



Rip currents: A deadly aspect of Lake Michigan

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By **Heather Lynn Peters | The Muskegon Chronicle**

WEST MICHIGAN — Nearly a year ago, **Ken Bilka lost a 17-year-old daughter** to Lake Michigan's deadly rip currents and nearly lost his 14-year-old daughter in the same tragic event.

His oldest daughter, Lindsay Bilka, 17, was swimming with her 14-year-old sister, Christy, near the Muskegon Water Filtration Plant when they ran into trouble. Lindsay was able to help her younger sister to a sandbar but then disappeared beneath the choppy surface.

She was pulled from the water five minutes later but never recovered and was taken off life support four days later.

Bilka said he hopes others will remember her story this time of year and steer clear of the lake's deadly currents.

"People are on their own here. There are no lifeguards, no undertow signs," Bilka said. "People, some from other states, come here to run into the lake because it's refreshing, but once in, they realize they can't swim (against the currents)."

Local authorities say rip currents are the most dangerous aspect of swimming in picturesque Lake Michigan. A deadly stream of water surges out from shore, or along piers and breakwaters, at speeds that can exceed 5 miles per hour. Officials said rip currents contributed to a number of drownings in 2010.

To escape a rip current, experts advise if you're caught in a rip current not to attempt to swim directly toward the beach. Swim parallel to the shoreline until you're out of the current then swim back to the beach. If you can't escape the current, float or tread water.



Associated Press file photo

The U.S. Coast Guard, along with the Ludington police and fire departments, search the Ludington Harbor for Anupam Bhattacharjee, a 26-year-old engineering student from the Detroit area who was swept from Ludington's North Pier on Sept. 6, 2010. His body was found Sept. 9, 2010.

Authorities said they hope this year will be different, urging shoreline visitors and local swimmers alike to enter the water with caution.

Along Michigan's west coast alone, from July 4 through Sept. 6, Labor Day, there were 10 rip current-related drownings, according to the National Weather Service, that occurred in various locations.

Several of those occurred in the Muskegon area.

That's the problem with rip currents — they are unpredictable and surface anywhere at any time, said Muskegon County Sheriff Dean Roesler, a licensed paramedic. Roesler has assisted in several body recovery efforts over the years.

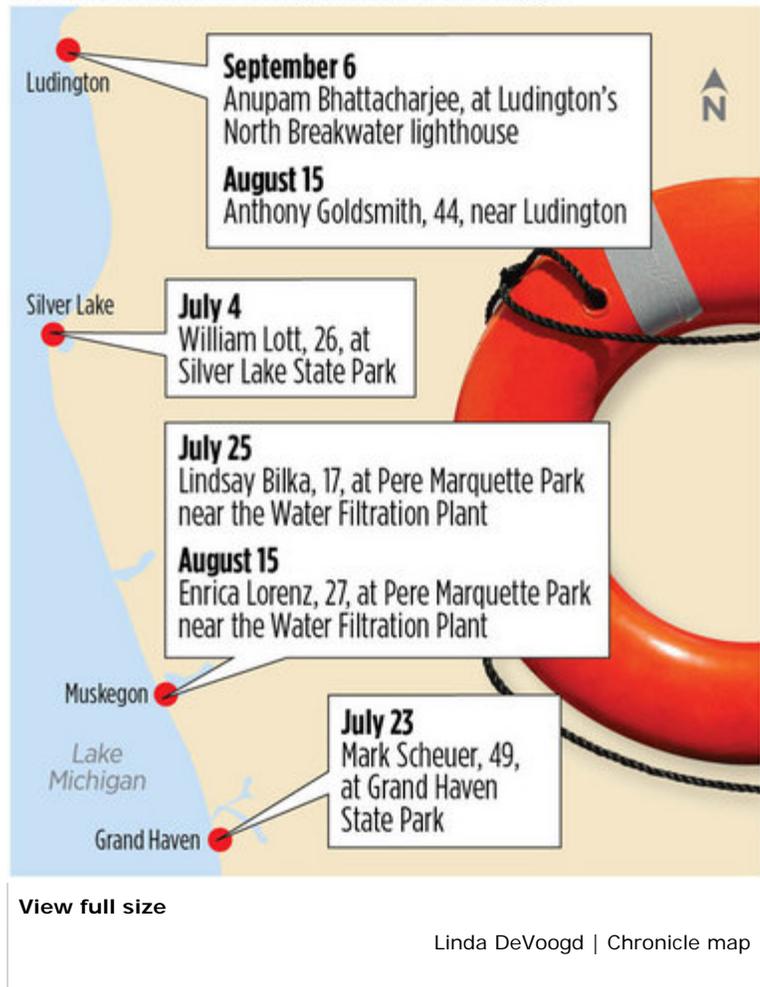
"I think the weather pattern certainly plays into the condition of Lake Michigan, and people need to pay attention to that," Roesler said. "People who have a pool or inland lake at home don't realize that Lake Michigan is a completely different animal."

"A strong swimmer in a pool doesn't equate to a strong swimmer in Lake Michigan," he said.

