

American Whitewater Accident Summary: January – July 2026

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THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF 2026 HAVE BEEN UNUSUALLY

quiet from a whitewater accident standpoint. The number of reported fatalities, 17, is way down, potentially due to droughts in many parts of the country. There were no reported deaths in Colorado or California, where there were low water levels in both states. Paddlecraft included 10 kayaks, 1 canoe, 4 rafts, 2 inflatable kayaks, and a powerboat. Causes include 4 strainer pins, 5 incidents where no life vests were worn, 2 involving rocks or sieves, 2 flush drownings, and 2 health problems. Three of the deaths were in Arizona; the rest were spread across 12 states and one European country; 10 of the accidents involved people under 30; and eight were in Class I and II rapids. There were a number of near misses reported, and several had useful lessons to convey. As always, my special thanks goes to those who have forwarded reports and to Charlie Duffy for his careful analysis and useful graphs.

Kayaking Accidents

On April 4, 2026, two experienced paddlers met to kayak Vermont's Class II-III Lamoille River. Sarah Goldberg, 34, had considerable paddling experience in Colorado. She was running with Maddie Clark, a local boater who was very familiar with the river. Both were fully equipped with drysuits, PFD's, helmets, and other gear.

The trip was uneventful until they reached a three-foot-high, river-wide ledge above the town of Wolcott. Ms. Clark ran first, turned upstream, and indicated a line to the right of a large boulder. Ms. Goldberg stalled out on her approach and went over the drop without much speed. She flipped in the hole and bailed out. The backwash, which didn't look very powerful, held and tumbled her.

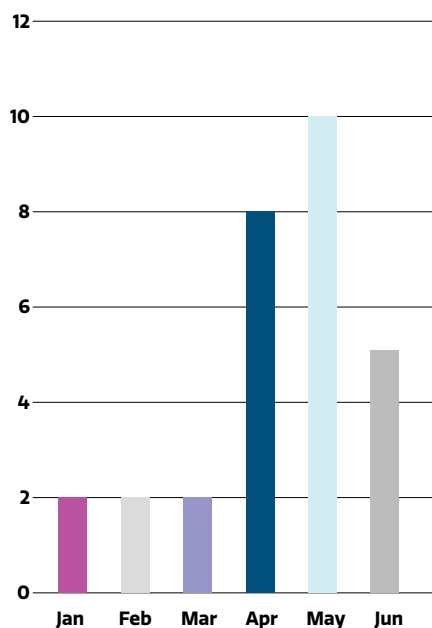
Ms. Clark, who was close to shore, got out and grabbed her rescue bag. Her throws were on target, but Ms. Goldberg did not grab hold. Ms. Clark was wading out to attempt a swimming rescue when Ms. Goldberg floated free of the hole and headed downstream. Hurrying back to shore, Ms. Clark ran several hundred yards downriver to where the current slowed, calling for help. Then she swam out into the river, pulled Ms. Goldberg to shore, and collapsed.

Fortunately, her cries for help had been heard, and volunteer firefighters rushed to the scene. They began CPR and took Ms. Clark to an ambulance. She was on the edge of respiratory failure and spent the night in the hospital. Efforts to resuscitate Ms. Goldberg were unsuccessful.

We have all been caught in holes that were much worse than they looked. It's not clear why Ms. Goldberg was unable to help herself after her kayak flipped, but we do know that cold water, especially if inhaled, can have paralyzing effects. Ms. Clark's rescue efforts were nothing short of heroic; she pushed herself to the limit to rescue her partner. A third paddler might have been helpful but would not have guaranteed a successful outcome.

There was a fatality in the runout below Great Falls, a class V+ drop on the Potomac River near Washington, DC. On May 3rd, Will Langford, 22, made a successful run of the Virginia side of this drop. After running the Spout, he caught an eddy, then washed into a rock wall where he was held underwater. Veteran falls runner and Great Falls Park Ranger Bill Kirby describes the place: "When the

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river goes over the Spout, most of the water goes downstream through O-deck, but there is a pretty strong current that runs straight against the wall on river left that forms the cauldron at the base of the Spout. The wall is the bottom end of the flake. If you wash against that wall, you're pretty much doomed to a swim because it is undercut just enough to force you over and the current is too strong to roll against. Countless people have done this and flushed out safely, but it looks like Will was pinned just long enough to drown."

