

American Whitewater Accident Summary: July – December 2024

Charlie Walbridge

THE SECOND HALF OF 2024 WAS MUCH QUIETER THAN

the first six months from an accident perspective, possibly due to drought conditions in many parts of the country. The 15 deaths reported in the U.S. included seven kayaks (five recreation boats), one canoe, four rafts (two commercial), and three standup paddleboards. These incidents were widely distributed geographically, with two deaths each in Alaska, California, Montana, Colorado, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. This year's total was 43, much lower than usual. Four tubing fatalities and four Canadian accidents were also reported. Life vests were not worn in 14 incidents; the year's total for "no life vest" was 31! As always, we are indebted to everyone who took the time to send in the reports entered in the database. I am especially grateful to Charlie Duffy for his help checking the data and preparing the graphics accompanying this article.

Whitewater Kayaks

On October 4th, a strong team of kayakers set out on California's South Fork of the Feather River. The section below Little Grass Valley Reservoir is a solid Class IV+ run. Chris Tulley ran this section often over the last twenty years. Darin McQuoid describes what happened:

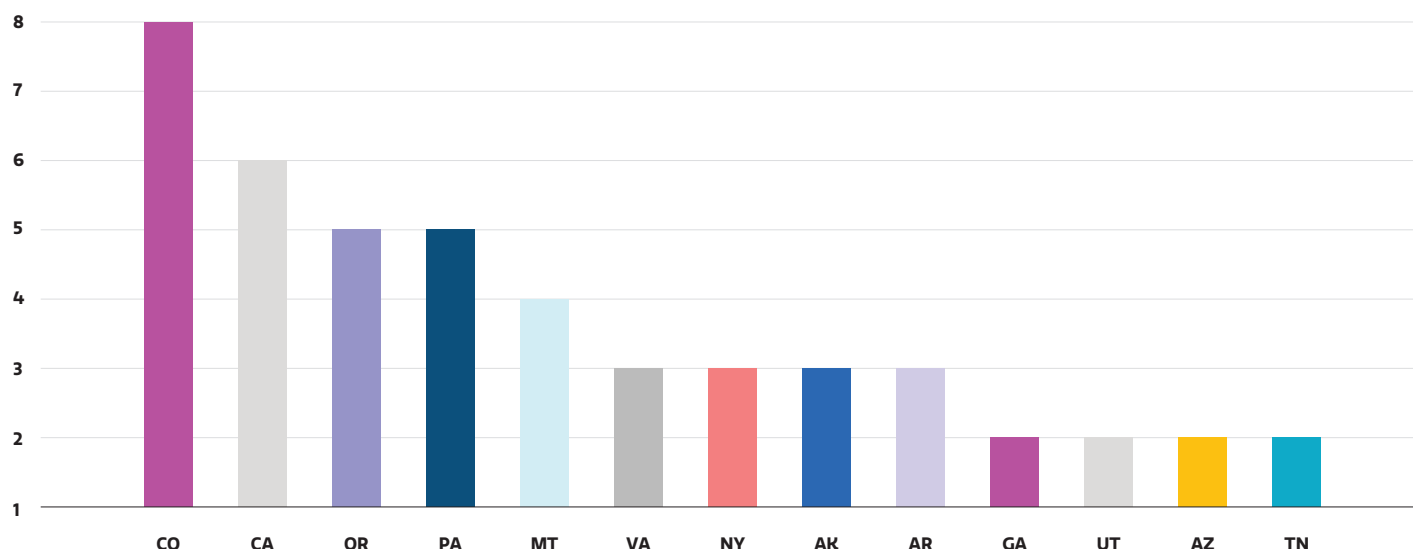
"A new tree had fallen, blocking a Class III rapid in a narrow gorge. As Chris went by the log, he had more left angle than we did. His stern hit a branch extending from the log. This slowed him down, and he did not make it over. His boat turned sideways to the current, and his stern was pulled underwater.

He quickly exited his boat. As another paddler chased Chris's equipment downstream, I looked upstream, expecting to see him close to us. He emerged from under the log, but then his progress stopped. He was facing downstream in the current with something snagged on the log. He was fighting for air.

