

BUZZ ON THE WATER



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Wildlife Troopers take Operation Dry Water to Alaska's waterways to enhance overall safety and pull the plug on impaired boaters.

BY KEN MARSH

Big Lake on a sunny summer day is always a busy place. But on the Fourth of July 2019 – a holiday memorable for its record-breaking, 90-degree heat – the popular Southcentral Alaska boating recreation area resembled the English Channel during the Invasion of Normandy. From the Wildlife Troopers' Helo 4, flying at about 500 feet, the wakes of boats large and small crisscrossed Big Lake as joyful Alaskans beat the heat while celebrating The Glorious Fourth.

"Let's keep an eye out for our guys," Wildlife Troopers Pilot Sgt. Dan Dahl said over the intercom.

"Our guys" included Palmer-based Wildlife Troopers Tom Akelkok skippering an AWT speedboat, and Ralf Lysdahl straddling a blue-and-gold Jet Ski trimmed with Alaska State Troopers logos. Both were patrolling Big Lake (named for its 2,495 acres of surface area) as part of Operation Dry Water, a national campaign to enhance recreational boating safety and prevent boating-related injuries and deaths.

Dahl rolled Helo 4 to the northeast, away from the sun and across the lake where families played aboard pontoon boats, and Jet Skis skipped over speedboat wakes. Below us a giant pink, inflatable flamingo large enough to accommodate a family of four added striking contrast to the shoreline's forest greens. A sailboat sat motionless in an island's windless lee.

A 17-year Wildlife Troopers veteran, Sgt. Dahl has piloted Helo 4 since 2013. He navigates the Robinson R44 light helicopter as effortlessly as a gull takes to the sky with a dip of its wings. Along the way Dahl generates a

kindly manner reflective of his North Dakota roots, a hospitable “Midwestern nice” outwardly unfazed by years on the Last Frontier dealing with lawbreakers and conducting search-and-rescue operations too often marred by grim endings. Perhaps he’s found a way in his aircraft – he is a private airplane pilot on the side – to gather airspeed and simply rise above the hubbub.

Don’t boat buzzed. That was the main safety message Alaska State Troopers aimed to make clear as Wildlife Troopers and the U.S. Coast Guard teamed up July 4 – 7 to increase their presence on popular lakes and waterways around the state. For the Wildlife Troopers the assignment was nothing new. They have participated in the national Operation Dry Water campaign every July for the last decade.

“It’s our job to keep Alaskans safe,” Alaska Wildlife Troopers Captain Rex Leath explained as he announced this summer’s effort to press and public. “So we’re going to be out there delivering our safety mes-

sage and keeping a sharp lookout for people operating boats while impaired.”

Alaska’s laws prohibiting the operation of boats while intoxicated – along with associated penalties including stiff fines and mandatory jail time – are similar to those governing driving while impaired.

In addition to discouraging people from drinking or partaking of other mind-altering substances while operating boats, the patrols also keep an eye out for required safety equipment.

“Boaters need to make sure they’re familiar with Alaska’s boating safety requirements,” Leath warned. “We’re going to be contacting boaters and looking for life jackets and other safety equipment like flares and throwable floatation devices.”

Historically, nine of 10 drowning deaths in Alaska have involved people not wearing lifejackets, according to the Alaska Department of Natural Resources Office of Boating Safety. And while all Alaskans are encouraged to wear life jackets while on the water, persons younger than age 13 are required by law to do so when in an open boat or on an open deck.



Wildlife Trooper Ralf Lysdahl, left, boards his patrol vessel — an AST Jet Ski — with help from Sgt. Dan Dahl, at Big Lake on July 4. Temperatures reached 90 degrees F that day.

Alaska Wildlife Troopers are primarily known for citing unlicensed anglers, seizing illegal catch from scofflaw commercial fishers, and nabbing hunters who take wildlife outside legal parameters. During Operation Dry Water, however, many Wildlife Troopers are assigned duties more frequently associated with those of traffic cops. Indeed, at the end of the day Wildlife Troopers (sometimes called “brown shirts” for the color of their field uniforms) are State Troopers. As State Troopers, brown shirts frequently serve Alaska as frontline law enforcement officers responding to everything from road-killed moose to homicides.

For the most part, the mere presence of Wildlife Troopers on patrol in well-marked boats – sometimes

assisted by aircraft overhead – serves as a deterrent to those who might otherwise drink and operate watercraft. Still, there are always a few who seem oblivious to the laws and those who enforce them. Until, of course, it’s too late.

