

American Whitewater Accident Summary: January – June 2025

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THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF 2025 WERE UNUSUALLY QUIET.

Although there were 25 fatal accidents reported, only two involved skilled kayakers and one of these was a fall during a portage. There were 5 private rafting deaths and no commercial rafting fatalities—both unusually low numbers. Over half the deaths (14) involved recreational kayakers, mostly in rivers with fast current or mild rapids.

People who buy their boats at box stores and have no contact with experienced boaters are not getting the safe paddling information they need! Life vests were not worn in 15 of these incidents and 7 deaths occurred while boating alone. Other accident causes include 4 flush drownings, 4 that involved strainers, 3 with people caught in low head dam reversals, and 2 recirculations in natural hydraulics. Locations of incidents were widespread, with Pennsylvania leading with 4 deaths, followed by Kentucky, Idaho, California, and Washington with 2 each. We had three reports from Canada that were worth adding.

As always, I'm grateful to dozens of people who submitted accident reports, and to Charlie Duffy for carefully checking each one before preparing his useful graphs.

Kayaking Accidents

Washington's Little White Salmon is a well-known Class V run that's runnable in the winter and spring. The crux of the run is 35-foot Spirit Falls and the nasty hole at Chaos just downstream. Most people portage both on the right, but the portage is tricky, with a short section sloping to the edge of a 30 ft cliff that lands

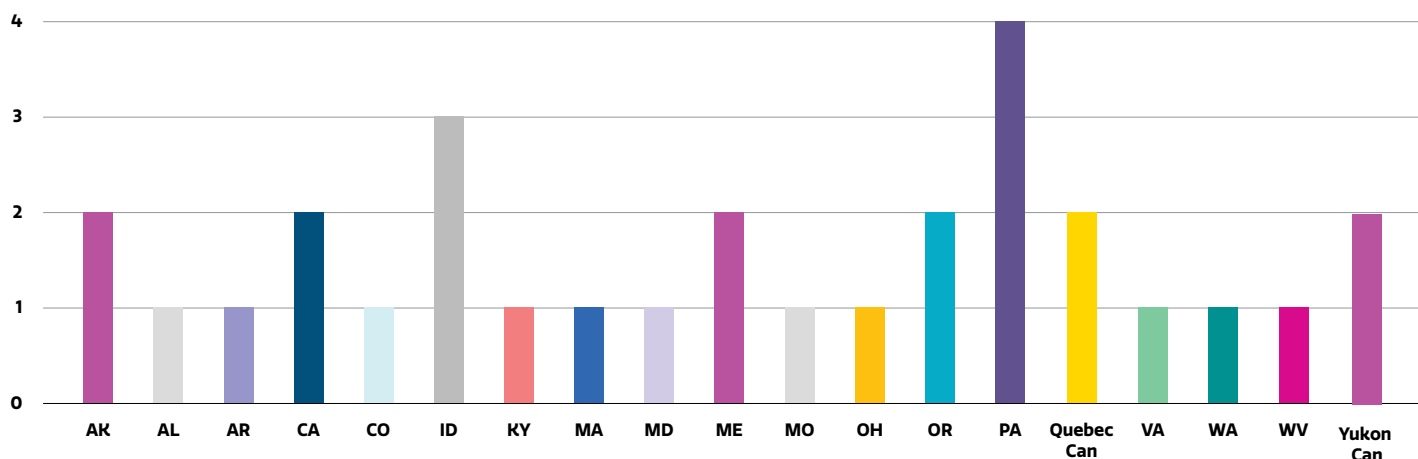
on rocks and shallow water. In the winter, when the portage gets icy, some paddlers bring yak tracks or spikes for traction. On January 30th Grant Garman slipped in an icy spot, fell, and landed head-first. His partner heard the fall and saw Mr. Garman unconscious in the water. He got him ashore below Chaos, attempted CPR, and when Mr. Garman failed to respond, ran out to the road to get help.

The Lower Youghiogheny River in Western Pennsylvania saw unusually high water through much of the late spring season. On June 13th the river was running at 4.2 feet, a medium-high level, when an experienced three-man crew got together for an afternoon run. The trip was uneventful until Bottle of Wine Rapids, where the group ran the standard river left boof. Michael Barney, 43, executed the boof cleanly but was caught by a nasty pourover just downstream. He flipped and rolled several times before bailing out and recirculating in the backwash. One of his friends ferried out and paddled into the pourover. After several rescue attempts, he, too, was caught in the hole. He flipped and bailed out. Then, as both men washed out downstream, he grabbed Mr. Barney and swam him to the river left bank. An impressive rescue effort. He administered CPR without success.

