

Lake Superior Rip Currents

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INTRO: This is Superior Science News. Today's program looks at new efforts to promote awareness of rip currents on the Lake Superior shoreline.

Beach-goers and swimmers began taking notice of rip currents in Lake Superior about five years ago. The death of 21 year-old Matthew Rheaume while swimming along Minnesota Point (also known as Park Point) in 2003 highlighted the danger rip currents pose in the Twin Ports. National Weather Service Meteorologist Dean Packingham with the Duluth office says the risks prompted them to develop a surf zone forecast for the area.

"The main purpose of this new product that we're starting on August first is to convey rip current threats on a low, moderate, or high basis daily to people who are going to the beaches."

Packingham says the forecast will be issued every day by 6 a.m. during the summer.

"It will have weather conditions, sky cover, and precipitation potential very much like you hear in the forecast on the radio or television. We'll also have wave height forecasts at the beach and temperatures at the beach."

Packingham says that just like we're getting better at predicting the weather, we're getting better at spotting conditions where rip currents are more likely to develop, although they can't be predicted yet.

"Conditions that are favorable for rip currents are onshore winds – winds coming generally from the northeast to east so the wind's essentially coming perpendicular to shore – about fifteen knots of wind, fifteen to twenty miles per hour of wind and then building waves. So, what happens is that all of that water that's starting to pile up toward the shore has to find some way to get out, and it finds the easiest way it can do that. So, it looks for any break in the sandbar at all, and then it all just evacuates out through that."

Minnesota Sea Grant Coastal Communities Educator Jesse Schomberg says the sandbar structure makes Wisconsin and Minnesota Point susceptible to rip currents.

“They tend to form more on sandy beaches. It’s pretty hard to rip through – for those currents to move rocks to create currents. You tend to get the kinds of beach formations on sand beaches that are more prone to create rip currents.”

Schomberg says Minnesota Sea Grant has been working to educate people about the danger of rip currents.

“The danger comes from not knowing what to do and from the unexpected nature of it. You don’t expect to be pulled out into the lake and often times folks will panic. That’s where the danger comes from. They can be avoided if you know what to look for, but you can also escape them if you know what to do when you get caught in one.”

Schomberg says people should swim parallel to the shore if they find themselves being swept out into the deeper part of the lake.

“Rip currents move faster than an Olympic swimmer can swim. You just can’t beat it, and, if you try, you’ll just wear yourself out and become exhausted and that’s when drowning becomes a lot easier. What you need to do is turn and swim across the current to swim out of the current. Rip currents are typically fairly narrow – often times less than 100 yards wide. So swimming sideways – you will get carried out a little bit further, but you will soon escape that current altogether.”

Packingham says rip currents are more likely to form along Lake Superior's shoreline in June and early July.

“The first part of the summer is where it’s the worst – an increased number of days because we have more northeast winds. Climatologically into the very first part of July, we tend to have a lot of northeast winds. The good thing about that is that we don’t have a lot of people going to the beach in June because the water’s cold and the air is still quite cold.”

Schomberg says the surf zone forecasts put together by the National Weather Service will help improve safety on Wisconsin and Minnesota beaches.

“We are very glad that they’re doing this. We’ve had a couple of fairly high profile issues on Minnesota Point with the bacteria monitoring and having beaches closed occasionally and with rip currents and people needing to get rescued . . . we certainly don’t want to give Minnesota Point a bad reputation. It’s still a great place to swim. But there are risks as with everything. The more we can do to let folks know what those risks are and make sure they’re prepared for them than the better off we all are.”

For Superior Science News, I'm Marie Zhuikov.

OUTRO: This has been a production of the Minnesota Sea Grant program at UMD and KUWS radio.

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Lake Superior rip current information can currently be viewed here: **http://www.seagrant.umn.edu/coastal_communities/rip**.