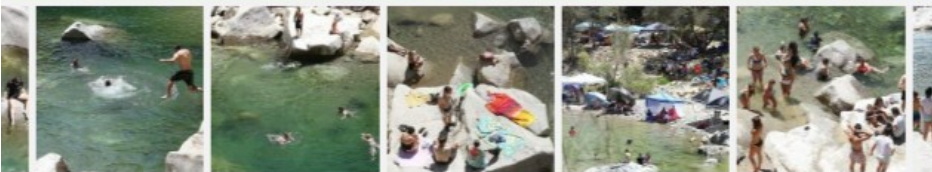


## The South Yuba River draws visitors every summer; officials urge they stay safe

News | July 8, 2019



**Alan Riquelmy**  
ariquelmy@theunion.com



The man died about an inch from the surface of the South Yuba River.

He'd been floating on an inner tube with his family when he went over a waterfall. His feet, pointed downward, became trapped between rocks at the river's bottom, said Capt. Kevin Menet, with the Nevada County Consolidated Fire District.

"You could literally see his hair floating at the top of the water," Menet added. "He literally died within an inch of the surface."

Eleven people have died because of drowning on the South Yuba River between 2008 and last year. Two have died this year. The most recent — 23-year-old Dalton Burgos — was found June 24.

These numbers don't include people who committed suicide, or died because of a fall or other accident. Additionally, someone taken out of county for treatment who then dies isn't reflected in local records.

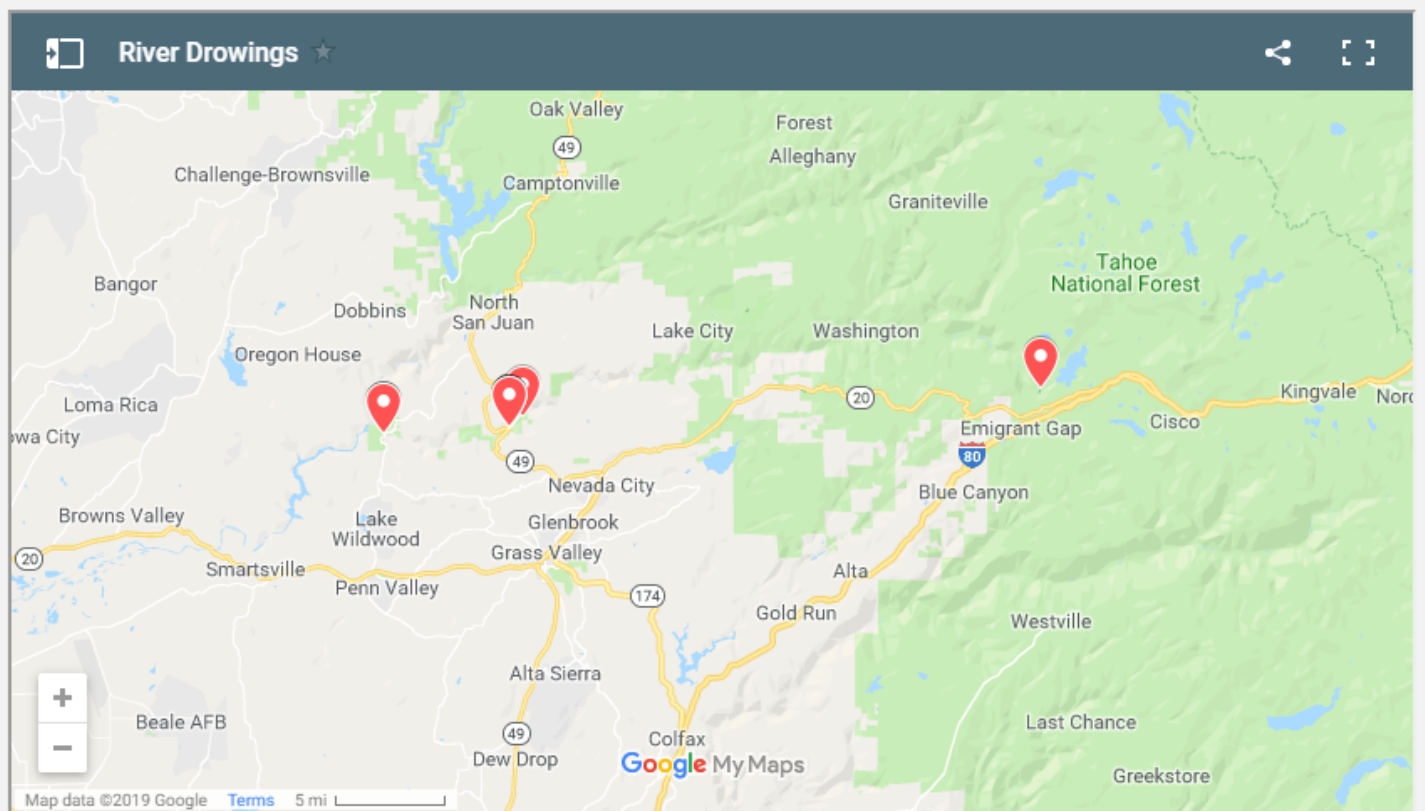
Nevada County officials say there are a handful of reasons that lead to river deaths. Two big reasons: the speed and temperature of the water.

"The water's still very cold," Menet said. "Your first jump in is initially shock."

People often panic in that situation. They thrash in the water, using energy. Then the swift current pulls them downstream.

