

How to Stay Safe on Long Island Sound

After a Beautiful, Sunny Sunday
Turns to Tragedy, Connecticut Kayakers
and Police Provide Tips on How to
Prevent Further Accidents on the Water

By Pem McNerney
Living Editor

Sitting on a bench in the shade outside of The Boat Center in Madison, Rich Schenk pointed to an elderly couple, with their big, shaggy dog, puttering down the Hammonasset River in an inflatable dingy with a small outboard motor.

"This is probably one of the prettiest places in Connecticut and 95 percent of the time, all goes well, people go out, people have a good time, and people come back in," he says. "I see that couple all the time, having a good time out on the water."

But Schenk, who has worked at The Boat Center for 24 years, and who has lived around the water his entire life, also knows how quickly a good day can turn bad. Two of his friends died while swimming in the Connecticut River after having had a few too many drinks. In March, he

had to help someone unable to pull himself out of the Hammonasset River. Schenk himself, about 15 years ago, fell into the river fully dressed

on a day when the water was freezing cold. His clothes became waterlogged and his boots filled with water. He grabbed onto the dock, realized he could not pull himself out, and started yelling. Fortunately, a friend driving by on the Route 1 bridge that goes over the river saw him, raced over, and saved him.

"I didn't think I was coming out that time," he says.

A Deceptively Beautiful Day

Schenk says he was sad to hear about the recent kayaking accident involving a group of three adults and a child who reportedly launched out of or near Hammonasset Beach State Park. That Sunday, June 12 was a beautiful day to be outside, sunny and warm with temperatures touching the 80s around midday. That beauty was deceptive. The weather report called for offshore winds out of the north of up to 18 miles per hour, with gusts going much higher. That weather report was enough to prompt April Tam, a paddler with 10 years of experience, to cancel a kayak trip she had planned.

While the air temperatures felt like summer, the water temperatures that day were only in the 60s, meaning that anyone immersed in the water would have only a few hours before becoming hypothermic and unconscious, says Eleanor Mariani, director of the Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection's Boating Division—"When you consider your body is 98.6, that is really cold."

Hypothermia occurs when your body temperature starts to drop below 95 degrees, preventing your heart, nervous system, and body organs from working properly.

Mike Lengle rides the surf at Hammonasset.
Photo by Kelley Fryer/The Source

Delfina Reynoso, 26, and her daughter, Damaris, 8, of Hartford, along with Avdias Ventura, 30, of Hartford, and Ferdinand Lagos, 39, of Manchester were all wearing life jackets and were paddling together as a group, following two of the cardinal rules of safe boating. Reynoso, her daughter, and Ventura were in the kayak, and Lagos was on a paddle board, according to police.

They launched right around 6 p.m., police say, shortly after the tide turned, sending the current rushing east out of Long Island Sound. If they were new to kayaking, as police officials say it appears as though they were, they would've found the tides and offshore winds pushing them further and further from the Connecticut shore. If they encountered the tide rip near the breakwater at Hammonasset, close to the Meigs Point boat launch, it would've pushed them straight out about a half mile. That picks up as soon as the tide starts to run out.

"That [tide rip] alone can capsize even an intermediate level paddler when it's running hard, and it would be very difficult...to paddle against," wrote one experienced paddler in a recent discussion on the online bulletin board for Connyak, a group of kayakers who are familiar with Long Island Sound.

"That [tide rip] can be nasty," says Jay Babina, a Connyak member and paddler with 40 years of experience. "It's almost like a rip current. It's a very scary thing when it kicks up."

Branford resident Babina says another issue he often sees with new paddlers is that they can have a hard time turning around to head back in against the tide or against the wind, without capsizing. Carl Tjerandsen, who has been paddling for 18 years and has spent a lot of time on Long Island Sound, agrees.

"Beware an offshore wind! Even with a brisk northerly wind, Connecticut kayakers can feel pretty secure pushing off the beach heading south in warm spring sunshine," he says. "As they proceed offshore, however, the wind invariably picks up and the wind waves build in height and general orneriness. This, because without the drag of the land, the wind becomes stronger, often much stronger as it sweeps south. The paddler is feeling the joy: wind at his back, riding the chop, moving right out. At a certain point, however, the kayaker will come to see things differently. 'Whoa! Maybe getting out a bit too far, kind of gnarly here.'"

Then comes the hard part.

In Trouble, Seeking Help

"The turn to get back exposes the kayak's beam [side] to the wind and the now-breaking wind waves. Beginner boats with flat bottoms combined with the inexperience of the now-fearful kayaker can easily result in a capsize. If the turn is managed, the paddler still has to get back to shore against the wind and the waves. Fear and exhaustion can predispose to a capsize on the way in," Tjerandsen says.

