

The Chesapeake Paddler



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Spring temps are in the air, but not in the water!

Workshops teach paddling safety in cold water and avoiding other hazards



Spring's warmup masks winter-like water temps causing numerous cold water accidents. CPA-sponsored workshops educate paddlers on staying safe in cold water and avoiding other common hazards. Above, participants test their cold water gear in a pre-COVID workshop in 2020. (Photo: Rich Stevens)

By Bill Upton

One of CPA's core missions is to promote safe sea kayaking practices through education. In numerous classroom workshops and hands-on training events, CPA volunteers have taught hundreds of students better kayaking skills and hopefully kept many of us out of serious trouble.

Spring is one of paddle sports' most dangerous times as air temperatures rise but water temps stay cold. This first week in April, Bay water temps were still just 48 to 50 degrees. Many a paddler has succumbed to the siren song of warm days and the urge to get out on the water,

only to end up needing a rescue or even worse, drowning, because they weren't prepared for cold water or unexpected hazards.

CPA has long hosted cold water training sessions and did so again this year. We are lucky to have a leading educator, Moulton Avery of the [National Center for Cold Water Safety](#), put on his Cold Water and Common Paddling Hazards workshops each year. Moulton was also an active CPA member before relocating to the West Coast.

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This winter, Avery took to ZOOM for the virtual-only workshop sessions. Because cold water mishaps are often fatal, the Cold Water workshop was an in-depth review of how cold water affects your body, correcting common misconceptions about paddling in cold water and how to prepare to stay safe.

Education and practice are the keys to staying out of trouble when dealing with cold water or other potential kayaking hazards. To help with education, Avery debuted the Center for Cold Water Safety's newly overhauled website that put a wealth of information into easily navigable sections on Cold Water, Five Golden Rules, Gear and a Resource section full of case histories, videos and articles.

There are many misleading "rules-of-thumb" about cold water paddling. For example, a common one is to add the air and water temps together and if it's above 120, you can skip cold water gear. That could mean on a warm day, the air temp could be 75 degrees and the water temp 53 degrees. At 128, using that formula you're good to go without gear. But immersion in water that is 53 degrees without protection is life threatening.

For Avery, the simplest way to stay out of trouble is to focus on the water temperature. Always treat any water that is below 70 degrees as hazardous and dress for immersion in it, no matter how hot the air temps are. And to make sure you are prepared for hazardous water temps, Avery emphasizes following the [Five Golden Rules](#):

- 1) Always wear your PFD.
- 2) Always dress for the water temperature.
- 3) Field-test your gear.
- 4) Swim-test your gear every time you go out.
- 5) Imagine the worst that could happen and plan for it.

These rules help you prepare for the common cold water killers that can strike before hypothermia sets in: [cold shock](#) and [physical incapacitation](#). Cold shock is your body's involuntary, potentially life-threatening responses to unprotected immersion in cold water such

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This kayaker on the Choptank river became marooned in the mud in February requiring a helicopter rescue by the Maryland State Police. Becoming familiar with how to avoid common paddling hazards can minimize the chance this will be you! (Photo: Denton Volunteer Fire Company)

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as uncontrolled breathing. Physical incapacitation means that when your muscles and nerves get cold enough, they stop working. In cold water, this can happen quickly, impairing your ability to swim, use your hands and more.

Wearing your PFD at all times, having the proper cold weather gear and testing it under safe conditions so you know it works and knowing what cold water is like before a crisis can save your life.

In the Common Paddling Hazards workshop, Avery took a broader look at paddling hazards and how to avoid them. Common to all the hazards is underestimating or not aware of possible conditions. Many paddlers run into trouble when they think they are safe because they plan to stay close to the shoreline and they don't have the experience or gear to handle changing conditions.

Avery reviewed several incidents where paddlers were able to handle the conditions they launched in but got into trouble when conditions changed. Sudden storms can create strong winds in a matter of minutes, turning calm waters into a sea of large waves. Or, wind blowing from the shore can create a "wind shadow" where the wind is calm close to shore but can quickly increase beyond a paddler's ability not far from shore.

Other hazards include getting into rough surf when rounding a land mass that is blocking waves or strong currents and shorelines with bulkheads that reflect

waves or rocks that make it impossible to land to get out of trouble.

In most cases, following a few simple rules can avoid disaster. Wearing a PFD at all times and dressing for the water temperature can increase your chance of survival if you capsize or are separated from your boat because of wind or weather. Having a way to call for help, such as a VHF radio, can cut down the time to get rescued. Being aware of weather conditions, tides and currents and the ability anticipate the worst possible conditions can help you plan a safer trip.

"Overall, you don't know what you don't know when you are starting out in kayaking," said Avery. "Taking these steps before you get into trouble can save your life and those you paddle with."

The Cold Water and Common Paddling Hazards workshops are just two of the many educational opportunities that CPA offers for your journey to safer paddling. Notices for other classes and on-water training are always posted on the [CPA Meetup](#) page.

For more information on cold water safety, visit the [National Center for Cold Water Safety](#). To check weather, tides and water temps, visit the [Resources section](#) CPA's website: www.cpakayaker.com. For local area water temps, refer to NOAA's [Water Temperature Map of the Central Atlantic Coast](#) (click on the red icons for that station's data).

This list of [contributing factors](#) to common paddling accidents is from the [National Center for Cold Water Safety website](#) so you can learn from other's mistakes.

The updated site has numerous case histories and articles to keep you safe on the water.

