

American Whitewater Accident Summary: July – December 2025

Charlie Walbridge

THE SECOND HALF OF THIS PAST WHITEWATER SEASON

saw only five fatalities in whitewater boats submitted to the American Whitewater Accident Database. Three of these were whitewater kayaking accidents (one was outside the US), the others involved a commercial raft and an inflatable kayak. There were twelve other deaths in moving water. Although there were no canoeing fatalities, there were reports of four recreational kayaking deaths, four tubing fatalities, and three instances where news articles identified the craft as a “fishing boat.” Four accidents involved strainers and three occurred at low head dams. Health issues, primarily heart attacks, were indicated in five cases. In seven incidents the victim was not wearing a life vest. Oregon had the most deaths with three, followed by Pennsylvania, Washington, California, and Idaho with two each. As always, I am indebted to members of the paddling community who take the time to forward reports, and to Charlie Duffy for his thoughtful advice and useful graphs.

Whitewater Kayaking Accidents

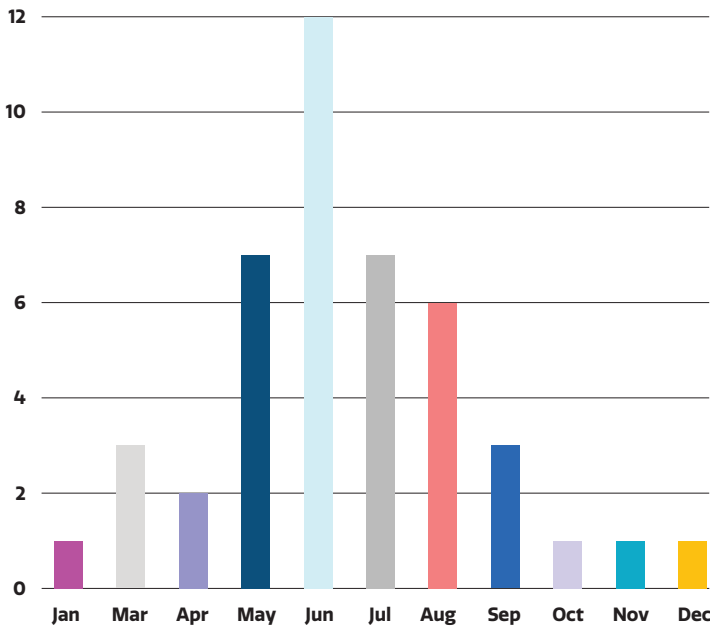
Two deaths in the past six months involved very experienced kayakers. On September 6th a group of eight were running West Virginia’s Upper Gauley, a popular Class IV-V run. At Pillow Rock Rapid Patrick Miljour, 53, flipped and did not roll despite multiple attempts. People in his group reported they had not seen him miss a roll in decades. A member of his group used a “Hand of God” rescue to flip him upright. He looked pale afterwards, and several of the group were worried about how long he kept trying to roll below Pillow. They talked with him about the importance of exiting his boat before becoming totally exhausted.

At Lost Paddle Rapid, Mr. Miljour ran cleanly through the first drop and sliced through the “Five-O Wave” in the second before flipping in the final curlers. He made multiple roll attempts before washing into the third drop. Here is an excerpt from a report written by Leland Davis:

“I turned around immediately after passing the hole and saw Pat come through 3rd Drop upside down, left of center, with several other group members close behind him ... As I was ferrying towards him, I saw his boat twitch in what I hoped was him wet-exiting ... but that I now think might also have been his torso getting pulled by the super swirly currents in the left side of the runout of (the) 3rd drop.”

“Other members of the group reached Pat first and began trying to ‘Hand of God’ him upright. I arrived and several of us were successful in getting him upright, and we kept him mostly upright through the small set of ledgy wavy holes on the left between 3rd and 4th drops. There’s a rock shelf that sticks out off the left bank that people typically eddy out behind before running 4th drop. We got Pat to the side at the upstream point of that rock shelf. Folks jumped out of their boats, pulled him out of his boat and onto shore, and immediately began CPR ... We had two nurses with 20+ years of experience in the group, and they advised the efforts as the rest of us joined in. We activated the SOS on a Garmin inReach, and not long afterward another person found that they had cell service, so we called 911 ... At 38 minutes into CPR, two park rangers arrived with an AED and oxygen ... At 1 hour into CPR, the oxygen supply ran out and CPR was stopped.”