Recreational Kayaking Accidents

Seven recreational kayaking accidents involved boaters who were not wearing PFDs. Four deaths involved cold water, which can be very disorienting to swimmers who find themselves in the water unexpectedly. Five were boating solo, which creates much less margin for error when things go wrong.

2025 Fatalities January – June



On March 19th William Moon, 54, drowned in the South Branch of the Potomac near Springfield, WV. His 12-foot fishing kayak capsized, and he did not resurface. The water was quite cold. His body was discovered a half-mile downstream from where he was last seen.

On April 21st Diane Spata, 59, was kayaking Class I-II with her sister on Virginia’s South Fork of the Shenandoah River when she capsized north of the Karo public boat landing. She was not wearing a PFD. First responders found her under three feet of fast water, with her leg caught by a rock in a foot entrapment.

On May 3rd Hector Rios, 57, left a group and continued alone down Arkansas’ Mulberry River. His destination was Mill Creek Access, 13 miles downstream. The water level was high, and there were several mild rapids ahead. Authorities were called when he failed to show up at the takeout. They quickly found his boat with his PFD stashed inside, but his body wasn’t located until 5 days later.

On May 6th a tandem kayak flipped at No Hands Bridge on California’s Lower American River. This area has fast currents and strong eddylines. One man made it ashore; the other man was still missing several days later.

Another tandem kayak flipped on the Connecticut River near Holyoke, Massachusetts. Niklas Dilisle, 27, was paddling with his girlfriend on May 19th when their boat capsized. The woman got near shore where a bystander pulled her to safety, but Mr. Dilisle was carried downstream. His body was found 19 days later.

On May 14th Sean Chilson, 34, launched his kayak onto a flooded Monocacy River in Maryland. Authorities were notified when he did not show up at his planned takeout. A search using two boats and three drones located his kayak and paddle, but there was no sign of him. His body turned up a week later.

On June 27th Air Force Sgt. Christian Diaz, 24, was paddling with three friends on the Chena River near Fairbanks, Alaska when his boat flipped and he did not resurface. This section of river has fast current and strong eddylines but no real rapids. His body was found several days later.

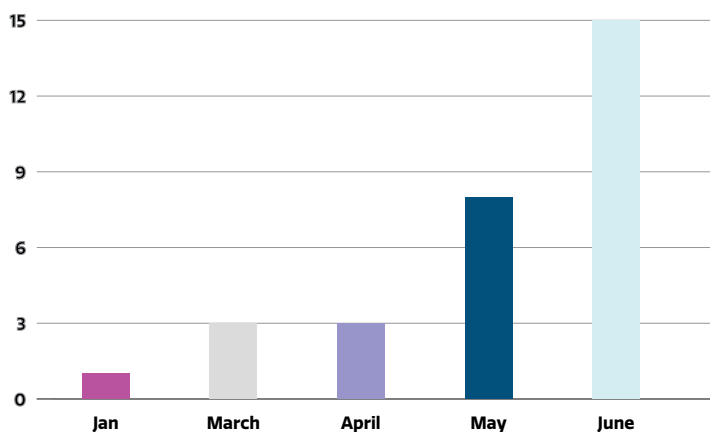
Three other recreational kayaking fatalities occurred at low head dams. On April 19th Russell Mayfield, 65, died after being trapped in the hydraulic below a gauging weir on California’s Kings River. This weir is below Pine Flat Dam, underneath a bridge and upstream of the usual put in. Someone threw him a rope, but he could not hang on. Sheriff’s deputies who were training in river rescue nearby pulled Mr. Mayfield’s body from the river.

On May 23rd Alex Campell, a 38-year-old park ranger at Tyler State Park in eastern Pennsylvania, was placing a warning buoy above a low-head dam on Neshiminy Creek when he washed over the drop and was caught in the hydraulic. No PFD was worn, and there was no backup on shore or in the water.

On June 8th Kevin Sellers, 38, drowned after he and his teenage daughter were swept over a low-head dam on the North Fork of the Kentucky River in Hazard, Kentucky. His daughter’s cries for help were heard and she was rescued by first responders. Mr. Sellers’ body was recovered a few hours later.

