



- Photo for The Union by John Hart

## Yuba's swift water poses threat to eager swimmers, kayakers

BY KYLE MAGIN  
STAFF WRITER,

As snow from a strong Sierra Nevada winter starts its annual rush down the Yuba River, concerns about downstream safety are rising with the water level.

After performing six swimmer rescues and responding to one fatality at the river last year, Nevada County Consolidated Fire Chief Tim Fike wishes potential spring swimmers would heed his advice about the Yuba.

"Admire it from a distance," Fike said.

The Sierra snowpack is higher than it's been in a few years and has the potential to ratchet up the flow of the Yuba's South Fork over the next three months. Upriver, Lake Spaulding is filling quickly with melt-off, and the Nevada Irrigation District will begin to release water downstream within the next two weeks.

That means the river will probably flow very fast – and very cold – through at least mid-June, Fike said.

"We average about four rescues per year," he said. "Quite often, people get into the water, get swept downstream and end up on a rock. Then, we'll use our swift-water equipment and folks to pluck them out of there."

That's in the best of circumstances.

Water in the river is melted snow – about 40 degrees right now, Fike said. The river commonly flows faster than about 1,000 cubic feet of water per second in the spring and can be very dangerous.

That powerful current can suck even strong swimmers into an underwater hole between submerged rocks, trapping them. The frigid water saps a person's strength within a few minutes – leading to drowning.

Firefighters put their own lives on the line in a swiftwater rescue. It is a task they'd rather avoid, Fike said.

Trouble spots along the Yuba's South Fork that generate the greatest number of calls for help are at Bridgeport, the Highway 49 bridge, in Washington and at the Emerald Pools near Bowman Lake.

Swimmers most often get into trouble, although kayakers occasionally require help, as well, Fike said.

If swimmers must enter the water, Fike cautioned them to take care. Use lifejackets for smaller swimmers, find shallow pools to swim in and swim near an eddy that will spin you toward slower, shallower water, he recommended.

If you do get taken by the current, head downriver feet-first on your back and try to aim for slow, shallow pools, Fike said.

To contact Staff Writer Kyle Magin, e-mail [kmagin@theunion.com](mailto:kmagin@theunion.com) or call (530) 477-4239.

---

<http://www.theunion.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100423/NEWS/100429878/1066&ParentProfile=1053&template=printart>