By sunset that Sunday, 8:24 p.m., the group of four paddlers knew they were in serious trouble, and Lagos, on the paddle board, decided to leave it and try to swim back to shore to seek help, police say. The other three with the kayak, which may have capsized at that point, continued to drift toward Long Island, police say. The mother and her daughter were finally washed ashore around 3:40 a.m. Monday, and the mother started yelling for help, according to a report in the *Suffolk Times*. That woke up Joanne Crokos and her husband John, of Orient, New York. They raced down to the gate that separates their property from the beach and found Reynoso and her daughter barefoot, soaked to the skin, and shivering. Reynoso was yelling “*mucho frio*” (very cold) and, likely referring to her lost companions, “*cuatro*” (four), and “*por favor*” (please). The little girl said nothing, “not even a whimper,” according to the report in the *Suffolk Times*.

Southold Police Chief Martin Flatley says it appears as though the eight year-old girl survived because Reynoso and Ventura managed to keep her either in or on the kayak, out of the water. Ventura, suffering from hypothermia, at some point could no longer hold on, and dropped off. Ventura was found, dead, about a quarter mile west of where the mother and daughter were found. Lagos, who had volunteered to swim back for help, was found dead around noon on Monday, in the water near the mouth of the Connecticut River.

Taken by the Tide

Flatley says this is the third or fourth marine incident so far this year.

“The kayakers get caught up, taken by the tide, and they realize they don’t have the ability to get back in,” he says. “When the tide runs in the Sound, it can be pretty powerful.”

Flatley says he loves to kayak, but that he uses the creek systems close to Long Island Sound, rather than venturing into the Sound.

“Quite frankly, who wants to paddle out there?” he asks. “There’s the tide, and other boats’ wakes, and the wind. I’d rather paddle in a nice flat area. Even when it looks calm, Long Island Sound can be deceiving. You have to respect the water. You have to respect the tides. You have to respect the wind and factor all of that in.”

Schenk, at The Boat Center, agrees. He says they often recommend beginners launch directly into the Hammonasset River and go upstream, rather than downstream toward the Sound. That way, if they fall out, they might get muddy walking to the river banks, but it’s easier to stay out of trouble on the river. He says there is a decent launch area just off of Route One, right as you go over the bridge from Madison to Clinton.

He also says they often recommend paddlers to go out against the tide, and against the wind, and then take the easier ride in with the tides and wind. He says most paddlers make it back in with no problem, but that sometimes paddlers lose track of time and don’t make it back in, prompting them to call and report them to the local police and the Coast Guard.

Abby Benchimol of Clinton has worked at the Harborside Marina/Paddleworks in Clinton for three summers and says they also recommend beginning paddlers stick with the area around

Cedar Island and Clinton Beach, rather than venturing out into the Sound.

“This year, we started to take groups out past the channel to make sure they know where they’re going,” she says. “We always have one floater out there to help with that.”

That also allows the store to evaluate the skill level of the paddlers and give advice as needed about routes and paddling tips. When the weather forecast calls for winds stronger than 15 miles per hour, they cancel any reservations made, with exceptions sometimes being made for groups they know are experienced enough to handle the conditions, she says.

“And, if the winds are over 10 miles per hour, we will recommend they don’t go out,” she says.

Paddleworks also prominently posts the latest weather conditions, wind speeds, tides, and other information paddlers should know, so that they have that information before heading out, Benchimol says.

Sympathy, Regret

Hammonasset Beach State Park Supervisor Bill Mattioli, calling the recent incident a tragedy, says paddlers should always be sure to wear a PFD, paddle in a group, be aware of weather and tides, and be sure their skill level is sufficient to handle the conditions on any given day.

“Never underestimate the power of the ocean,” he says.

“The Connecticut coast is a tricky place for boaters,” says Tam. “Some days, the weather is calm and quiet, one can go way out and enjoy the serenity of the water without a care. But days like [that] Sunday, it was a death trap. Sadly, it took two lives.”

Tjerandsen and other Connyak kayakers expressed sympathy and regret about the kayaking deaths, while discussing them to find out what they could learn from it.

“Experienced kayakers, speaking in all honesty, will admit to some good luck in surviving some of the foolish things they did early on,” Tjerandsen says. “Scary situations motivate the now-wary paddler to seek training, safer gear, and on-water companions capable of rescuing themselves and others. They don’t take a lot for granted as they refine their judgment and skills. I doubt the folks involved in the recent mishap on the Sound were foolish people. I expect they didn’t have the kind of experience that might have kept them safe. As luck would have it, two of them didn’t get a chance to learn from their mistakes. Very sad.”