Seeing Mr. Langford in trouble, John Woodward attempted a rescue. Here is his account: "I then got a glimpse of Will in the water, maybe six feet deep ... not showing any signs of swimming, and decided I needed to get to him ... I jumped in, grabbed Will, and kicked off the rocks to get us away from the wall as I tried to push him forward ahead of me out into the current ... When I surfaced next to him, I saw he was totally unconscious. I tried to wake him up as we floated through the next wave train. I did my best to keep his head out of the water as we floated down, but it was difficult to do this through the waves. During this time, I was yelling, "911!" to people on the shore whenever possible ... Will was unconscious and never coughed or moved at all. As we got to the end of the rapid, I swam him to the first available spot on the shore and dragged him up on the rocks where he was stable enough for CPR. I started doing CPR and rescue breaths ... Help arrived soon after. There were moments during CPR where he seemed to almost start breathing. His face, blue when I got him out of the water, began to get some color. River rescue arrived after maybe 15-20 minutes and loaded him onto the boat." Sadly, Mr. Langford did not survive.

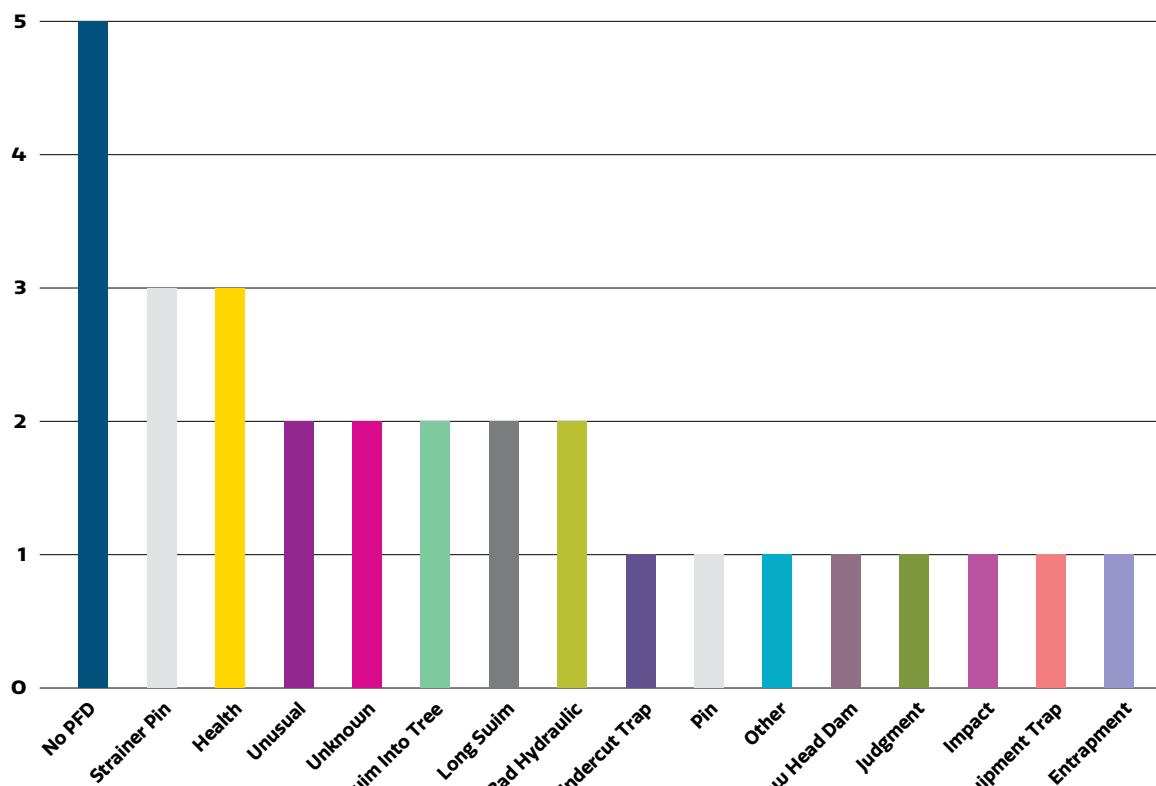
Marsh Creek is used to access Idaho's Middle Fork of the Salmon River when early-season snow blocks road access to Boundary Creek. It is not difficult whitewater (Class III), but at this time of year it's known for fast water, few eddies, and dangerous downed trees. Early reports indicated that this was an especially bad year for trees. On May 5th, an experienced group comprising three rafts and two kayaks encountered several bad strainers that required difficult carries. It was at one of these spots that Scott Robbins, 21, washed under a log.

