

SAFE

WATERFOWL HUNTING

Don't make a fatal mistake this season

By Lee McClellan

NATIONAL STATISTICS compiled by the U.S. Coast Guard show more waterfowl hunters die each year from drowning, hypothermia and cold water shock than accidents involving firearms.

“One of the biggest safety issues for waterfowl hunting in winter is overloading the boat,” said Zac Campbell, boating education coordinator for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. “With waterfowl hunting, you have so much equipment. Your equipment and decoys weigh a lot. Hunters sometimes don't realize how much all that stuff weighs when you put it all together.”

Campbell explained the boat operator is responsible for knowing the weight capacity of the boat. “There are sometimes enough people and gear for two or three boats in one boat,” Campbell explained. “All the hunters may want to go in the same boat so they can be with their friends, but it can create a very dangerous situation if they overload the boat.”

Approximately 20,000 people waterfowl hunt in Kentucky each year, according to Rocky Pritchert, migratory bird program coordinator at Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. Pritchert, an experienced waterfowl hunter himself, offered some simple advice to stay out of trouble.

“If you do capsize, stay with the boat if at all possible,” Pritchert said. “Today's boats have extra flotation built in and are easier to locate than a single person in the water.”

Since 2003, Kentucky has recorded only two fatal incidents; four waterfowl hunters died while boating during these. An examination of circumstances reveals the importance of wearing a life vest or flotation coat at all times while waterfowl hunting.

ORRIS WILLIAMS PHOTO

ONE OF THESE COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE

On the morning of Jan. 10, 2009, four teenage hunters launched their 14-foot johnboat from Rocky Point ramp on Kentucky Lake. The hunters were bound for a small cove on the Land Between The Lakes side of the lake for a morning of waterfowl hunting.

Their 1978 Polarcraft boat was heavily loaded: four hunters with shotguns, two gear bags filled with shells and gear, a dozen decoys and a dog. The typical johnboat of that size has a passenger capacity of approximately 400 to 550 pounds.

After a few hours of hunting, the men decided to retrieve their decoys and head home.

Kentucky Lake has two personalities: the gentle one in the early morning with small rollers – and the angry one that wakes about mid-morning snarling with churning, white-capped waves.

Four- to 5-foot waves pummeled the johnboat as the hunters made their way back across the lake. With no bilge pump or means to bail water, 45-degree water began filling the boat.

Then a huge wave hit the right side of the johnboat, swamping it. The operator pulled the boat's plug then gunned the 35-horsepower motor in an attempt to drain the water. This worked until several large waves stalled the motor.

The boat capsized. The hunters managed to flip the boat to trap air underneath it and keep it afloat. They hung onto the side of the boat to consider their next move. No other boats were in sight; a cell phone carried by one of the hunters was waterlogged and of no use.

They agreed that the best swimmer should head for shore to get help. He swam for two hours before latching onto a green navigation buoy. Residents heard his cries for help and rescued him in their boat.

Only the hunter who swam for help and the dog survived. The hunter also wore a lifejacket.



BELT PACK PFD



INFLATABLE VEST PFD



FLOAT COAT PFD



FOAM VEST PFD

The second fatal incident occurred on Dec. 13, 2010. On that day, three waterfowl hunters in their early twenties launched their 16-foot johnboat on the Ohio River near Warsaw, Kentucky. About 11 a.m., they shot two geese that landed in the middle of the river. The hunters maneuvered their boat toward the birds, but the strong winds blowing upriver created large waves that broke over the stern.

The waves swamped the motor and killed it. Now without power, the boat filled with water and sank quickly to the bottom.

One of the hunters grabbed a lifejacket; another held onto a floating cushion; the third clutched onto a bag of decoys.

The bag was not tied, however. Decoys began slipping out and drifting downriver; the third hunter went under. The other hunters managed to swim to the bank. They walked along the shoreline for half a mile before finding someone who could help them.

One of the hunters remarked that his hands were so cold he could not unsnap his waders while in the water to remove them. With his movements limited by hypothermia, he found that the only way he could swim was by using a backstroke.