Incidents/Month, 2025



“Both nurses on the scene agreed that there was very likely a cardiac component to this accident that contributed to the CPR not being successful ... Pat did have an underlying heart condition, as well as ongoing effects from past Lyme Disease.”

As someone very familiar with Lost Paddle Rapid I am truly impressed that the group made such a fast, quick rescue.

Another, very similar report came from Africa where an expert kayaker and raft guide died on the Zambezi River. Larry Firman, 68, was part of a group that had finished a 12-day expedition down the Zambezi where he ran all the rapids successfully. On November 13th, the day after the expedition was over, a group of 12 paddlers in rafts and two kayakers planned a day trip through the main rapids.

At 3:00 pm they entered Rapid #7. At the end of this rapid, below the “Land of the Giants”, Mr. Firman flipped in a large hole. He attempted to roll five times as he drifted past a rock island into the river left eddy. The second kayaker paddled up to Mr. Firman, quickly flipped him upright, and pushed him to shore.

He had only been underwater for about 40 seconds. The other kayaker pulled him out of his boat and started CPR. The rafters arrived quickly to help, and used a Garmin InReach and a cell phone to call for an evacuation. They began a raft evacuation thirty minutes later while continuing CPR. They got to a helipad, but despite fast transport Mr. Firman was later pronounced dead,

Although there are other accounts of determined paddlers who have lost consciousness while trying to roll, fatalities like these are quite unusual. Both paddlers were older, and as we age we acquire various health issues that reduce strength, flexibility, and endurance. But no matter what our age we need to save some of our strength for bailing out and swimming whitewater.

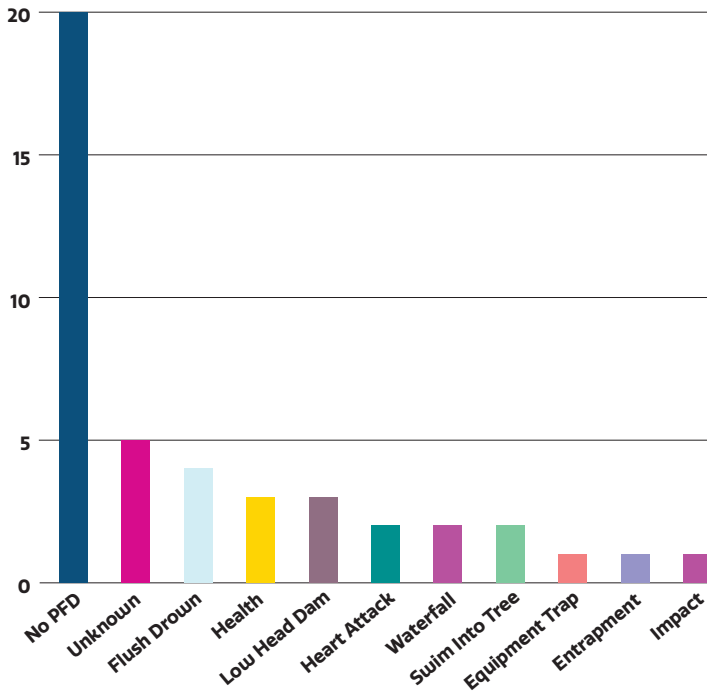
On August 19th first responders responded to a report of “capsized kayakers” on a Class II section of the McKenzie River near Rainbow, Oregon. Gregory Gibson, 66, was paddling with a partner when he died. Both men were wearing life vests, which suggests a certain amount of experience, but no other details are available. Anyone with more information is urged to contact American Whitewater.

Inflatable Boat Accidents

There were two other incidents where cardiac problems were suspected. On August 23rd there was a commercial rafting fatality on Tennessee’s Ocoee River. A 79-year-old man died after a short swim in Class IV Grumpy’s rapid, which starts right below the put-in. Guides got him ashore quickly, but CPR was ineffective. Then, on August 29th, a 50-year-old man in a rented inflatable kayak swam after broaching on a rock above Class III+ Nantahala Falls in North Carolina. No one was with him, and he was probably in the water 5-8 minutes before being pulled ashore below the Rivers End restaurant. Here guides and a rafting guest with paramedic training began CPR and applied an AED. Then EMS arrived and continued CPR for 20 minutes before taking him to a hospital where he was pronounced dead.

With accidents like these, it’s often difficult to decide whether “flush drowning” or “heart attack” should be listed as the cause.

