

As Mich. boating season ramps up, officials tout safety

[Mark Hicks](#), The Detroit News Published 10:11 p.m. ET May 26, 2018 | Updated 10:55 p.m. ET May 26, 2018



Students board PB (patrol boat) 8, the marine division's new 32-foot Munson Pakcat search and recovery dive boat for their tour of Lake St. Clair. One hundred seventh-grade students from Chippewa Valley Schools, all of whom scored a 100% on their boaters' safety course, tour the Macomb County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) Marine Division Boathouse, in Harrison Twp., and ride on patrol boats on Lake St. Clair, Thursday morning, May 24, 2018. MCSO deputies teach more than 6000 county students the 'Boat Michigan-A Course on Responsible Boating,' during the winter months. Hundreds of students, scoring a 100% on this course, are rewarded with this tour during the 2018 National Safe Boating Week, May 19-25.(Photo: Todd McInturf, The Detroit News)

As Memorial Day weekend and sunny weather usher in the summer season, southeast Michigan waters beckon outdoor lovers.

If Danielle Radue joins them, she is prepared. Having recently completed a Michigan boater safety course and passed a related exam, the 12-year-old knows the finer points of wearing protective gear and watching her surroundings when cruising on a pontoon or other vessel.



Sheriff officials takes pictures of students as they head out on Lake St. Clair for their patrol boat ride. (Photo: Todd McInturf, The Detroit News)

“It’s a very important part of this recreational activity,” said the student at Algonquin Middle School in Clinton Township. “It’s great that I could have this opportunity when I am so young. The knowledge will last me my whole life.”

As the holiday gives way to the recreational boating months that [have proved deadly](#) for some, authorities across the region hope others who rush to the waves follow that example. They stress awareness, education programs and extra precaution to avoid dangers.



Marine Safety Officer (MSO) Brian Miller, right, ensures the proper fit of this personal floatation device on Seneca Middle School seventh grader Orion Wilson, left, 14, of Macomb Twp., before he and classmates tour Lake St. Clair on patrol boats. (Photo: Todd McInturf, The Detroit News)

“The most common thing we hear from people who nearly drowned or their survivors is: ‘I didn’t know,’” said Jamie Racklyeft, executive director at the [Great Lakes Water Safety Consortium](#). “People just need to know what they don’t know. Education and training is absolutely key.”

The U.S. Coast Guard found Michigan had 38 of the more than 700 deaths [related to recreational boating reported nationwide in 2016](#). Some 83 percent of those who drowned that year were not wearing life jackets, according to the agency.

Meanwhile, one group [noted 88 drownings](#) on the Great Lakes in 2017, including 40 on Lake Michigan, 16 on Erie, nine on Superior and seven on Huron.



MCSO Lt. Jeffery Brossard, left, commander of the marine division, welcomes students to the boathouse, Thursday morning, May 24, 2018. One hundred seventh-grade students from Chippewa Valley Schools, all of whom scored a 100% on their boaters' safety course, tour the Macomb County Sheriff's Office Marine Division

Boathouse, in Harrison Twp. (Todd McInturf, The Detroit News) Boaters' safety aces tour Macomb County Sheriff's boathouse

Whether on large or small bodies of water, many people fail to realize how quickly someone can find themselves overcome when boating and swimming unprepared, under the influence of alcohol or without a life jacket, said Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard.

“It takes only 20-60 seconds for a struggling victim to drown, and most drownings occur within 10-15 feet from safety. It’s very fast and close to what you think would be safe.”

In 2017, the county reported zero boating fatalities and two drownings, fewer than in previous years, Bouchard said. The sheriff attributes part of the drop to his office’s [Marine Patrol and Water Rescue Unit](#) training some 500 people in boater safety.



Deputy Bill Willhite explains how deputies and marine safety officers patrol waterways as he refers to the Lake St. Clair navigation map in the boathouse radio room. (Photo: Todd McInturf, The Detroit News)

“There’s a greater awareness,” he said. “Not only does that make them better prepared on the water, they share some of that knowledge with other people.”

That’s why the [Macomb County Sheriff’s Marine Division](#) teaches boater safety curriculum in school districts as well as parks and recreation programs. Last year, officials instructed an estimated 6,000 students.



Students ride two of four boats during their patrol boat rides on Lake St. Clair. (Photo: Todd McInturf, The Detroit News)

They stress that Michigan law [requires a safety certificate](#) to operate a boat for anyone born after mid-1996. Those born after Dec. 31, 1978, also need the credential to operate a jet ski.

Among recent students was Orion Wilson, a seventh-grader at Seneca Middle School in Macomb Township. The 14-year-old visited the county marine division in Harrison Township on Thursday with other graduates who earned perfect scores on their boating safety exam.

He hopes to use those skills when fishing or boating this summer. “It’s important to understand boating safety and requirements so everyone I might be riding with can stay safe,” the youth said. “If a boat overturns, we know what to do to stay warm, we know how to call for help.”

Madi Stewart, 13, who attends Wyandot Middle School in Clinton Township, never forgets a crucial detail: “Always wear a life vest.”

Coast Guard officials also [urge paddlesport enthusiasts](#) to wear protective clothing, including dry or wet suits appropriate for waters that are likely to remain cold despite recent warm weather.

“Dress for the swim,” said Mike Baron, recreational safe boating specialist for the U.S. Coast Guard Ninth District.

This time of year, the cold water can cause involuntary gasp reflex, Racklyeft said. “They can just inhale water very quickly and drown.”

Paddlers should also equip their boats with safety gear, such as flares, a handheld VHF-FM radio and a personal locator beacon.

“It’s like riding a bike: inexpensive, accessible and fun,” Baron said. “Don’t cheap out on your life; get the right gear for your safety.”