On July 4, Fairbanks-based Wildlife Trooper Tim Abbott contacted a man running an unregistered boat on Harding Lake. Abbott’s routine registration and safety check grew serious, however, when the boat driver – on felony probation/parole with multiple conditions not to possess alcohol or drugs – was found to have on board a cooler of alcohol, methamphetamine, and drug paraphernalia. After a brief investigation, Wildlife Trooper Abbott weighed anchor for Fairbanks Correctional Center with the negligent navigator bound for lockup and arraignment on various parole violation and drug-related charges. He also re-



Big Lake, less than a two-hour drive north of Anchorage, draws throngs of boaters on the Fourth of July.

ceived a \$70 citation for operating the unregistered boat.

That wasn’t all for Abbott, by the way. In an Operation Dry Water sweep two days later on Harding Lake,

he arrested a boater suspected to be operating impaired – this one on a Jet Ski.

Operating boats while impaired is no joke. Just last summer – June 2018 – a woman was killed and two



Wildlife Trooper Tom Akelkok, right, is seen here accompanied by a U.S. Coast Guard officer while contacting a boater on Big Lake during Operation Dry Water 2019.

others badly injured on Flat Lake (which connects to Big Lake) after an intoxicated boater collided with the inflatable tube they were in. Incidents like that highlight the need to find and remove impaired boaters from public waters.

On July 6, during this summer's Operation Dry Water, television news viewers statewide witnessed a felony DUI arrest at Big Lake when a reporter for KTUU Channel 2 News captured the event while rid-

ing along with Palmer-based Wildlife Trooper Dan Gunderson. In the news clip Gunderson is seen contacting a shirtless man operating a 23-foot North River inboard jet boat.

"How's it going, sir? I'm with the Wildlife Troopers," Gunderson says. "We're just out doing boater safety checks. Mind if I step on board?"

Once aboard the boat, it's not long before Gunderson

is heard asking, "How much have you had today, sir?"

"I've only had one or two beers earlier," the boater responds.

His claim is soon contradicted by field sobriety tests and a preliminary breath test indicating he has exceeded the legal alcohol limit for operating an automobile – or a boat – by nearly three times.

Later in the news story, Gunderson provided a recap of the encounter:

Operation Dry Water deters boating related crimes



By Kim Daehnke | Posted: Sun 10:00 AM, Jul 07, 2019 | Updated: Sun 2:15 PM, Jul 07, 2019

“When we got close I smelled marijuana and saw that there was a large number of empty beer cans on the boat and he admitted to drinking some alcohol. I checked his eyes and he failed the test. I went back to shore and re-tested his eyes and did a field sobriety test and he ultimately was placed under arrest for that and for a warrant out of Anchorage as well.”

The buzzed (and then some) boat operator was arrested for DUI and for a \$1,000 arrest warrant from a previous DUI. Investigation revealed the arrest to be his fifth DUI and his third within 10 years making the charge a felony. Gunderson subsequently seized the vessel, valued at approximately \$100,000, and the boater was remanded to Mat-Su Pretrial.

Back on Big Lake on the Fourth of July 2019, Helo 4 Pilot Sgt. Dahl located Wildlife Trooper Tom Akelkok manning a blue speedboat with “State Troopers” painted in white along its side. Akelkok had made fast to a pontoon boat equipped with canopy and waterslide and could be seen chatting with a man accompanied by a woman and young child. A Coast Guard law enforcement officer riding with Akelkok had boarded the pontoon boat and was head-down writing something on a clipboard.

Prior to finding Akelkok, Helo 4 had been dispatched to a welfare check in a bay on the lake. A caller had

reported yelling near a neighbor’s home and was concerned. Sgt. Dahl was there within a minute, passing low overhead. A man and woman were seen leaning against the railing of a deck, placidly waving hello at the helicopter. Another man shaded his eyes and looked up, apparently unconcerned. Finding no signs of disturbance, Sgt. Dahl turned back to Operation Dry Water.

“There’s Lysdahl,” Sgt. Dahl said.

The young Wildlife Trooper appeared below, cutting the smooth blue water on the Troopers Jet Ski and wearing a grin broad as Big Lake itself. Within seconds Lysdahl veered off to contact a boat towing three children in an oversize inner tube.

For a moment Helo 4 hovered, Sgt. Dahl watching as Lysdahl spoke with the boater.

Far to the north, a brown haze could be seen hanging just west of the Talkeetna Mountains. “That’s probably from the Montana Creek fire,” said Dahl. “If the winds kick up and that fire starts to flare, I may be called to break away and head up to provide support.”

The sun burned greenhouse-hot through the helicopter’s Plexiglas canopy as Sgt. Dahl swung Helo 4 away to check on Akelkok. For now it was back to Operation Dry Water, and assisting Wildlife Troopers on the water as they worked to keep Alaskans safe on a bright Fourth of July.

