

NINA MOINI: We know Minnesota's baking under a mass of hot, dry air this week. Few things bring relief from extreme heat, like wading or swimming out in the cool waters of this region's lakes and many streams. But that's also a part of the danger of a heat wave. Drowning spiked when temperatures soared in Europe earlier this summer. This was also true during an infamously hot summer in North America 90 years ago, as Journalist Jeff Williams recently told MPR's Chief Meteorologist Ben Cathey.

JEFF WILLIAMS: People would go to rivers and creeks to cool off, and then suddenly they would drown. Swimming lessons were not the best in 1936. You could argue that more people should be learning to swim now.

NINA MOINI: Today, swimming lessons are more common, and sheriffs departments across the state have staff dedicated to water safety. Perhaps one of the busier teams is in Otter Tail County, which has a lot of lakes. Troy Lee is a water patrol officer for the county, and he's on the line. Thanks for being here, Troy.

TROY LEE: Hey, thanks for having me, Nina. Can you hear me OK?

NINA MOINI: I sure can. Thank you. I know you're very busy. We really appreciate your time. Want to start with this tragic event over this weekend. Three people, we're told, were killed in a boating accident on Lake Pepin on the Wisconsin border over 4th of July weekend. We know there were at least three drownings in the state, one water rescue. How have the couple of weekends been for your team in Otter Tail County?

TROY LEE: Well, happy to say-- last weekend with the 4th of July-- we got by with just two personal watercraft jet skis that bumped into each other, and that was our worst one. So we're pretty happy. We kind of planned for the worst, and especially with a Saturday, Friday, Saturday, the way it's set up with a lot of people having that Friday off. But overall, we were very lucky, I think.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And then it gets so hot like it is now, this heat wave that we're dealing with. How do you prepare for a heat wave? Do you feel like more people are out on the water? It creates more of a dangerous situation?

TROY LEE: Yes, for sure. I think a lot of us from this part of the country, we're not really used to that kind of heat. And especially-- well, like yesterday and today with this humidity. [LAUGHS] Kind of sneaks up on you, and we're just not used to dealing with it. But obviously, a lot of people do head for the water to cool off.

And I guess, the bad part about that is we tell people that the sun rays pretty much double as soon as you get on the water compared to land. It's about twice as much. So it just amplifies dehydration and sunburn. And the hydration, I think, is obviously that much more important, for sure.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, you make a good point that it's not just about watercraft. It's about any types of emergencies that can happen when people are out on the water. I wonder, since you all have so many lakes and bodies of water, how do you prioritize where to focus your attention, especially when you know it's going to be a busy day on the water?

TROY LEE: Sure. Yeah, we're proud to say we have 1,048 lakes, I think it is. Most lakes in any county in the US. We're pretty proud of that.

NINA MOINI: [LAUGHS]

TROY LEE: We get, I would say, probably 200 of those that we actually get on in one summer. Obviously, some are pretty small. We have our large ones that are close enough to bigger cities that we get a pretty good influx from North Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota. They tend to find our bigger ones quicker.

So yeah, I mean, it's tough. We typically have four guys on, especially on weekends. Sometimes six. Try to get even up to six guys. We have six in the county. So most of us have been doing it 20 years. We kind of know where most of the vacationers are headed to. And just with the heat, it can be just the perfect storm with a lot of people and typically a lot of inexperienced boaters, unfortunately.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, I could see that.

TROY LEE: We end up-- yeah, dealing with that quite a bit.

NINA MOINI: And I know you mentioned jet skis and some reports of just dangerous driving. Or what are some of the more common calls that you get? Not things that you happen upon, but calls you get.

TROY LEE: Yeah. Well, we do get a lot of complaints on the jet skis. They're much more restricted compared to regular boats. It's kind of our classic 150-foot no-wake zone. They basically have to be-- any jet ski has to be under 5 miles per hour at a no-wake speed within any stationary object. And a lot of people don't know that. And they turn so fast, and it's just, like I said, a perfect storm. If it gets busy, it's hard for them to follow that rule because it's so many boats on the lake.

But we did-- last year in Minnesota, last July 1, I think it was, they started this new boaters law. So they're really trying to push the education. Basically-- well, this July now, a year later, it goes all the way to 26-year-olds, 12 to 26 have to have an operator's permit basically to drive any boat of any size. And it's a watercraft operators permit, it's called.

And we really-- it was quite an education, because it jumped four years last year, and then another four years this year. So from 26-year-olds down to 12, it gets to be a lot of people. And they can go online. The DNR has a website for the boaters course.

NINA MOINI: Well, what do you say, Troy, though, to folks who are like, I don't need to take that. I've been out on the water or my family's been on the water. What are people really-- without going through the whole training for us, [LAUGHS] what do you think people really gain when they decide to be safe that way?

TROY LEE: Sure. You know, it's all kinds, because we've got-- really, we're trying to hit-- I think the state's trying to hit the people that just-- they bought their first boat, and here they go, you know? And just no education on it. Typically, we're not too worried about the more seasoned veterans that have been boating a while. We've got some 15-year-old kids that have been driving for quite a while, and they're really good.

But the older ones, we just tell them, hey, it's a good refresher. You sit down for three, four hours, and you might learn something. I'm pretty sure they will learn something. It's really good. It's a lot of video and good interaction, so we really encourage it, just to get them thinking. It's just changing. There's more and more people on the lakes. And especially now, it's just our go time in July here, for sure. [LAUGHS]

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And a few hours, I mean, that's not the end of the world to give a few hours to brush up on your safety and help other people out hopefully too. What about--

TROY LEE: Oh, for sure.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. While I have you though, Troy, what about on swimming beaches across the county? Sometimes there are lifeguards. I don't know if there are always lifeguards available. What is your advice to people, families who are maybe swimming in an area when there are no lifeguards present, if that happens?

TROY LEE: Oh, sure. Well, I think rule number 1 is just always have somebody with you swimming. You just don't want to swim alone. And even if there is a lifeguard, you just never know. You can get tangled in stuff, or who knows? So that's rule number 1. Swim with a-- swim with a buddy, if at all possible.

I think, unfortunately, it's tough to have lifeguards. Even in our city, we have lakes that are right in cities, and it's tough to get those with a worker for that much time every day, all summer. So unfortunately, it is a lot of swim at your own risk.

But obviously, with the younger kids, if they've got a babysitter or a parent or somebody, just keeping an eye on them constantly, because you just never know. It's really, really encouraged to have enough people with them to keep an eye on them.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. Don't go alone and be paying attention constantly if you're overseeing little ones. All right, Troy, we really appreciate your time. Wishing you a safe summer ahead for all of you. Thank you.

TROY LEE: Great. Thanks for the time.

NINA MOINI: Troy Lee is a water patrol officer in Otter Tail County.