"I paddled to river right, climbed up 80 feet to get above the gorge, moved upstream, and scrambled down the cliff to a small flat outcropping under the log. Another paddler threw a rope to Chris from upstream, but the gorge kept him from getting a useful pulling angle. When I reached river level Chris was getting tired. Something attached to one of his legs was snagged on the log. I blew my whistle to get his attention and threw him a rope. He grabbed hold briefly, but the current was incredibly powerful, and he was unable to do anything before he lost consciousness. I pulled the rope in, then jumped on Chris, hoping to break him free. The water quickly flushed me downstream with Chris' PFD. A team member on river left tried the same thing and was flushed off too. The current pushed me quite a way downstream before I was able to get to shore.

"Chris had now been underwater for 10-15 minutes. I climbed down the log and lassoed his left foot as it came near the surface. Due to the force of the current, we needed a 3-1 mechanical advantage to release him. This pulled him close enough for us to cut him free and work him over to shore. It appeared that while going under the log Chris's sprayskirt had snagged on a tree branch. His skirt twisted in the water, and the waist

2024 Fatalities Top 10 States



wrapped tightly around his calf and ankle. We got Chris out of the water just after 2:00 pm and used a satellite device to notify authorities.”

Snagged sprayskirt entrapments are uncommon, but several have been reported over the past 30 years. Any loosely hanging equipment like a sprayskirt is hazardous to paddlers around strainers.

Mossy Creek is a Class III-IV tributary of the Upper Chattahoochee River in Northern Georgia. On December 11th Joseph Shaber, 43, died during a solo run. Water levels were high. His wife reported him missing when he did not return home. His body was found washed up on shore. His death was later reported as a heart attack.

Recreational Kayaks

There were five deaths among recreational kayak paddlers. None of them were wearing a life vest. On July 13th, first responders received a call that Alfred Arzuaga, 67, was missing after his kayak flipped on New York’s Class II Hudson River below North Creek. He was not using a life vest and did not resurface. They found his body hours later.

On August 10th, three adults and four children put in on Yellow Breeches Creek in Southern Pennsylvania. The river was running high following recent rains, so it wasn’t the usual lazy float trip. Partway down the group encountered a series of strainers that would not have caused trouble at lower water levels. Most of the group got to shore safely, but Matthew Cofroth, 10, was swept away. Rescuers had to dismantle a large debris pile to recover his body.

On August 13th, a fisherman in a sit-on-top kayak drowned on the Class I Lower Watauga River in Tennessee. Brandon Nave, 31, was paddling with a friend when a dam release surge hit them and capsized both boats. The water here is quite cold. Mr. Nave, who was not wearing a life vest, did not resurface.

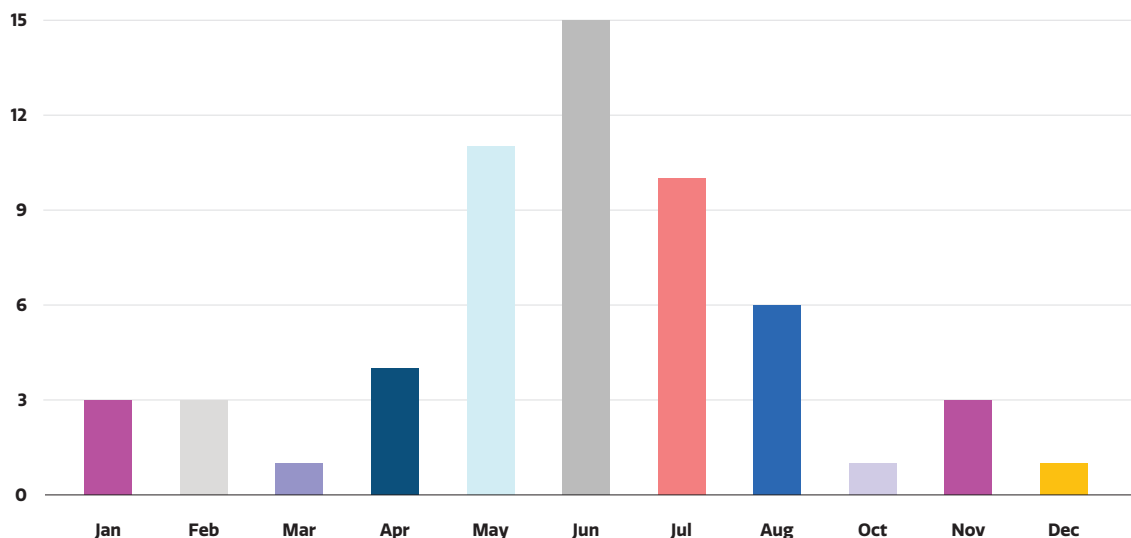
There were two recreational kayaking deaths on Virginia’s James River. On November 23rd, a man and a woman launched sit-on-top kayaks below the confluence with the Maury River. David Bradford, a paddler active with Rockbridge Baths Volunteer Fire Department, said the pair had planned to paddle upstream but were swept into a Class II rapid below. Octavia Richardson, 20, flipped and was unable to get to shore. Her heavy jacket and sweatpants, combined with the lack of a life vest, made swimming almost impossible. Divers found her body six hours later.

