

Paddlers warned of high waters on Mississippi River

St. Cloud Times - St. Cloud, Minn.

Author: Ann Wessel

Date: Jun 2, 2012

Start Page: n/a

Section: Local

Text Word Count: 749

Document Text

One canoe and kayak outfitter suspended Mississippi River trips and another started gauging paddlers' abilities before sending them out since heavy rainfalls swelled downstream currents and unleashed more potential hazards.

The U.S. Geological Survey gauge showed the Mississippi River was running at 27,600 cubic feet per second at St. Cloud on Friday. The previous maximum flow for that date was 18,900 cfs, set in 2001. The previous minimum was 3,500 cfs, set in 1992. Data is available for 22 years.

The river measured 8.75 feet on Friday at St. Cloud, where flood stage is 9 feet.

"We're looking at record highs. It's big, big water," said Ivan Bartha, coordinator for experiential programs at St. Cloud State University's Outdoor Endeavors. St. Cloud State doesn't rent vessels for use on the Mississippi when the river flow exceeds 10,000 cfs.

"The whitewater boaters are going crazy. The whitewater boaters are calling me left and right from the Twin Cities," Bartha said Wednesday. "This is like out West whitewater conditions for them. This is like the upper part of the Grand Canyon."

Experience required

The conditions that draw what Bartha called the creme de la creme of paddlers also make it dangerous for the less experienced. High water submerges some dangers, and strong currents push around obstacles such as fallen trees.

Dan Meer of Clear Waters Outfitting Co. in Clearwater said staff has been asking about customers' paddling experience before renting boats to them.

"We can be a little bit more specific on who we let go based on their skill levels," Meer said Wednesday. A day of paddling planned for a group of students was moved to a nearby lake.

Meer said the cold water is a bigger danger than faster currents and deeper water.

"It's making it a little more challenging for trips, but for the most part our trips below the dam at Clearwater (are) fairly safe," Meer said.

Trick kayaker Rick Rassier, a motivational speaker who runs St. Cloud-based Teamwork Motivation Training, said he had been on the water every day since the river level made playboating possible just below the Sauk Rapids bridge. But he issued a warning for anyone planning a casual paddle down the Sauk or Mississippi rivers.

The rapids just below the bridge contain a 60-foot-long straight-line drop that produces a so-called terminal hydraulic, which can trap boats. Rassier said paddlers who don't know it's there can easily get pulled in and drown -- even with a life jacket.

"If you're kayaking down the river, you can't even see it," Rassier said. "Nobody should be paddling down here unless they know exactly where they should go."

Bartha compared putting an inexperienced paddler in the river under these conditions to giving car keys to a 6-year-old.

Outdoor Endeavors outfitted its last Mississippi River trip on May 25. Bartha said the volume was near 10,000 cfs when the students launched that morning. By the time the group -- which included several chaperones -- left the water, the flow had increased by 3,000 cfs because the dams were being opened.

Boats, lifts, docks

Sauk Rapids-based area hydrologist Nicola Blake-Bradley of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has taken some calls from people asking if no-wake zones would be posted on area water. She said that decision falls to local governments.

Lt. Robert Dickhaus of the Stearns County Sheriff's Office oversees its boat and water safety team. He said officers would post caution signs if waters reached the level where they would cause shoreline damage.

"We haven't had a lot of complaints about wakes and things like that," Dickhaus said Thursday.

Dennis Schuneman, who has lived north of Sartell on the Mississippi River for 56 years, said he could see a boat lift stuck on a sandbar in the middle of the river. He hadn't yet put his dock in for the year.

"Most people in this area have taken their boats out of the water," Schuneman said. "There's a lot of debris, logs and branches and brush and stuff coming down the river."

One high-water effect might not show up immediately.

The unseasonably high river levels have the potential to affect newly hatched smallmouth bass, which Paul Diedrich, the DNR's Montrose-based area fisheries supervisor, said generally fare better during low-flow years.

"These high waters could sweep fish away. Usually there's pretty good year classes that form on the Mississippi," Diedrich said.

The DNR should know more late next summer, when its five-year river survey is planned.

ID_Code: DR-306020011

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

The U.S. Geological Survey gauge showed the Mississippi River was running at 27,600 cubic feet per second at St. Cloud on Friday.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.