Tjerandsen says paddlers should always dress for the water temperature, not the air, and to invest in seaworthy kayaks.

“Seaworthy kayaks, dress suitable for immersion, and paddling lessons do not come cheap. The casual paddler is not likely to invest in any of these. OK. It’s not that hard to paddle forward and turn, after a fashion,” he says. “You can have fun on the water. But, the casual paddler has to appreciate that venturing into conditions beyond his zone of safety can result in a one-way trip.”

Still, he says he understands when beginners sometimes go where they should not.

“The lure of the offshore island can be irresistible, as can curiosity about paddling an exposed headland,” he says.

Ten Tips on How to Stay Safe

While the incident on Sunday, June 12 was a grim reminder that Long Island Sound needs to be treated with respect, boating experts and experienced kayakers say it’s worth mastering the details of water safety so that you can enjoy boating trips. Here’s what you should do:

- 1 Always wear a life jacket.** Make sure the fit is snug and that it is fastened so that it cannot be pulled off, if you have to be hoisted from the water. This is particularly important for small children. “Fit is key,” says Rich Schenk from The Boat Center in Madison. “We make sure the kids have a proper fit, and that it’s the right color. That’s important to them. They’re so cheap, too. When they outgrow it, give it to someone else.”
- 2 File a float plan** with the marina or boat center where you rent your kayak, or with a friend. Tell them when you are leaving, where you are going, when you will be back, what your boat looks like, and what you are wearing. And then let them know when you come back. “In the event you don’t come back, that would increase the chances of our finding you,” says U.S. Coast Guard Petty Officer Sabrina Laberdesque. “We want to know your route, your boat, and what color your [life jacket] is”
- 3** If you’re a beginner, **always paddle with a group**, ideally with people who have more experience. It’s easy for people who are new to the sport to make mistakes, say the experts. “Many of us learned our lesson by making poor judgment in our earlier days of kayaking,” says April Tam, a kayaker with 10 years of experience. “I’ve had my days of fighting stiff head winds back to the launch and realizing (a bit late) that I bit off more than I should.”
- 4 Consider purchasing a VHF radio.** While some people like to rely upon their cell phones, sometimes cell reception along the shoreline is spotty. Or the phones won’t work if they get wet. If someone in trouble calls for help on Channel 16, not only will the Coast Guard be alerted, but area boats will respond as well. “Nearby mariners can come to your assistance, along with our partner agencies at the local level,” says Laberdesque.
- 5** If you’re going to stay close to shore, get a waterproof bag for your cell phone that allows you to dial through the bag. Then **download the U.S. Coast Guard app**, available for both iPhone and Android. If you get in trouble, you can request emergency assistance. You can also file a float plan, find the nearest NOAA buoy, report suspicious activity, and read up on the latest safety regulations and navigation rules.
- 6 Check weather.gov**, or another weather site, to check weather conditions, including the possibility of storms, and wind speeds.
- 7 Check the water temperature before you go out**, and dress for the water temperature, rather than the air temperature. Dry suits can help protect a paddler in colder water. You can find information about that at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration National Centers for Environmental Information, www.nodc.noaa.gov/dsdt/cwtg/natl.html
- 8 Check the tide chart before you go out:** <http://ct.ussharbons.com/connecticut-tide-charts>, and understand the effect of the tides on your proposed route.
- 9** If you’re on a larger boat, consider getting **flares** and training in how to use them. If you’re on a smaller boat, make sure you have a **waterproof flashlight** to use as a means of communication.
- 10 Take lessons.** General boating lessons will allow you to understand how larger boats navigate and the rules they abide by, so that you can avoid collisions. Specific lessons, specific to your craft, will allow you to master skills that can be lifesavers in an emergency.

Here are some more safety tips from the Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection

www.ct.gov/deep/lib/deep/boating/canoe_and_kayak_brochure.pdf

Five area sources for lessons

These are some recommendations from David Grainger of Connyak:

- Sea Sherpa <http://seasherpakayak.com/>
- Prime Paddlesports www.primepaddlesports.com/
- Kayak Waveology www.kayakwaveology.com/
- Collinsville Canoe and Kayak www.cckstore.com/
- The Kayak Centre <http://kayakcentre.com/paddling-school.htm>
- Changing Tides Paddlecraft www.ctpaddlecraft.com/index.htm
- Kayak Adventure www.kayak-adventure.net/

He says others can be found by simply Googling “Kayak Lessons CT”