

IDNR, Illinois Conservation Police Urge Life Jacket Use, Sober Boating

by Jayette Bolinski
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SPRINGFIELD – With the traditional start of the summer boating season just around the corner, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) and the Illinois Conservation Police are reminding people to wear life jackets anytime they're on the water and to only operate boats while sober.

[National Safe Boating Week](#) is May 20-26, the week leading up to the Memorial Day holiday weekend, to raise awareness of boating safety.

“Life jackets save lives, period,” said Illinois Conservation Police Lt. Curt Lewis, the state’s boating law administrator. “Everyone who heads out on the water should wear a life jacket, regardless of whether they’re on a motorboat, a kayak, a canoe, or a stand-up paddleboard. We want you to have fun, but most importantly, we want you to be safe.”

In 2022, there were 52 reportable boating accidents on Illinois waters, resulting in six fatalities and 40 injuries, according to statistics compiled by the **Illinois Conservation Police**. Prior years’ statistics:

- 2021: 93 boating accidents with 16 fatalities and 28 injuries
- 2020: 81 boating accidents with 21 fatalities and 36 injuries
- 2019: 72 boating accidents with 14 fatalities and 42 injuries

(Annual boating accident statistics are compiled based on the federal fiscal year Oct. 1 through Sept. 30.)

Statistics show most boating accidents occur between noon and 6 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays between June and August. Conditions are usually clear with good visibility, light winds, and calm water. Most accidents involve operators between the ages of 20 and 40 who have more than 100 hours of boating experience but little or no classroom boating safety instruction. They also usually involve open motorboats cruising in a careless or reckless manner, culminating in a collision with another boat.

IDNR offers free boating safety courses that provide a review of boating laws and regulations, as well as instruction on the safe and attentive operation of watercraft. The department encourages boaters of all ages to take a safety course. Anyone born on or after Jan. 1, 1998, must pass a course and have a valid Boating Safety Certificate to operate a motorboat (with over 10 horsepower). State law also requires boating safety education for people ages 12 to 17 to operate a motorboat.

“With boating season getting underway, everyone who heads out to enjoy the beautiful lakes and waterways Illinois has to offer should make safety their first priority,” **said Cody Gray, safety education program administrator for IDNR**. “IDNR’s mandatory boating safety classes are free, and what you learn may just save someone’s life.”

Free safety courses are taught by volunteer instructors and are available throughout Illinois. Find a schedule of courses at <https://dnr.illinois.gov/safety/boatingsafety.html>. For a fee, online boating safety courses are also available.

As part of the Illinois Conservation Police boating safety enforcement effort, officers also strictly enforce laws regarding operating under the influence (OUI) for boat operators.

Operating a boat under the influence is in some ways riskier than operating a motor vehicle under the influence, Lewis said. On waterways, there are no lane markers, boats have no seatbelts, and there is little protection for occupants should a collision occur.

In 2022, Illinois Conservation Police officers arrested 72 boaters for OUI, a 10% increase from the previous year. In 2021 they arrested 65 boaters for OUI.

None of the six boating-related fatalities in Illinois in 2022 involved alcohol or drug impairment. Of the six fatalities, four who died were not wearing life jackets or vests.

Lewis stressed that wearing a life jacket is the most important action boaters and paddlers can take to ensure their safety and that of others on board.

Illinois law requires that personal flotation devices, or PFDs – which are life jackets or life vests – be available for each person aboard a boat or other watercraft. The law also requires Illinois law requires everyone to wear a PFD while operating a personal watercraft or jet ski.

Under [625 ILCS 45/4-11](#), the Boat Registration and Safety Act, no person may operate any watercraft unless an approved and appropriately sized wearable U.S. Coast Guard approved personal flotation device is being properly worn by each person under the age of 13 on the deck of a watercraft or in an open watercraft at all times in which the watercraft is underway; however, this requirement shall not apply to persons who are enclosed in a cabin or below the top deck on a watercraft, on an anchored watercraft that is a platform for swimming or diving, or aboard a charter "passenger for hire" watercraft with a licensed captain.