Mr. Robbins rolled up quickly, but his sprayskirt popped and he began taking on water. Then he had a violent collision with a 20" diameter log angled upstream from the right bank. His body washed through, but his life vest snagged, and he was held underwater. (Rescuers later found out that his kayak tow tether was what got hung up on the log). It took this very well-trained and equipped group six tries, described in detail in a report submitted to the AW Accident Database, to free him. The group eventually cut through the log, and this swung Mr. Robbins into a more accessible position. He was not breathing, had a bloody nose, and had a bad impact mark on his helmet. It is possible that the collision with the log knocked him unconscious.

The group performed CPR, attempted rewarming him, and used an EPIRB to call for help. EMS could not reach the group, so a National Guard helicopter was dispatched. It arrived at 11:30 pm. By this time, Mr. Robbins had not responded to CPR and was presumed dead. The rest of the group, exhausted and cold, were evacuated the following day.

On March 31st, Campbell Kowalczyk, a 17-year-old kayaker from Boise, Idaho, was paddling on the Salaach River in Austria when he pinned against a sieve and drowned. This is a popular Class IV whitewater run known for these hazards. No further details were provided.

Incidents/Cause, Jan – June 2026



Recreational Kayak Accidents

Five kayaking fatalities involved less experienced paddlers in recreational boats. On May 10th, Sohail A. Nabi, a 21-year-old kayaker, was found dead in a Class I section of the Schroon River near Warrensburg, NY. His capsized kayak was floating nearby. He was not wearing a PFD and was paddling ahead of his group. On June 17th, Samuel Mobley was found dead on Idaho's Clearwater River. He was also paddling alone without a PFD.

Two other deaths involved impacts with strainers. On May 31st, a family of five in kayaks and tubes washed into a logjam on Ohio's Licking River. This stream is described as Class I with sharp bends and downed trees. The water level was high and the current was fast. Responding firefighters found two people clinging to the logjam. They later found that a third, Brenda Montgomery, 15, had been pushed beneath the logs and trapped. The rescue and CPR came too late. On June 9th, a 69-year-old man paddling Wisconsin's Sugar River got ahead of his group, hit a strainer, and capsized. Water levels were high, and he was held underwater. His group pulled him free and attempted CPR without success. Although the man was not wearing a life vest, it is possible that he would have become trapped in the strainer with one on as well.

There was a frightful accident at the dam that creates Lake Springfield on Missouri's James River. High water on June 15th created a strong current that pushed a mother and her three children over Springfield Dam into an extremely dangerous hydraulic (search YouTube for "Lake Springfield Dam Rescue"). The mother was in a kayak; the rest of the group was in tubes. It's not clear that they

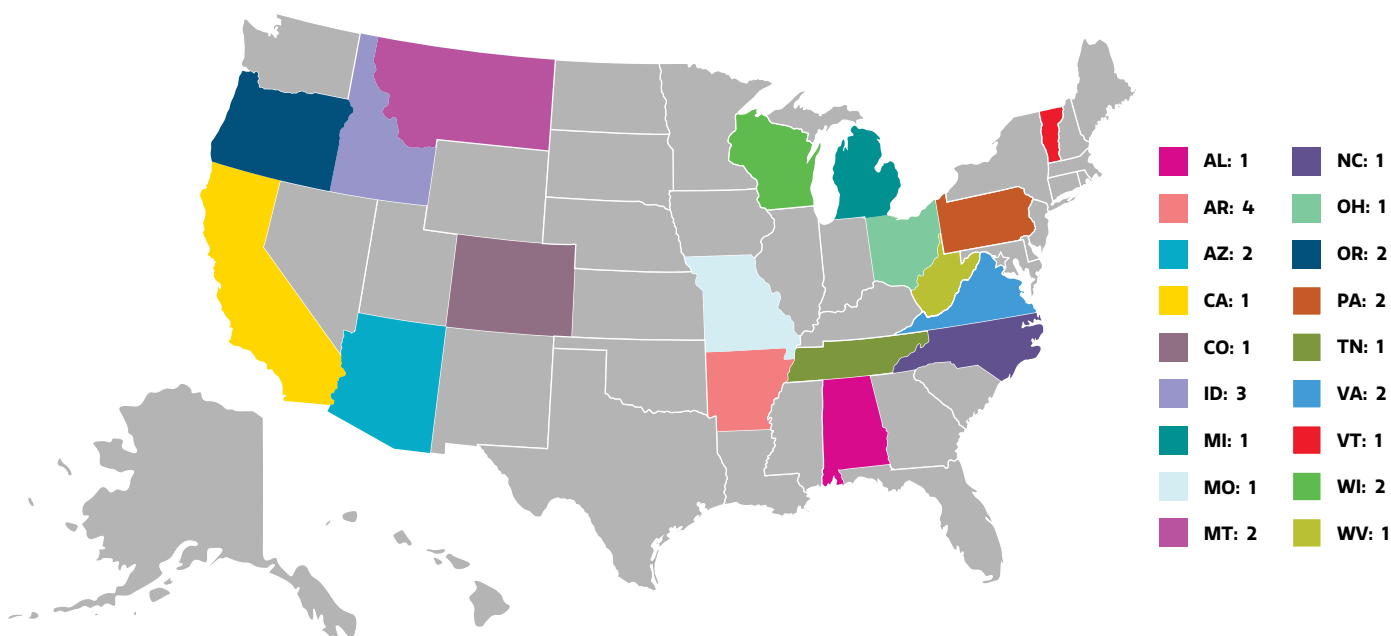
knew the dam was there. Andrea Stawny, 19, Sofie Stawny, 17, and Taylor Stawny, 40, never resurfaced. Aurelia Stawny, 12, survived by clinging to logs jammed against the uprights of a bridge built over the dam. Rescuers lowered a PFD to her from the bridge but then attempted to reach her by boat rather than by doing a vertical rescue. This was a bad idea! The rescue boat picked up Ms. Stawny before being drawn into the maw of the hydraulic, where it violently capsized. It's a miracle that none of the firefighters or the young girl they were rescuing was killed.