Two other recreational kayaking deaths were caused by strainers. On June 1st a 63-year-old woman died on Missouri’s Current River after she was pushed into a downed tree. Her kayak flipped, and she was pinned underwater. Nearby paddlers pulled her free, but she could not be revived. Then, on June 7th, three kayakers—two adults and a 4-year-old—washed into a strainer on the Lower Loyalsock Creek below Montoursville, PA. One adult and the child were able to swim to shore and called for help. They watched helplessly as Dakota MacGill, 26, held onto branches for 45 minutes before he was pulled under. First responders found his body the following day.

2025 Incidents/Month, January – June



Lastly, another kayaking fatality occurred at Willamette Falls in Oregon City, Oregon. This 40-foot high, horseshoe-shaped drop has been run successfully (and illegally) by kayakers. It's not recommended. On April 12th Angelo Rodriguez, 20, put in for an evening paddle a mile above the Falls. His family said he had only kayaked a few times and may not have known there was a falls downstream. The flow was 39,000 cfs, high water, and the current carried him over the drop. At 10:52 pm a homeless man saw him struggling against the current and called 911. An extensive night search located his blue kayak, but there was no sign of him. His body was found three weeks later.

Canoeing Accidents

There were two canoeing fatalities in the last six months. On March 23rd a fisherman died on Sherman's Creek in central Pennsylvania. The man, who was not wearing a PFD, had anchored his canoe in strong current. The anchor line pulled his stern underwater, swamping the canoe. The man was caught in the anchor line while trying to release it. His partner escaped unharmed. On June 14th two men were paddling on the St Croix River, which forms the border between Maine and Canada. Despite being experienced paddlers their boat capsized in a long class II rapid. One man made it to shore, but his 78-year-old partner washed some distance downstream and drowned, despite wearing a PFD. First responders said that he was "pretty banged up," and a head injury might have contributed to his death.

Rafting Accidents

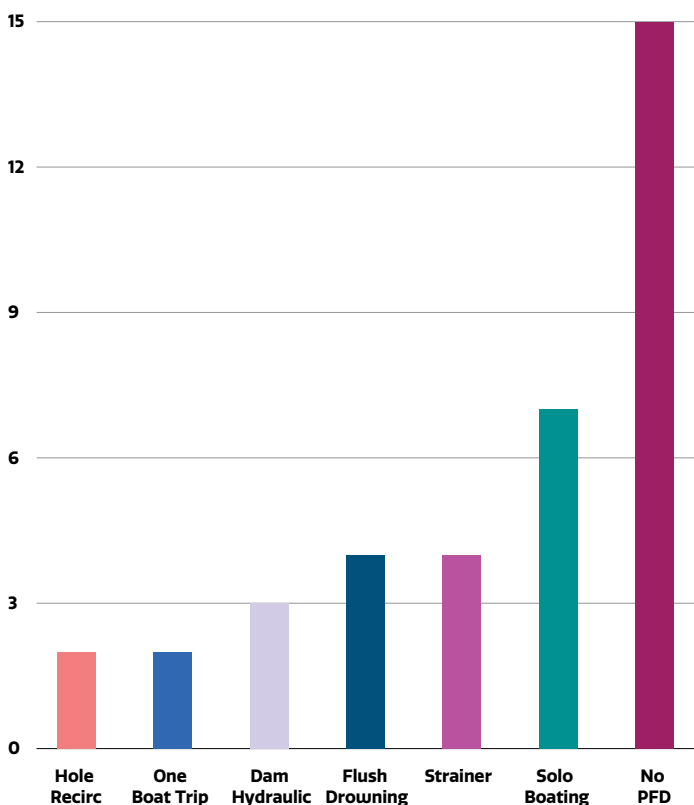
On May 10th there were two rafting fatalities on Idaho's remote Selway River. Water levels were high and continued to rise during their trip. There was considerable debris in the river. The party was quite experienced, paddling a mix of small rafts, kayaks, and catarafts. Several were veteran whitewater guides. Rivers are boated sometimes at very high water, and this accident shows how a situation may become hard to manage under these conditions.