### LIVES LOST

- July 5, 2008: Luis Sotelo Tobon, 23, Yuba City
- May 19, 2009: Alan Grant Burton, 57, North San Juan
- July 11, 2009: Raymond Roy Fowler, 41, Natomas
- July 2, 2010: Robert Vincent Welch, 20, Auburn
- 2011:
- 2012:
- June 29, 2013: Keegann Reign Carovich, 12, Nevada City
- April 1, 2014: Andrew Smith De Debord, 64, Paradise
- Aug. 9, 2015: Omar Ramez Dec Chaar, 25, Elk Grove
- 2016:
- May 28, 2017: Jesse Babb, 23, Marysville
- Aug. 19, 2017: Ricardo Alvarez, 37, Nevada City
- June 5, 2018: Christian John Cotter, 23, Elk Grove
- June 26, 2018: Mario Julian Benassi, 23, Colfax



Map created by Digital Engagement Editor Samantha Sullivan

## RIVER CHANGES

Currents have slowed over the past several days, but officials are loathe to ever say the South Yuba River is safe.

“No one will tell you a level at which it’s safe to swim,” said Melinda Booth, executive director of the [South Yuba River Citizens League](#). “There’s no such thing.”

Officials measure the speed of water in cubic feet per second.

Heavy winter rains pushed the water’s speed to almost 20,000 cfs in January 2017. Last year it topped out at 14,000 cfs in April.

It’s dropped to under 5,000 cfs by May over the past five years, barring 2015 when the drought kept currents slow throughout the year. It’s currently in the hundreds, though a seemingly calm river can still carry an extremely dangerous current.

“The river changes,” Booth said. “It’s dynamic.”

Swift water can move rocks, even boulders, changing features of a river its visitors expect. Booth said a 15-foot deep swimming hole can disappear from one season to the next.

That’s why a healthy respect for the river is necessary.

“There are so many people who don’t take the time to read the river,” said Katrina Schneider, a regular river visitor and attendee to meetings of the Yuba River Public Safety Cohort.

## SAFETY

Schneider said she visits the South Yuba River about twice a week. She enjoys snorkeling in the river, exploring its various points.

The river has many safe spots for swimming, Schneider said. Visitors must make a point of discovering them and rediscovering them.

Echoing Booth’s comments, Schneider noted that the river’s features change over time.

Schneider emphasized awareness about possible entrapment. A foot caught in rocks at the river’s bottom can quickly lead to drowning. She advised swimmers to go against the current and avoid where water from a pool spills into the moving river.

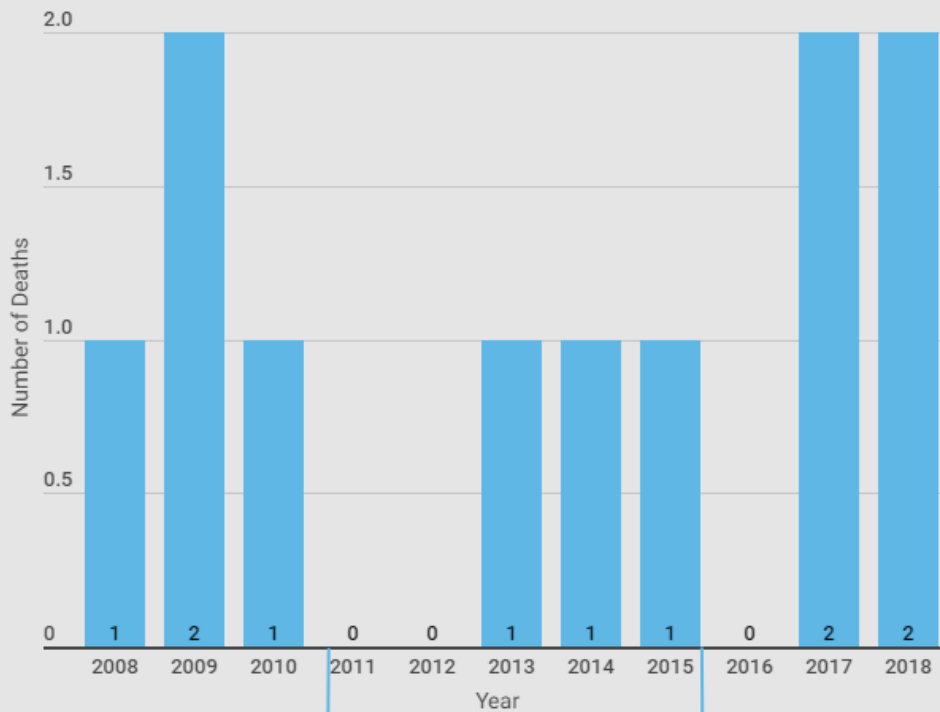
According to Schneider, people should stay near shore when testing the waters. Swimmers should ensure they can get out if the river proves cold and their muscles seize up.

People moving across the rocks should have three points of contact – their two legs and a hand – as they traverse the landscape. Schneider said a film formed from sediment has made the rocks more slippery this year.

“It’s not like the rocks were last year,” Schneider said.

To contact Staff Writer Alan Riquelmy, email [ariquelmy@theunion.com](mailto:ariquelmy@theunion.com) or call 530-477-4239.

## South Yuba River drownings from 2008 to 2018



The latest California drought began in 2011 and was declared over in 2015

Source: Nevada County Sheriff's Office

Created by Digital Engagement Editor Samantha Sullivan