Inflatable Kayak Accidents

Two incidents in the first half of this year involved inflatable kayaks. On April 26th, Richard White swam at Grumpy's Ledge just below the put-in of the Middle Ocoee River. Although Mr. White, 50, was a very experienced paddler, he made no effort at self-rescue. Nearby paddlers pulled him ashore and attempted CPR without success. A heart attack or some other serious health problem could have been the cause.

There was a fatality on Washington's White Salmon River on June 25th. This section is Class II-III except for Steelhead Falls, a Class V rapid with a fast-moving, blind lead-in. A couple in a low-quality inflatable kayak apparently paddled over Steelhead Falls by accident. Local paddlers came upon a man in the gorge below the falls. He was severely hypothermic. They found his IK, towed him to the takeout, and dialed 911. Rescue squads later found his deceased partner, a woman, floating about 3/4 of a mile above the Columbia River confluence. She was wearing a PFD but no helmet and had a bad cut on her forehead.

States with the Highest Fatality Rates, Jan – June 2026



Canoeing Accidents

One canoeing accident was reported in the first half of 2026. A 28-year-old woman in a rented canoe drowned on the Buffalo National River in Arkansas on April 9th. She was a non-swimmer, paddling alone, and not wearing a PFD. She went into the water below, where a tree was sticking out into a Class I rapid a few hundred yards above her intended take-out at Grinders Ferry. There were no witnesses, but she was on her phone doing FaceTime with her boyfriend when it happened. He saw a splash on the phone, then lost contact. Her phone was found on the river bottom within a few feet of an overhanging branch. She came free and was found floating face down in the pool below by some young tubers. The Park Service no longer issues reports covering accidents occurring within its system, making it harder to get information on incidents such as this.

Rafting Accidents

One commercial and three private rafting fatalities were reported to American Whitewater between January and June of 2026. On February 20th, Aaron Benjamin, 30, was running the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River when his raft hit a hole and capsized near the top of Hance Rapid. Mr. Benjamin, who was quite experienced and well equipped, died after a long swim through this turbulent rapid. Very cold water may have played a role in this probable flush drowning. A nurse and a paramedic on the trip attempted CPR without success.

On May 28th, a group from a New Jersey school was on a commercial rafting trip on the Lehigh River in Eastern Pennsylvania. This was on a Class I section below Jim Thorpe. The water level was 1200 cfs, a moderate flow. Although the rest of the trip went left, one raft went to the right of the island above the Bowmanstown