On November 28th, three paddlers launched their recreational kayaks onto the Class II-III Balcony Falls section of the James River. No life vests or cold weather gear was in use. A 20-year-old woman flipped her kayak and swam. Another paddler tried to help her and got in trouble himself. A search and rescue team brought two paddlers to safety and treated them for hypothermia. The woman’s body was not found until the next day.

Canoes

A canoeist was found dead downstream of the Voyagers Rest Fishing Access on Montana’s Yellowstone River on August 15th. The man was paddling alone, and no life vest was in use. Once he was reported missing, a search began, and his body was found a few hours later.

2024 Incidents/Month



Commercial Rafts

A 65-year-old woman died on July 7th after her guided river raft flipped on Alaska's Klutina River east of Anchorage, Alaska. A recent landslide had created an unusual hazard on this fast moving, splashy Class III river. Deborah Burke was with a guide and two other passengers when their raft flipped and violently pinned against landslide debris. Other rafts on the trip picked up the guide, Ms. Burke, and another passenger. Good samaritans in a jet boat picked up the fourth person some distance downstream. Ms. Burke was deceased. Another passenger and the guide were medevaced to Anchorage with serious injuries.

On August 25th, an 80-year-old man drowned after his commercial raft flipped near Fossil Rapid in Arizona's Grand Canyon. Grand Canyon National Park was contacted via satellite phone and told that CPR was in progress. Despite the efforts of the group and park rangers flown in by helicopter, resuscitation attempts were unsuccessful.

Private Rafts

There was a fatality on the remote Kisaralik River in Western Alaska on July 19th. A raft with several people approached Upper Falls, a Class IV+ double ledge drop 10-12 feet high that the group planned to carry. The water was high, and their raft washed into the drop and flipped. No one aboard was wearing a life vest. Larry Erwin, 53, recirculated in a hole and drowned. A second raft portaged the drop and chased the swimmers. The survivors and their gear were scattered over miles of river. A commercial trip running the river behind them found the gear in the river, then saw a call for help written with a sharpie on a T-shirt laid across a log. They caught up with the party,

learned of the death, and used their satellite phone to call for help. Mr. Erwin's body and the survivors were evacuated by helicopter.