In both cases, the groups of hunters were faced with situations where no other boats were around for a rescue. Taking precautions like wearing a life preserver, having a cell phone in a waterproof case or letting others know an anticipated return time could have affected the outcome.

"Waterfowlers don't see themselves as boaters," Campbell noted. "They see their boat as another tool for hunting."

This blind spot can lead to reckless decisions on the water during the time of year when boating is most dangerous.

"Boating safety applies to waterfowl hunters as well; they are boaters," said Capt. Stephanie Weatherington, boating law administrator for the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. "They need to go by the rules and use common sense, like other recreational boaters."

Hunters can lessen the potential for dangerous situations by hunting close to the launch ramp and staying near shore. Hunters can increase their odds of reaching shore safely and can avoid the most hazardous waves found in the middle of a lake or large river.



OBIE WILLIAMS PHOTO



PHOTO COURTESY U.S. COAST GUARD

Top: An inflatable vest doesn't interfere with movements and can keep a person afloat until a rescuer arrives.

Left: If possible, stay with the capsized boat to make yourself more visible.

Bulk is one of the main reasons for this reluctance to wear a lifejacket. Some hunters complain the floatation material interferes with mounting a shotgun. There is a solution to this problem.

"A belt pack type of personal floatation device is a great option for waterfowl hunters because it doesn't get in the way," Campbell said.

This type of personal floatation device inflates automatically when submerged. Wearers can also pull a cord that quickly releases carbon dioxide gas into a bladder for floatation.

Manufacturers also produce camouflage lifejackets made for waterfowl hunting. This type has mesh in the upper body to make it easier for hunters to shoulder their gun. Companies also make float coats in camouflage patterns. These look like a normal hunting coat, but serve the same purpose as a lifejacket. Float coats keep hunters warm like a traditional waterfowl hunting jacket.

"Whichever kind you use, make sure you wear your personal floatation device at all times on the boat when waterfowl hunting," Campbell said.

A lifejacket stowed in a storage compartment or stuffed into a decoy bag won't do much good if the unexpected

occurs.

"Waterfowl hunters worry about staying warm, but not nearly as much as falling in the water unexpectedly," said Mike Fields, recently retired major in the Law Enforcement Division of Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. "If you aren't wearing your lifejacket when you hit the cold water, chances are you won't get it on at all."

Fields likens this situation to putting on a seatbelt during an auto accident.

Waders can also cause problems if a hunter falls into the water. This is because the legs of the waders can quickly fill with water. Water weighs a little more than 8 pounds a gallon. Waders filled with water can quickly tire out a hunter trying to swim in icy water.

Fields, who oversaw boating education for Kentucky Fish and Wildlife, said a person has approximately 10 minutes to get to safety after being submerged in the cold water of winter while wearing a lifejacket. After that time, major motor functions begin to shut down and the victim can lose dexterity in the extremities. Without a lifejacket, this drops to just a few minutes.

Blood leaves the arms and legs to protect the vital organs when a person falls into icy water. Cold water draws heat more quickly from the body than cold air.

Hunters should use care around water even if they are not in a boat. Pond hunting is one of the more popular forms of waterfowl hunting, especially in central Kentucky and the Pennyroyal region. Hunters typically don't need a boat to hunt a pond. Farm ponds can offer some of the most productive hunting for ducks and geese in the state.

Many hunters wade to retrieve ducks in these ponds. Anyone who's waded in a muddy pond in the summer knows how slick the bottom can be, but waders and bulky clothes can make a situation worse.

"Wear your lifejacket while wading," Weatherington said. "If you catch your foot on a log or a rock and get off balance, you won't go all the way under. I take a wading stick with me and probe the bottom with it before I go. You can also use it to make sure you don't walk off into a deep slough."

If you go waterfowl hunting this winter, don't overload your boat, stay close to shore, wear a lifejacket and pack your common sense. Your loved ones would much prefer you return from your hunting trip in your truck, not in an ambulance. ■