



Young paddlers receive canoeing instructions at Laurel Creek Nature Centre before going out on the water.

# Put safety first on water

People get into serious trouble and sometimes die in the Grand River, its tributaries and the reservoirs, but there are many ways to reduce the risks.

Let's hope this summer everyone will put safety first on local waterways. June 6 to 13 is Water Safety Week, an annual campaign to educate Canadians about how to stay safe around water and prevent drowning incidents.

According to the Canadian Red Cross, wearing a life jacket could eliminate up to 90 per cent of all boating-related drownings, so the biggest preventive measure anyone can take is to wear a PFD when canoeing, kayaking, tubing, on a raft or SUP (stand up paddle board), or in a motor boat. Also ensure that family and friends do the same.

Experienced paddlers wear a PFD at all times as a matter of habit. It is the occasional paddlers who are easy to spot on a river, because they are often the ones who do not wear PFDs.

Alcohol is suspected in half of boating-related fatalities, so drinking and boating of any sort do not mix.

## Lifejacket loaner program

For 10 years, all Grand River Parks have had a lifejacket loaner program for swimmers at beaches and pools.

This program got underway after a tragedy at a park when two brothers drowned. Park staff have life-jackets on hand to loan out for

free with a small, refundable deposit or photo ID as security.

## Temperatures and flows

Paddlers and anglers need to be aware of the fluctuating river flows and also temperatures. Spring and fall are the most dangerous times, because river water is much colder even when the air temperature may be warm — this is when it is best to wear a wetsuit or drysuit when paddling and the water is moving quickly, or to take extra care if you are fishing.

View [www.grandriver.ca/riverdata](http://www.grandriver.ca/riverdata) before you go out to check the river flows and temperatures.

Trees can also come down across a river, resulting in one of the most dangerous obstacles that a paddler can encounter on fast-moving water. A tree that is partially or completely submerged can block the river. The danger is being swept into the maze of tree branches by fast-flowing current and becoming trapped.

This spring, a large tree was across the entire Eramosa River. When flows were 4 cubic metres per second (cms) on Good Friday, paddlers could get under the tree safely. However by the next weekend, a combination of melting snow and rain meant that three times as much water was flowing down the river. Unfortunately, the tree crossed at a blind turn where Blue Springs Creek joins the Eramosa. This led to a

dangerous trip on a beautiful warm day for unsuspecting paddlers.

## Capsized boats

Several boats capsized at the spot, including canoes carrying young children. A kayak was swept away and not found. Fortunately some very experienced paddlers were able to rescue those who capsized. Rescuers are not always around and they, too, are at risk on the rivers.

The incident is a reminder to paddlers to be aware that danger can lurk around the corner on a fast-moving river, and to ensure they and those they are with have the skills to handle such a situation. Paddling in a group is much safer. Training on the water with a qualified instructor is best and there are many courses available locally.

Interestingly, removing a downed tree in a river is the responsibility of the property owner, who may not even be aware that the tree has come down, or may not realize that the tree is a danger to paddlers. As a result, the tree may not be removed. On a roadway, a downed tree will be removed by the municipality, or emergency services, however this is not the case with a tree on a river. In this case, there was very little that the GRCA could do, aside from contacting the property owner to advise them of the problem tree. In this case, it was removed by paddlers.

## Dam safety

Dams are much more dangerous than they may appear.

The GRCA owns 29 dams and there are over 100 other dams within the watershed. Water surges through gates or over the dam, creating strong undertows and backwash below the dam, where you can be pinned below the water. Areas above and below a dam are dangerous waterways for boating, fishing, swimming and winter activities. Always stay behind barriers and adhere to safety messages at dams. While all GRCA dams are marked, some that are privately owned are not marked and may not be easy to see.

For more information, check out the river safety section on [www.grandriver.ca](http://www.grandriver.ca) or information about canoeing on [www.grandriver.ca/canoeing](http://www.grandriver.ca/canoeing).