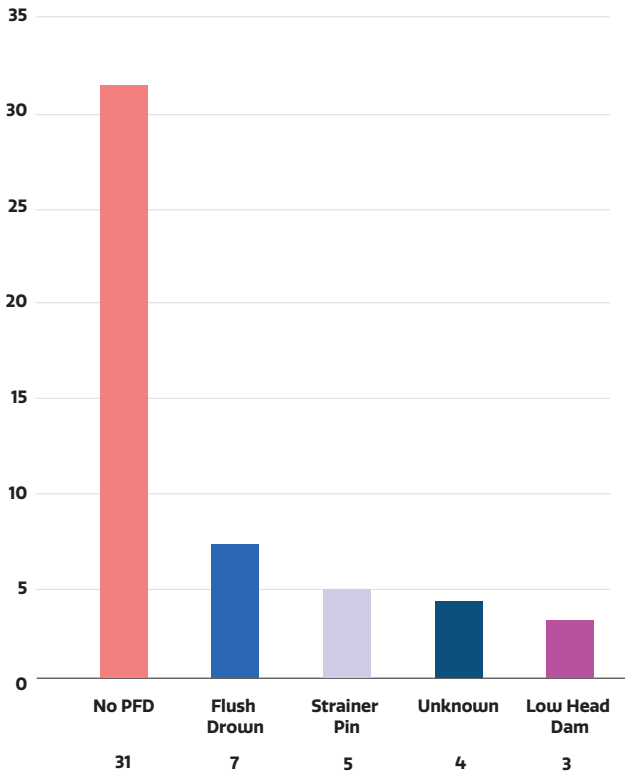
The Lower Kings River near Fresno, California was the scene of another rafting death. On August 17th, Mary Marshall, 63, was paddling with a group of friends who float the river each year. Ms. Marshall had tied her raft to another raft. Her dog was on a leash and tethered to a harness Ms. Marshall was wearing. The rafts veered into a tree on the river and pinned. The dog jumped off the raft and the raft flipped. The woman and her dog washed into a strainer where the dog's leash became tangled around a tree branch. Rescuers had to cut the leash to free their bodies.

Tubes

We have four reports of tubers without life vests who drowned in the last six months. Gary Conley, 53, drowned on the Delaware River near Easton, Pennsylvania on July 7th. The river here has good current and occasional riffles. Again, no life vest was worn. Bystanders got him ashore, started CPR, and called EMS.

Another tuber drowned on the Colorado's Lower Arkansas River on July 15th. A group of seven people had entered the river near Portland and planned to float to their campsite a few miles downstream. After the group became separated a 35-year-old man fell off his tube. A fisherman saw him floating unresponsive in the water, pulled him out, and began CPR. On November 13th, a 72-year-old hunter drowned while attempting to cross Muddy River in Washington State on a tube. A Skamania County Sheriff's Video showed a solid Class III whitewater stream. The man had no life vest and was wearing

2024 Top 5 Accident Causes



hunting clothes. He has not been found. A search-and-rescue team helped a second hunter trapped on the far shoreline at 2 a.m. the next day.

Lastly, Kayaker Leo Burns described a July 14th attempt to rescue a tuber on the Rainbow River near Dunnellton, Florida. "The drowning victim had no life jacket and was floating beneath his tube. I turned upstream into a 2-2.5 mph current to attempt a rescue. I yelled to the other tubers to call 911. I was below him when I made a wet exit. First mistake! I should've paddled above him. I started swimming, but with my hat, sunglasses, life jacket, and paddle shoes it was a nightmare! I couldn't reach the body, and diving down five feet to reach him was nearly impossible. I'm pretty fit. I swim 6000 yards a week, but I exhausted myself!"

Stand-Up Paddleboards

There were three standup paddle board fatalities in the last six months of 2024. In the most tragic instance, an 11-year-old boy drowned in Washington's Cowlitz River on July 6th. The boy, who was wearing a life jacket, was paddle boarding with his father when he struck a logjam and fell into the river. The boy's father attempted rescue, but the youngster was swept into a second logjam and pinned underwater. Divers recovered his body hours later.

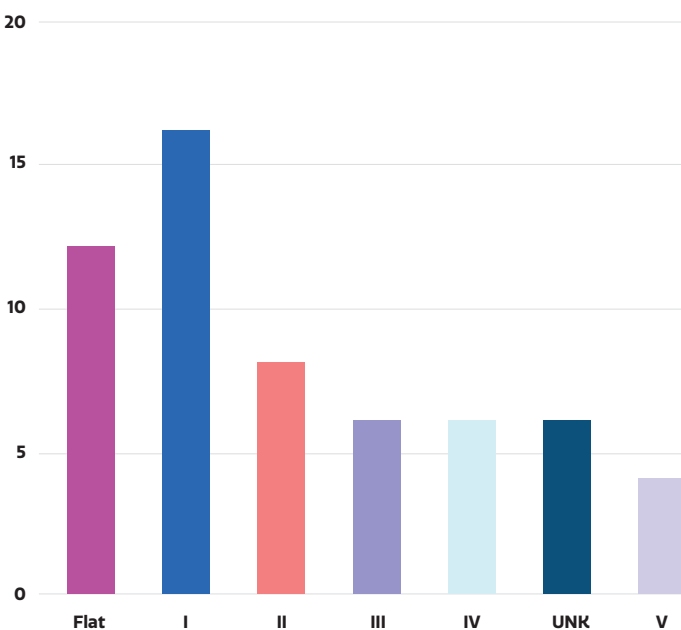
On July 13th, Naomi Pomeroy, a well-known Portland chef, drowned while paddle boarding on Oregon's Willamette River. Ms. Pomeroy, 49, was floating with two other people in tubes tied together. The group encountered a snag just above St. Mary's River. The paddleboard leash was caught on the snag, and she was held underwater. She was not wearing a life jacket.