Incidents/Cause, 2025



Swimming whitewater is very strenuous, and even healthy people wearing life vests sometimes drown. Autopsies are seldom done, and while they do spot cardiac blood clots, they can't see the electrical disturbances behind many heart attacks. A bad swim can certainly unveil any latent heart problems. A heart attack seems more likely in the Ocoee accident, perhaps less so on the Nantahala, but as stated it's almost impossible to know.

There was another accident on California's Russian River where a raft carrying two young men flipped near Monte Rio Beach. Elan Miranda, 17, died; bystanders were able to save his companion. Neither was wearing a life vest.

Recreational Kayak Accidents

There were three recreational kayaking deaths around low-head dams in the last 6 months. On July 7th, a 38-year-old woman kayaked over a dam on the Great Miami River in Hamilton, OH. She and a friend had run another dam a few miles upstream and she wanted to try this one. She got caught in the hydraulic and recirculated. Firefighters got her out using a 2-boat tether in 53 minutes. They performed CPR, which restored her pulse and respiration, but she died 2 days later.

On July 27th, a tandem kayak went over a dam on the Elk River near Noel, MO. A 43-year-old man drowned; a 26-year-old woman held on to the kayak until it was pushed out of the backwash. The man was pulled ashore by a bystander where firefighters tried unsuccessfully to revive him.

On December 12th, an unidentified man died after washing over a dam at the Ballard Locks on Seattle's Lake Washington Ship Canal.

Water levels were high and the current was much faster than usual. A second man who grabbed hold of an upstream buoy was later rescued.

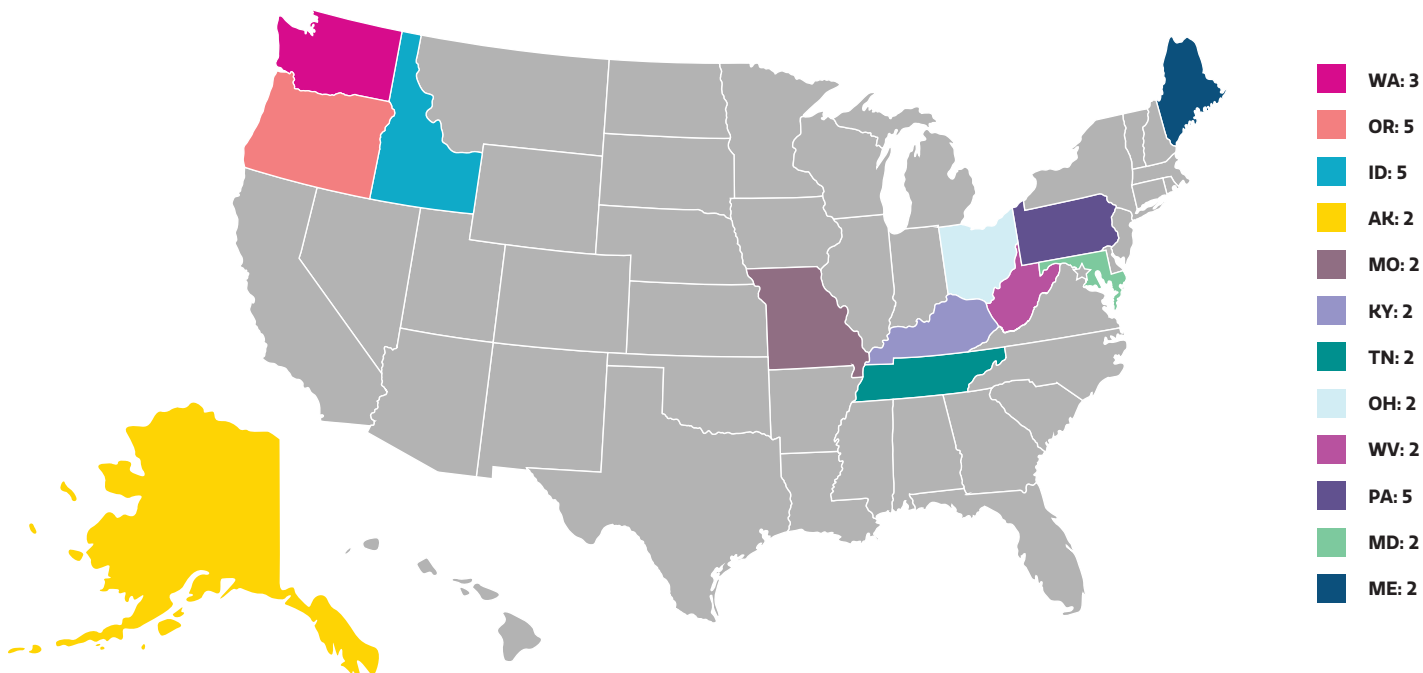
Two other incidents involved paddlers who were not wearing life vests. On July 9th, a kayaker died after flipping in a Class II rapid on the Delaware River below the Bushkill, PA boat launch. He was boating alone, so details are not available. There was a second fatality on the Lower Ocoee River. Mike Dupre, 58, was paddling with a woman in a tandem kayak when a sudden release from Parksville Dam increased the flow resulting in their boat being pushed into a bridge pier where they capsized. A local tubing outfitter attempted a rescue, without success.

