

Nonprofits, government agencies work together to increase South Yuba River safety



Liz Kellar
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Photo courtesy Felicia Van Hecke | Photo courtesy Felicia Van Hecke

River Ambassador Ron Stickney educates families about their impact at the river.

PLAYING IT SAFE AT THE RIVER

When picking where to hang out at the river, look at these three things:

Gradient (is there a steep drop?)

Flow (how much water is going by?)

Substrate (what kind of rocks? Are there entrapping boulders, obstacles or logs or sieves?)

Each of these elements create their own hazards, but on their own might not create a danger spot. High flow in an area that is not steep and has no foot entrapment rocks can be a great place to play at times, while a steep drop with limited flow and no entrapment hazards can make for a fun water slide.

— Courtesy Katrina Schneider, river safety advocate

The temperatures are reaching triple-digit levels. That means visitors — both locals and out-of-towners — are flocking to the South Yuba River in an effort to stay cool.

But even though water levels are falling, that doesn't mean the potential dangers have decreased.

Just this week, a teenage boy was hoisted out of the river canyon at Purdon Crossing and flown to a regional hospital after slipping and falling, sustaining head trauma.

His accident highlights the safety message being promoted by Nevada County officials and the South Yuba River Citizens League — Look (scout before you leap); Grip (watch your footing); Protect (avoid entrapment).

SYRCL has ramped up its safety message in the last few years, working with river safety advocate Katrina Schneider to develop a video and messaging that is posted on its website and has become part of a scrolling TV message on the Yuba Bus that takes visitors to the river.

[Playing safely at the river](#) has also become part of the message disseminated by the group's volunteer river ambassadors.

And through a partnership with the county's Yuba River Safety Cohort, the ambassadors now have tools to expand their reach and get help more quickly.

The program is in its eighth season and currently has 31 volunteer ambassadors and three "river captains," said SYRCL Executive Director Melinda Booth. Ambassadors are situated at the river at two locations right now — the Highway 49 crossing and at Bridgeport, four hours a day on holidays and weekends, talking to visitors and helping them have a safe and enjoyable experience, Booth said.

The volunteers, who work under the auspices of the state Department of Parks and Recreation, deliver positive messages rather than punitive enforcement, Booth stressed.

"Safety is a newer message," Booth said. "We've been working with Katrina (Schneider), she has helped create some simple wording and messaging, something to share with people. ... We are incorporating it a little more now."

Booth noted that a suggestion has been made to install river safety signs at popular swimming spots. But signage is something that would need to be installed and maintained by the state parks department, and is not something it wants to undertake right now, she said.

"I definitely think the ambassadors help," she said. "Do they reach everybody? Certainly not. However, the number of people we're able to connect with is huge."

According to Booth, the ambassadors have talked to more than 6,000 visitors to the river already this season, which runs from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

"I think it is making a difference — those one-on-one interactions are the most influential way to reach people," she said, adding, "It's not a solution for the entire problem, obviously."

Some other aspects to ensuring safety at the river are also being addressed by a multi-agency South Yuba River Public Safety Cohort, including illegal parking that blocks access by emergency vehicles and fire danger.

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The safety cohort was responsible for getting an emergency satellite call box installed at Purdon Crossing in late June.



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"That's been used already for a couple of accidents and a felony assault, and allowed the Sheriff's Office to get down there quickly," said Nevada County Supervisor Heidi Hall. "We're very excited about its use."

Four satellite communication devices that connect to cell phones are being donated this week for use by the river ambassadors, funded by the Board of Supervisors.

Hall said she is submitting a request for an additional \$86,000 in grant funding for three more fixed call boxes and five more of the communication devices, as well as for two variable-message electronic signs for safety and education purposes.

"We can save 20 to 30 minutes of people having to hike out and call for help," Booth said. "This will also allow us to expand our reach — the ambassadors can be on more trails and at more crossings, this will allow us to go farther afield."

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