A retired volunteer firefighter was boating on the Housatonic River on August 1st when he got a cell phone call reporting that a kayaker was floating face-down in the water. Heading downstream, they spotted a paddle board in the river. The current here was mild due to reduced releases from Stevenson Dam. His wife jumped into the water to retrieve the paddle board and found someone floating six inches underneath it. Allysa McKinnon, 30, was tethered to the board. She wasn't wearing a life vest, and it wasn't clear exactly what happened. First responders took her to a hospital, where she died soon after.

Canadian Fatalities

A deadly dam on Ontario's Grand River claimed the lives of two young women on July 19th. Annette Marz, 49, and Rachel Taylor, 45, were last seen paddling a two-seat inflatable kayak over a low-head dam near the Hidden Valley Low Lift Station and calling for help. They were not wearing life vests, and apparently missed signs on riverbank warning of the upcoming weir. Below the dam, trapped logs thrashed wildly in the backwash, loudly thumping against each other. A witness saw what happened and called for help. The two women's bodies were later recovered downstream.

2024 Fatalities/Class



Annual Fatalities Since 2004



Denis Laroche, an experienced paddler in his early 50's, was running the Matawin River in Quebec on July 20th. He apparently had a medical problem and ended up in a large hole. He swam out of his boat and lost consciousness. It took his group a while to get him to shore. CPR began immediately, but this is a remote section of river with no cell phone coverage. One of the rescuers went to a local raft outfitter to alert emergency services and get help with the evacuation. Mr. Laroche was in critical condition when he arrived in the hospital and did not survive.

Also on July 20th, a party of three kayakers were running the Clearwater River in Alberta when they rounded a sharp bend and encountered a river-wide log. All three hit the strainer and came out of their boats. Two self-rescued, but a third washed downstream, around a bend. When the group couldn't locate him, they activated an EPIRB. Rescuers found the man pinned in a strainer. His spray skirt snagged on branches and his left leg was pinned between the tree trunk and the riverbed.

The Kispiox River in British Columbia was running high on October 22nd after recent rains. Jon Abshagen, 45, was fishing from a raft with a river guide and a friend when the raft hit a strainer. The impact sent Jon and his friend into the water. The guide was able to save one man, but could not get to Mr. Abshagen in time. He drowned before he could be rescued.

A Rescue Gone Bad

Flood waters are always dangerous; even calm looking places may have powerful currents moving swiftly towards dangerous obstructions. On July 9th, a swiftwater rescue team set out on a flooded Bear Creek near Columbia, MO to rescue several

people stranded by rising water. Assistant Chief Matthew Tobben, 42, and another Columbia firefighter picked up two people in a motorized Zodiac inflatable. They were headed back when they lost engine power. The boat washed into a tree and capsized. Chief Tobin, who was wearing a life vest, was held underwater and drowned. The others in the boat were recovered downstream.