Tubing Accidents

There were four reported tubing accidents in whitewater over the last 6 months, the most serious of which occurred on Oregon's Deschutes River. A group of six tubers floated into Dillon Falls, a well-marked Class V drop. Three tubers bailed out and swam for shore. Amanda Lloyd, 39, Lindsay Bashan, 33, and Derek Slesinger, 33 all washed into the rapids and were killed, probably by a massive hole that's hard to avoid. It was weeks before the last body was found.

Two other deaths were caused by strainers. On August 31st, Luke Poulin, 67, died after falling off his inner tube in the Willamette River in Springfield. When he did not resurface, his friends called for help. Although Poulin was wearing a life jacket, he was found caught by underwater branches. That same day Carollyn Beck, 45, was tubing with a group on Idaho's popular Class II Kuna Creek. She was also swept into a strainer.

States with the Highest Fatality Rates, 2025



Lastly, a tuber died on the Potomac River below Needles Rapid on July 7th. Cory Binkowski, 51, was wearing a life vest and there was no apparent reason for his demise. First responders attempted CPR, then pronounced him dead at the scene. A heart attack is suspected.

“Fishing Boats”

We had three reports of moving water fatalities that occurred when “fishing boats” capsized in mild whitewater. It’s not clear if these boats were rafts, dories, or something else. These were all one-boat trips where no one was wearing a life vest. On July 26th, Allen Shaw, 82, died when his boat capsized near the Mallards Fishing Access on Montana’s Bighorn River. A companion swam to shore and called for help. On October 30th, there was a triple fatality on Washington State’s Bogochiel River. Alfonso Graham, 39, Christian Akers, 35, and his son Wyatt, 7, all perished when their fishing boat overturned after washing into a tree. Another man managed to hold onto the tree and dial 911. And finally, on November 10th, Judy O’Brien died on the Salmon River above the Tower Creek Boat Launch. Ms. O’Brien, 75, drowned after her boat ran up on rocks and capsized. Her husband swam her ashore and attempted CPR.

Near Misses

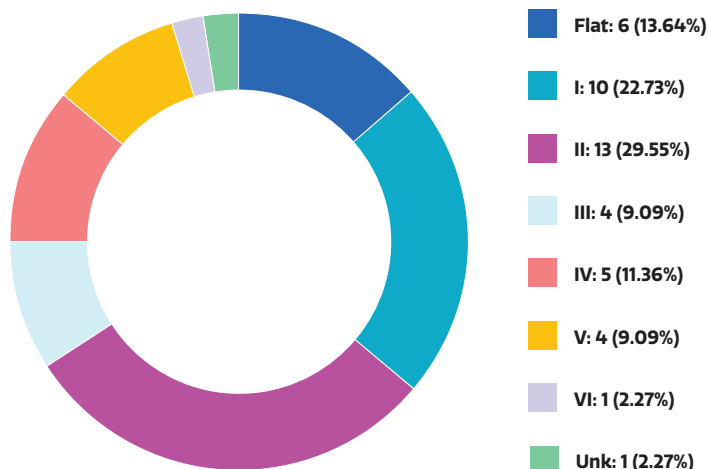
On July 4th, a group of four tubers and a kayak washed into a huge debris pile on Pennsylvania’s Swatara Creek. Several fire companies arrived at the scene and used a drone to locate the stranded paddlers. Lower Swatara Township and Hummelstown Fire Departments’ river rescue teams loaded all the paddlers onto boats and got them ashore. Several were transported to a nearby hospital for treatment. Firefighters happily noted that everyone was wearing a PFD.