On the fourth day the group scouted ahead and decided to portage Ladle, the biggest drop on the run. Approaching the carry, a two-man raft flipped on a strong eddyline. Although one man quickly righted the boat, his partner, Matt Lane, 35, did not get back to the raft. A kayaker reached Mr. Lane and was towing him towards the eddy when he let go suddenly. His rafting partner immediately pulled him into the boat and caught the next eddy while another member of the group jumped into the boat and started CPR.

Once they got him ashore they activated a Garmin InReach satellite communication device, and a member of the party ran upstream to Moose Creek Ranger Station to fetch a portable defibrillator. These efforts were unsuccessful, and an autopsy later revealed that Mr. Lane had suffered a massive heart attack. As Mr. Lane was being taken ashore three other rafts pulled into a wild, surging eddy nearby. Things got really hectic as the eddy was up against a cliff with few places to hold onto. Keeping all the boats in the eddy while getting one of their party, who was a nurse, on shore to help with CPR was incredibly difficult. After roping the nurse to shore the empty raft swung back into the current, pulling Dan Trianafillou, 41, and his partner in an oar boat into the current and downstream. They washed through WaPoots and headed for Ladle.

Mr. Trianafillou, a veteran guide with 20 years of experience, tried to pull his oar boat to the right, but he was unable to make it over in time. They flipped in a huge hole at the top of Ladle. They swam through this rapid and several other rapids below. A group of kayakers who were scouting Ladle saw them flip and rescued one of the rafters, but Mr. Trianafillou was carried further downstream. He was unresponsive when the kayakers caught up to him. They attempted CPR, but were unsuccessful. There were some signs of a head injury which could have compromised his chances of survival.

2025 Top Accident Causes



The members of the party working on Mr. Lane did not learn what had happened downstream until two hours later, when a second message was sent out via the InReach device. The group performed CPR for three hours until EMTs from a Life Flight helicopter pronounced him dead. Life Flight was unable to evacuate the deceased, and an attempt by a US Forest Service mule team to reach them was unsuccessful due to steep terrain. Two Bear Air responded and utilized a helicopter winch system to recover their bodies. The rest of the group hiked out with help from another rafting group that picked up the gear of several party members.

There was a commercial rafting fatality on the Rouge River in Quebec on June 1st. A 29-year-old woman fell out of the raft in a hole above Washing Machine Rapid and did not resurface. She was last seen swimming down the right side of Washing Machine, floating over a rock, and disappearing in the turbulent eddy below. This rapid has seen thousands of swimmers over the years and it wasn't clear what happened. Guides used tethered swimmers to search the area but found nothing. Over the next three days emergency services brought in divers, cameras, drones, and a helicopter without finding the woman. Her body was found almost a month later in an eddy at some distance downstream. Injuries to her ankle suggest a possible foot entrapment.

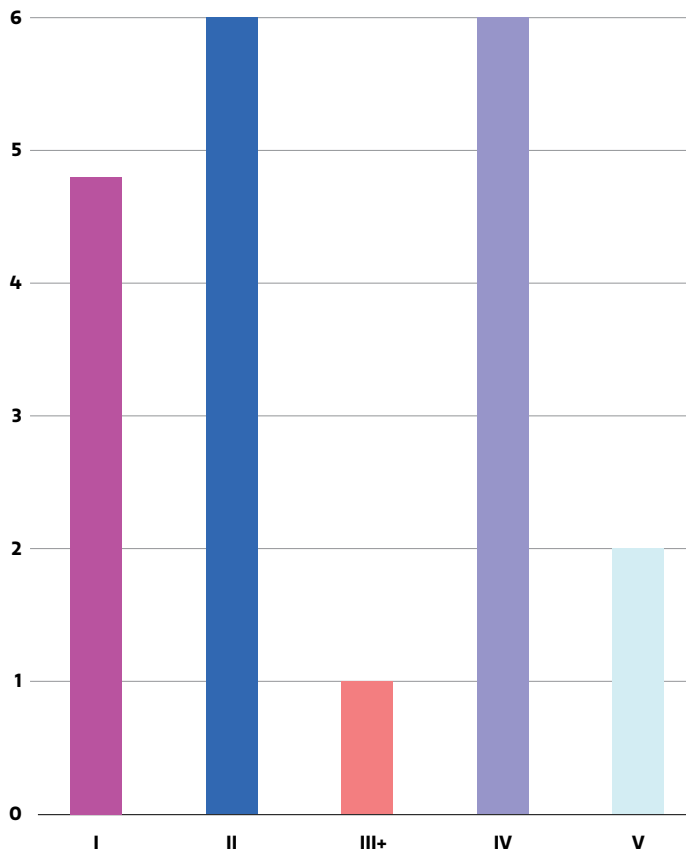
On June 22nd a group of river guides from Haines, Alaska encountered trouble while paddling the Tatshenshini River in Yukon Territory on their day off. An hour into the trip a raft high-sided on a rock and flipped. Five people were thrown into the water; four were recovered immediately, but Marin Elizabeth Pitt, 33, was "held underwater" for several minutes. She was unresponsive when another raft picked her up. They attempted to revive her without success.