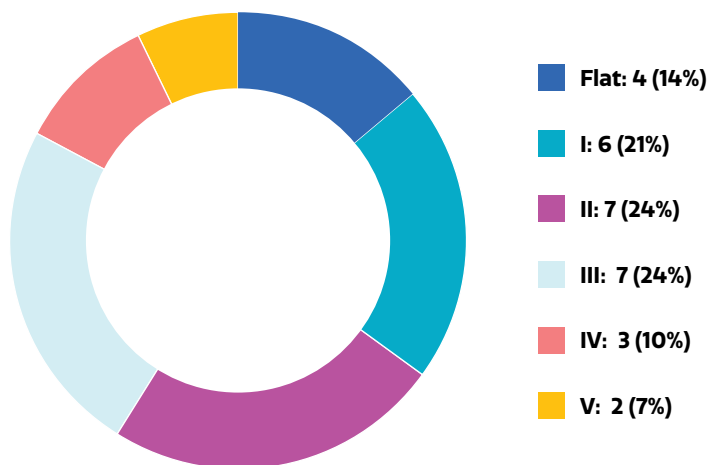
take-out and slammed into a downed tree. Cesar Guncay, 12, was pinned underwater and drowned. The other four kids in the boat with him escaped unharmed.

We have two other accident reports based on news stories that are very short in detail. On April 27th, a man was found dead after a raft flipped on the Clark Fork River near Clinton, Montana. Other people in the boat made it ashore and notified authorities. On June 24th, James Reed was rafting the Class I Lower Payette River in Idaho, near Ontario, Oregon, when he drowned after jumping into the river to rescue his dog. PFDs may have been absent in both cases, but we don't know for sure. Both reports came from news articles, which are often lacking in key details. Anyone with more information is urged to contact American Whitewater.

Miscellaneous Reports

On June 23rd, Sahr Sewah, 22, drowned on Arizona's Salt River below Stewart Mountain Dam. The river here is a popular Class I float trip. He was not wearing a life vest when he fell off his tube, washed around a bend, and disappeared. After he was reported missing, searchers deployed and found his body. Since inner tubes are not considered boats, many of these accidents are not reported. They are a significant part of river use and deserve our attention.

And lastly, on April 8th, two men in a powered bass boat launched at Pierce's Ferry on Arizona's Colorado River. This is the usual take-out for the Grand Canyon, and there's a nasty, unstable, and often Class V rapid just downstream. They were heading upstream to fish when their engine malfunctioned and their boat was swept into the rapid. One man who was not wearing a life vest died. The other, who was better equipped, lived.



Near Misses:

Ice-out conditions on rivers are very hazardous! Sections of rivers may look clear, but that can change quickly. The ice itself can act like a surface-level strainer as current rushes beneath it. On March 6th, Kevin Miller was pushed under an ice sheet on Michigan's Muskegon River. He was held under for 45 seconds and almost blacked out as the current shoved him under. Fortunately, he survived the experience!

On March 31st, several paddlers made a great rescue in the lower section of Alabama's Little River Canyon. A kayaker missed several rolls and was pushed under a rock in Wolf Creek Rapids. He was held under water for about four minutes before washing out. His teammates pulled him to shore and successfully administered CPR. Once his breathing was restored, they called 911, and the man was evacuated by helicopter.

In one of the most unique stories I've heard, a man whose legs were pinned between his canoe and a downstream rock kept his head above water and used a cell phone with satellite capability to summon help. The incident occurred on the Mulberry River in Arkansas on May 24th. He came through the experience alive despite having to wait over four hours for help to arrive!

A rented raft flipped on the Middle Youghiogheny River below Confluence, PA, on May 24th, putting six people in the water. The Yough was running high at 5.8 feet, creating an aggressive hole in the Class II Ramcat Rapids. Some of the rafters who washed downstream were in the water for over 40 minutes! First responders were called to assist the group, which was spread out over miles of river. The Great Allegheny Passage bike trail was closed to allow

motorized rescue vehicles to move freely and search the area. A 5-year-old needed CPR and was life-flighted out. She survived. The others were uninjured.

We receive many reports of stranded paddlers being brought to safety by well-equipped and trained rescue squads. The help given to 28 Boy Scouts caught by swiftly rising water on West Virginia's Cacapon River was widely noted. Most other incidents involved paddlers marooned on midstream rocks or stuck on the "wrong side" of a river. These would be handled easily by a group of trained paddlers without calling for outside assistance.

YOU CAN HELP!

American Whitewater depends on paddlers to help us keep track of mishaps and tragedies on moving water so we can all learn from them. We want to tell YOUR story after a fatal accident or near miss! We are also interested in newspaper clippings, web articles, and reports published by first responders as sources of information about accidents involving people outside the boating community. You can go to the Accident Database page on the American Whitewater website and use the report form, contact Charlie Walbridge at ccwalbridge@cs.com, or message him on Facebook. While the names of fatal accident victims are a matter of public record, the names of other members of the group and the reporter can be kept confidential upon request. The use of names on near-miss reports is encouraged but not required.