Quick action by the National Canoe Safety Patrol on Pennsylvania’s Upper Delaware saved a life on July 5th. Tom Wilkins and Peter Van Slyke were on duty when two canoes, each carrying three people, flipped and pinned in Class II Skinners Falls. When only 2 people floated out, they hurried over to the pinned canoe and found a man trapped underneath. As they unpinned the canoe, he came up coughing and gagging. He would have drowned without their help. The second canoe flipped just upstream, and there were several people left standing in the middle of the river. They borrowed a small raft and got them to shore.

On August 3rd, A group of paddlers were running the “Lower 5” section of Idaho’s North Fork of the Payette River when a car traveling southbound on Highway 55 came off the road, bounced down the riverbank, hit a rock and flipped upside down in 2-3 feet of water! Jeff Landers, in a Facebook post, described how his group responded:

“I jumped out of my kayak, threw it up on the rocks with my paddle, raced to the car, grabbed the back door handle, and yanked it as hard as I could ... The car was very dark and full of smoke from the air bags ... I finally felt a hand and grabbed hold and yanked the man out. He then informed me there was a disabled woman inside ... Micah Barker was out of his kayak, ready to help. I opened the back door and saw the woman’s head, barely above the water, asking for help. I held her chin, keeping her head above water. She was pinned between the two seat backs, Micah opened the front door and I told him to find the seat back lever. Once he pulled it, I was able to lift the seat back out of the way. I grabbed the woman’s head... as Micah grabbed her feet and we pulled and pushed her out. We got her out of the water and up onto some rocks. A few bystanders were up on the road and Micah instructed them to call 911. Then kayakers

Incidents/Class, 2025



we saw at the put-in started showing up. One was a doctor and she took charge ... Forest Service and Sheriff's Deputies arrived. We strapped the lady on a backboard and carried her up the steep bank to the road."

On August 17th, a group of 80 paddlers on a memorial trip down Pennsylvania's Lower Yough was hit by a microburst above "Camel and Walrus" rapid. Fortunately, no one was hurt. Here's a first-hand Facebook account from Scott Ferrari-lksic:

"My wife and I had our Eurocraft yanked out from under us. As I surfaced, I saw my boat literally FLYING upstream at 50+mph! Boatless but still clutching our paddles, I grabbed my wife by the jacket and told her to stay with me. The shore was 40 feet away but barely visible. The trees were whipping back and forth like those crazy roadside inflatables. 100-foot pines were exploding like they had been hit by a rocket. We held each other and used the water as protection as we watched kayakers get tossed around us. Several of the still upright rafts that were with us had to high-side into the wind as they got swept upstream!"

Wolf Creek Dam on the Cumberland River in Russell County, Kentucky was the scene of a near drowning on September 1st. A kayaker attempted to run the dam and was caught in the hydraulic. Fortunately, he was wearing a life jacket. A nearby boater grabbed him when he washed free and first responders airlifted him to University of Kentucky Hospital where he arrived in very poor condition.

Deborah Webb sustained nasty injuries while running Tennessee's Ocoee River. Here's her story:

"At Tablesaw Rapid, my brace failed and I flipped. I tried to roll and I was hit hard by the notorious underwater rock we call "Guide Ejector " ... Remarkably, I stayed conscious and held onto my paddle. I was still upside down and not confident I could roll, but one of my crew was nearby and I was able to do a hip snap on his side rail. I came upright in my boat and saw that I was approaching Diamond

Splitter. I thought I could make it over to the far-right eddy ... I was dazed and not paddling well. I flipped again, washing into Witches' Hole, then flushed out ... I was exhausted and pulled my skirt ... After the crew gave me a quick mental status check, a kind person with a raft invited me aboard and towed my kayak to below Cat's Pajamas Rapid. From there, I ferried over to where I could climb up to the road. I was oriented and alert, so I drove myself to the emergency room. Diagnosis: T2 fracture, whiplash injury, and a possible mild concussion. I'm certain I would not be alive without my excellent Sweet Protection helmet. Worth every penny!"

On the afternoon of November 8th firefighters were dispatched to a water emergency in the Schuylkill River near Reading, PA. A kayaker was found in the river, hanging onto tree branches on the far river left. A rescue boat was deployed to bring him to safety. ■

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 any moving water accident. 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 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.