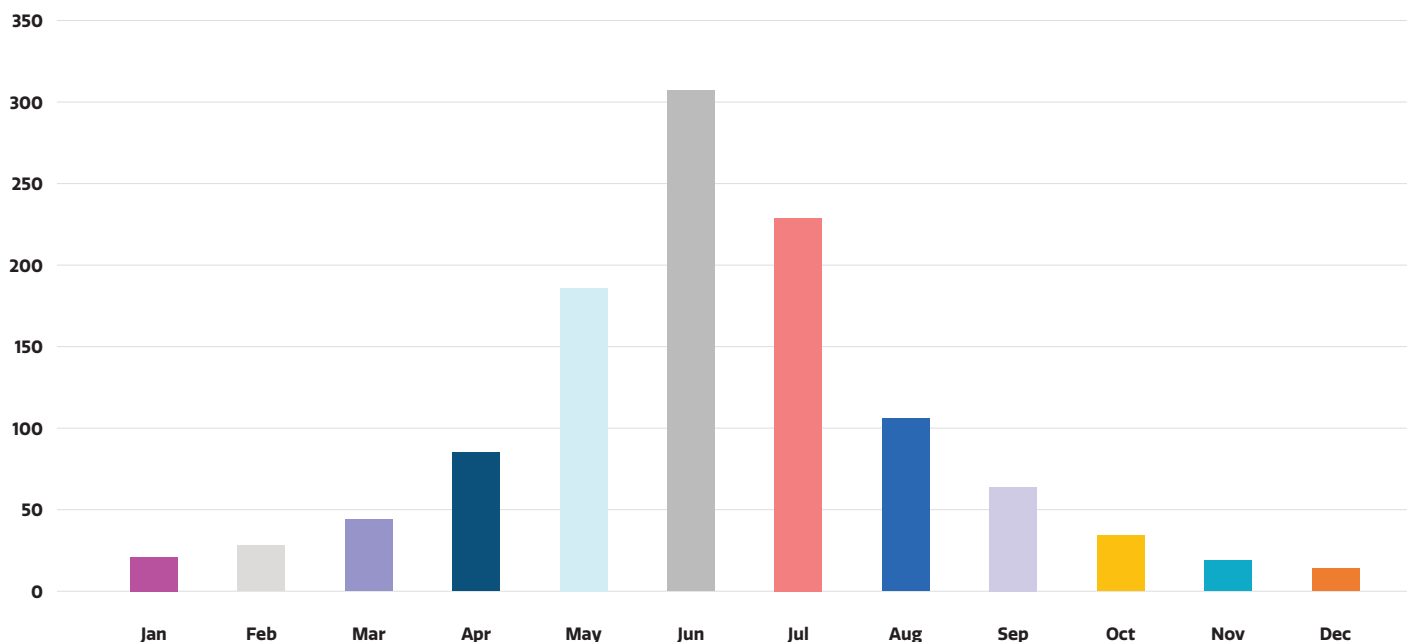
Near Misses and Fast Rescues

Two Bear Air Rescue provides aviation support for Search and Rescue operations in Montana, Idaho, Eastern Washington, and Eastern Oregon. Philanthropist Michael Goguen supports all the costs of this program. On September 14th, they were dispatched to search for a kayaker who had been floating the Middle Fork of the Flathead River and failed to reach the takeout before dark. They were able to locate the paddler with an infrared camera. He'd flipped his kayak several times and made it to shore to await rescue. He was very hypothermic and was transferred to Evergreen Ambulance for further treatment.

Paddling Life.com reported that 10 kayakers got separated and stranded while paddling the Potomac River above Great Falls on Sunday, Oct. 6th. They "encountered rough waters" in the Class I-II range. Four paddlers were stranded on rocks; two others were in the water downriver, and four more stuck on an island. The four on rocks were rescued by a Maryland State Police helicopter; the others were assisted by swiftwater rescue crews in conventional craft.

On October 26th, paddle boarders Jeremy Norris, 43, and Sydnie Keeter, 37, read an internet blog that said that New

Fatalities By Month Since 2004



Mexico's Upper Taos Box could be floated in an inner tube. They launched their paddle boards at noon for a Class III-IV run that takes skilled boaters 5-8 hours. Three miles south of the High Bridge, they'd lost their boards and found themselves stranded in a sheer walled gorge at dusk. They were cold and wet, without wetsuits, shoes, life jackets, and other gear. They were able to send an "SOS" via phone and search efforts began immediately.

