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Latest News

Article published July 25, 2001

Boaters scrape by on low water levels

Hidden hazards often mean expensive fixes

By [DAVID PATCH](#)
 BLADE STAFF WRITER

Kevin Kreft has had some expensive experience with the low water level on the Maumee River and in Maumee Bay.

Several times this year, while piloting his parents' 21-foot Sea Ray, Mr. Kreft has clipped underwater logs in the shallows, each time damaging the boat's propeller.



Laura Chalwick of Edgewater Drive in Point Place says her boat, normally at dock level, now is 2 1/2 feet lower, so she must jump to board it. THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH

"You really have to watch where you go - you have to follow the buoys, and watch for logs," the 19-year-old Beverly Drive resident said last week while launching the boat at the Walbridge Park ramp.

And forecasters say Lake Erie, which is about 10 inches below where it was at this time last year, has passed its peak for the season.

"Last year, we were a lot higher, because we had a lot of rain in June and July that kept the water levels up in the lower lakes," said Cynthia Sellinger, a physical scientist with the Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory.

This summer, Ms. Sellinger said, the Great Lakes have received relatively little rainfall.

Another federal agency, the National Drought Mitigation Center, last week listed Lake Erie's south shore and parts of northern Michigan as having been "abnormally dry," the mildest stage on its drought scale.

The result is water levels that continue to be their lowest since the mid-1960s, though so far the Great Lakes have approached neither that low nor the record lows of the mid 1930s.

Laura Chalwick, who has lived along the Ottawa River in Point Place, said she had not noticed a difference between this summer's water level and last summer's.

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The conditions pose a severe challenge for boaters, she remarked, especially when westerly winds amplify the situation by pushing water away from Lake Erie's west end.

"It is passable for people who know what they're doing," Ms. Chalwick said yesterday. "But for novice boaters, well, it's probably good for the people who sell props."

Marshall Gill, the operations manager at Toledo Beach Marina in LaSalle Township, Michigan, said about two boats come in each weekend for propeller work or other repairs associated with hitting sandbars or underwater obstacles.

"I don't know that that's more or less than last year, but it's steady," Mr. Gill said.

The boat owners, he added, usually can't believe they have hit anything until their boat is hoisted out of the water and the evidence is there.

Since the lakes began dropping rapidly during the late 1990s, authorities have cautioned mariners to carry current charts and proceed carefully in shallow water because of the increased risk from submerged hazards.

A U.S. Army Corps of Engineers forecast calls for Lake Erie to drop 9 more inches by the end of September.

Ms. Sellinger said autumn is when the lakes evaporate fastest, because cooler air blowing over warm water enhances that effect.

When the lakes don't ice over, or don't stay iced over for long in the winter, evaporation continues, she said.

What the Great Lakes region needs for the downward trend to reverse itself, Ms. Sellinger said, is "a normal snow pack and a lot of ice cover" during the winter.

Blade staff writer Brian Crocker contributed to this report.



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