There was a death in Maine's Kennebec River Gorge on June 27. Scott Albin, 56, collapsed and fell out of his oar-rigged boat at Big Mama. He was unresponsive when rescued by nearby paddlers. A heart attack is suspected.

Joye Maple, 67, died on Alaska's Chatanika River on June 27. This was a one boat trip in fast water about 40 miles north of Fairbanks. No PFDs were worn. Her raft flipped and she was carried into a downed tree. The other person in her raft swam to shore and walked to the Steese Highway to get help.

A 67-year-old woman on a "floatable device" was swept downstream from a swimming area into S-Gorge below 90-foot Noccalula Falls on Black Creek in Alabama. On May 27, Regina Smith was last seen floating near the beach before the current took her around a bend. The river below the falls is described as "fast, narrow, boulder choked, class IV rapids containing many strainers and sieves." She never had a chance. Her body was found several days later.

2025 Fatalities/Class



A Packraft Accident

Directly below the Buena Vista Play Park on the Arkansas River in Colorado, a powerful Class IV rapid forms at high water. On June 6, two experienced, well-equipped packrafters flipped in Lodo Wave and swam through this rapid, Beaver Falls. At the day's high water level (1780 cfs at Granite) it's a nasty swim. The left side has a bad hole and a rocky runout; the right side is a big wave train with a bad submerged rock. One paddler self-rescued, but Ethan Sandoval, 35, was later seen face down at the Beaver Falls bridge. When an experienced paddler got him out of the river 5-10 minutes later there were no signs of life. Two people performed CPR for 15 minutes until paramedics arrived.

Stand-up Paddleboard Accidents

There were two paddleboard accidents involving snagged leashes or tethers. On May 29, a married couple was paddling on the Deschutes River in Oregon when they were swept into Pringle Falls, a Class IV drop. When rescuers arrived they found a 22-year-old woman "entangled" in the river. They were unable to rescue her before she broke loose and disappeared. Her body was found downstream several hours later. Her husband went through the falls unscathed. On June 23, a 40-year-old man drowned after his ankle leash got snagged on Quebec's St Charles River near Pont Masson. The river is Class I-II. The man, who was not wearing a PFD, was unable to release his ankle leash in the swift current. Another person on the board was able to swim to shore.

Tubing Deaths

We also received word of two tubing deaths on popular urban rivers. On June 23, Patrick Cross, 27, was floating Ohio's Cuyahoga River with his family. The river was high, 2300 cfs, and no PFDs were worn. Mr. Cross and his 5-year-old son missed their takeout and washed over a Class V stretch of rapids and falls that is the focus of a whitewater festival. They both drowned; his wife and daughter got to shore above the drop. River recreation is popular in the area and high water always causes trouble. The day before, on June 22, the Kent, Ohio Fire Department rescued 50 people and 8 dogs in a bewildering array of mishaps. The fire chief noted that only 10% of the people were wearing PFDs.

On June 30, Clinton Biesche, 34, died on the Town Section of Idaho's Boise River when his inner tube was pushed into a downed tree. The water level was high, 1300 cfs, and no PFD was worn.

Near Misses and Great Rescues

Several excellent rescues were reported to us. On April 20, a fisherman saved two kayakers at Dock Street Dam in Harrisburg, the scene of 31 previous drownings. Craig Stoudt was fishing in his boat with his two sons when he saw two kayakers headed straight for the dam. The woman in the first kayak, an inflatable, started frantically paddling upstream. Her kayak went over the dam backward, folded in half, and bounced back into shape with her still inside. The second kayak then went over the dam and flipped. They were both caught in the backwash. Mr. Stoudt pulled up his anchor and sped toward the kayakers. Staying clear of the dam hydraulic, he attached a spare anchor line to a seat

cushion and threw it to the woman, who was still upright in her kayak. Then he put his boat in reverse and slowly pulled the woman free. The other paddler grabbed hold of her kayak, so Mr. Stoudt rescued them both! As he pulled them into his boat he heard sirens, and he called 911 to let them know that he had the kayakers safely aboard.