After the two were located by the Taos County Sheriff's drone operator, river guides John Fullbright and "Copper John" Nettles set off at 10 p.m. with survival supplies. They reached the two stranded paddleboarders about 1 a.m. The hypothermic pair was rewarmed by the river guides through the night. The next morning, the Bureau of Land Management's River Raft Team set out in a craft large enough to carry the pair down to the Taos Junction Bridge where they received medical attention. The Lower Big Sandy below the Rockville Bridge is a favorite of skilled paddlers in Northern West Virginia. On December 18th, a strong crew set off on an after work run. Big Splat, a Class V drop, is often portaged. It is a very serious place, the site of one fatality and several frightful beatings. Shane McManus tells us what happened:

"At Big Splat, the group paddled to river left for the portage. I ran a lap while the rest of the group watched and ran safety. I ran without issue and paddled to river left after Big Splat, elated with joy. I got out of my kayak and hiked up to lead the next run. Two other members of our group were setting safety.

"We ran the rapid together, myself leading. As I punched through the lead-in rapid and over the guard rock, my left paddle caught a crab. In hindsight, perhaps I should have braced further on the right, but I was already tipped over. As I tried a quick back deck roll I went over the flat iron rock toward the horseshoe and my right hip came loose. I tried to pull myself back into the boat. I was unsuccessful, so I tucked tight. Then I felt the full force of the river thrash me into the dark bottom of the falls. I tucked through the seam of the drop upside down and backward. When the boat and I pitoned into the bottom of the river, I felt several pops and cracks in my back. Then a powerful thrashing began. My new Sweet Protection Rocker Helmet was ripped off my head by a strong hit, the stitching of the chin strap buckle literally ripped out. I was ejected from my kayak deep underwater. My shoes and elbow pads were ripped off me, and my paddle was pulled out of my hands. I was pulled into the curtain of the falls and pushed further under.

"I balled up, followed that current in deep darkness, and began to see the lighter water. I got a fresh, well-timed, breath but knew I still had a wild ride ahead. Thankfully, I popped up very near two paddlers who had run the drop successfully. I was very aware of a bad rock sieve in the middle right of the following rapid and knew that the best way around was to swim to a rock on the right side near the cave. I swam for the rock with everything I had and grabbed hold. One of the guys paddled up to me and told me to grab his boat. He asked if I was all right. I only managed to say, 'Help me!'

Fatalities By Boat Type Since 2004

Canoe	136
Drift Boat	21
Inflatable Kayak	44
Inner Tube	84
Jet Ski	1
Jon Boat	7
Kayak	368
None	17
Other	20
Pontoon Boat	3
Raft	400
SUP	23
UNK	7
Packraft	5
Sit On Top Kayak	1

"I grabbed his stern grab handle and he pulled me into the eddy after the cave on river right. I got out of the river and laid as flat as possible on the biggest flat rock around. The group got my gear, and I checked my physical and mental health. They found my paddle, a throw bag, and my lost elbow pad. I noticed that I had blurry vision in my right eye. I felt I damaged a rib or two and perhaps my back. I knew a hike out would be painful and difficult. When I saw someone hiking my boat up on river left and they said they found my helmet, I knew I could paddle out. It was a difficult scramble down to the kayak. I supported myself with my paddle and a long beaver-chewed branch the river gifted me.

"The paddle out was very difficult. We used a short cam strap to hold my helmet on, adjusted the outfitting, and I slipped back into the kayak with some assistance. We stayed together for the run, and the crew did a great job of support and leading. I portaged First Island with help. I didn't have much strength, but I knew the river like the back of my hand. When we got to the takeout my friends helped get my dry suit off before we rushed to Ruby Emergency Room. When we got there, I walked to the doors in my wet socks and sat down in the first wheelchair. It was impressive to watch the trauma team work seamlessly and flawlessly together to stabilize my back and neck, and use ultrasound, X-rays, and a CT scan to find my injuries. They found ten broken ribs, one fractured L2 Vertebrae, and a concussion. And one very humble and grateful me.

"Some people jump out of planes with parachutes others ride bulls and tame stallions. I ride down the back of a relentless water dragon disguised as a river. I made one mistake that led to a series of challenges. I accept that and will continue to walk forward with humble accountability, graceful gratitude, and positive reference for life. It was a worst-case scenario with the best possible outcome.

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 paddling community. You can go to the Accident Database page on the AW 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.