

Other tips from the boat patrollers: never swim alone, tell a friend before entering the water, know your swimming limitations, wear a whistle, never jump into cold water, and prepare for accidental immersion by putting on a life vest.