On April 27, a group of rental paddlers were floating below Steel Creek on Arkansas' Buffalo River. Part way down the run a canoe and a sit-on-top kayak pinned against a tree stump and a ten-year-old girl was held underwater for several minutes. Two nearby campers heard cries for help, entered the water, freed the canoe and got the girl to shore. A trained EMT from another group arrived and began CPR. After several minutes the girl began to breathe again on her own, but she had noticeable head injuries. A passing paddler used a satellite phone to notify the National Park Service, Newton County 911, and a nearby concessioner. Two National Park Service Employees and the concessioner (who is an ACA L4 SWR Instructor and a volunteer SAR team member) paddled down to the site. They coordinated with a Life Flight helicopter that landed on a gravel bar nearby. The girl was evacuated to a hospital in Springfield, MO for treatment and recovered fully.

A kayaker was rescued on April 29, after being flipped and pummeled in North Carolina's Nantahala Falls. He was brought to a flat, midstream rock by his paddling partner and revived with 3 minutes of CPR. Brought ashore by raft, he was taken to the hospital where he was released the following day. Kudos to his rescuer for a fast, effective save!

May 16, there was a bad pin on New Mexico's Canadian River. A party of three was attempting a run down a Class III+ gorge west of Santa Fe when Jacob Trant was pinned between his canoe and a midstream boulder. He sustained serious injuries, including crushed ribs and a punctured lung. His brother Ben Trant swam out to the river and got him out from under the boat. Since Jacob was unconscious and not breathing, Ben administered several rescue breaths in the eddy behind the canoe before swimming him through the remainder of the rapid. Jacob was breathing by the time they reached the bank, but he remained unconscious for hours. The group used an emergency position indicating radiobeacon (EPIRB) to summon help, and New Mexico Game and Fish provided medical assistance and coordinated the rescue. Additional search and rescue personnel from various agencies arrived to assist, and a New Mexico National Guard helicopter airlifted the critically injured Jacob out of the canyon.

First Responders to the Rescue

The past six months have seen bad floods strike many parts of the country. Watching the news reports, I've been impressed by the strong, water-savvy work of first responders. In the 1970s and '80s very few departments had swiftwater rescue training and news footage often showed a cringe-worthy absence of basic safety precautions. But since 1991, when the National Fire Protection Association recognized the need for swiftwater rescue training, the skills and equipment of rescuers have greatly improved. Here are a few interesting examples:

On June 14-15, Virginia's Rappahannock River rose from 1,100 to over 16,000 cfs, trapping a group of paddlers who were camping on a midstream island. The island was going underwater. At 1:30 am on June 15, Spotsylvania Fire and Rescue responded to a 911 call from the group. They requested help from Stafford's Water Rescue Team, and the two units established a ferry using a tethered inflatable raft to get everyone safely back to shore.

Tennessee's North Chickamauga Creek rose suddenly after heavy thunderstorms on June 29, stranding 56 hikers and 2 dogs on the wrong side of the creek. Swift water teams from the Mowbray and Chattanooga Fire Departments set up a system of ropes to help get them back to civilization. The operation took about four hours.

On July 12, just after midnight, Grants Pass, Oregon Fire Department and Josephine County Sheriff's Deputies responded to a report of a possible drowning. Several hundred people were participating in the "River Glow Float," a nighttime event on the Rogue River that was advertised on Facebook. Several people were trapped on a large midstream log. Most had no PFDs, and some were separated from their group. The Sheriff's Office Marine Deputy worked with other responders to rescue 5 individuals and assist 7 others. Afterwards, several miles of river were checked to make sure that everyone was accounted for.

You Can Help!

American Whitewater depends on boaters 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 river running community. You can go to the Accident Database page on the American Whitewater Web site 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 on request. The use of names on near-miss reports is encouraged but not required. Everything that comes in will be posted on the American Whitewater Accident Database Facebook page, and those interested are encouraged to follow us there.