The National Weather Service Grand Rapids said beach traffic was high in 2010 because of last summer's warm air and water temperatures and there were 64 drownings in Lake Michigan in 2010. Of that number, there were at least 19 documented Great Lakes drownings associated with "rip currents." In 2009, there were three rip current-related drownings the entire beach season.

This summer, there have been five Lake Michigan drownings, including one in the Muskegon area, and none were related to rip currents.

2010 Lake Michigan drowning deaths in West Michigan



KNOW THE DANGERS

Pier Safety Tips

- Closely supervise children.
- Lifejackets should be worn on the pier.
- Do not dive off or swim around pier structures.
- Stay off piers during high winds or when waves are splashing over.



Four other Muskegon-area drownings occurred this year in inland lakes, one in the Muskegon River, and did not involve rip currents.

Deadly currents

Often, rip current victims are just in the wrong place at the wrong time, Roesler said. But rip currents don't occur in specific areas of the lake, he points out.

On Aug. 15, 2010, three people lost their lives to rip currents at three separate Lake Michigan beaches: Anthony Goldsmith, 44, of Lawton, near Ludington; Enrica Lorenz, 27, of Wyoming at Pere Marquette Park in Muskegon; Ethan Seitzer, 9, of Edgewater, Ill., at a private beach in Berrien County's Chikaming Township.

Others West Michigan drownings in 2010 included Anupam Bhattacharjee of the Detroit area, who drowned Sept. 6 in Ludington; William Lott of Durand, who drowned July 4 at Silver Lake State Park; and Mark Scheuer of Holland, who drowned July 23 while saving his son from a rip current at Grand Haven State Park.

There are a couple of hot spots in the Muskegon area where, historically, drownings have occurred: Norman F. Kruse Park; P.J. Hoffmaster State Park; and Pere Marquette Park, in front of the Muskegon's Water Filtration Plant, Roesler said.

But Roesler said it has less to do with the water conditions at those locations, and more to do with the beach draw.

"I don't know if they are more dangerous, but they are certainly more popular and that increases the change for drownings to occur," Roesler said. "The greater the amount of people, the greater potential

- Avoid walking on wet, slippery areas.
- Stay away from pier edge.
- Don't run or climb on the pier structures.

For more information visit the pier safety Web site at: <http://www.lre.usace.army.mil>.

Fighting the rips

Q: What is a rip current?

A: Simply put, it's a powerful stream of water surging out from shore or along piers and breakwaters at speeds that can exceed 5 miles per hour. A top Olympic swimmer cannot swim that fast.

Q: Where do I find rip current forecasts?

A: Daily advisories from the National Weather Service can be found at www.crh.noaa.gov/grr/marine/surf.

There are three levels:

- **High risk:** Four foot or larger waves, strong rip currents and undertow. Red flag.
- **Moderate risk:** Two-to-four-foot waves. Strong winds present. Yellow flag.
- **Low risk:** Safe for swimming, no rip tide expected. Green flag.

Q: What if you are caught in the current?

A: Remain calm. Don't swim directly toward shore. Swim parallel to shore out of the current — usually a short distance — then angle back to the beach.

Sources: National Weather Services and Chronicle News Service reports

for a problem.”

At least 61 people **have drowned in Lake Michigan rip currents** since 2002, according to records compiled by the National Weather Service and The Grand Rapids Press. Most deaths occur from Muskegon to the Indiana border, where beach usage is high.

In August 2008, the National Weather Service began issuing daily rip current risk advisories. It uses wind-speed readings from a moored buoy midway in Lake Michigan as well as research in Grand Haven from an Acoustic Doppler Profiler, which uses sonar to show water velocity, the NWS said.

Pier-jumping: A bad idea

Ottawa County Marine Division Sgt. Keith Koeman, a member of the county’s dive team, said piers along the lakeshore tend to attract lots of people — and dangerous currents — which is why pier jumping is strongly discouraged.

Koeman said he thinks there should be an ordinance prohibiting people from jumping off piers, but until that happens, he will continue to spread the word about its dangers.

“The pier is supposed to be an aid to navigation, to assist shipping in and out of harbors. They’ve become, over time, a great scenic walk and that’s all fine, but it’s really not designed for any of that,” Koeman said.

Dangerous lake currents form near piers because there is nowhere for water to go when it comes up against a structure, he said. The water piles up on shore, making it drive out harder and faster. West Michigan’s long sandbars, extending into the lake, also add to the risk, Koeman said.

“The water doesn’t flow underneath it. It’s a solid structure, so any water or lake current that comes against



Chronicle file photo

Ken Bilka holds a picture of his daughter, Lindsay Bilka, 17, of Norton Shores, Tuesday, October 5, 2010. Lindsay drowned July 25, 2010, at Pere Marquette Park in Muskegon.

it, you don't see. People who jump off the end of the pier are drawn out into the lake. It sweeps them away. It will take you away, not down."

Koeman said a rip current near a pier can be extremely strong, "stronger than a poor swimmer can swim against."

'Use common sense'

For those not familiar with Lake Michigan, or someone who isn't particularly a good swimmer, Koeman cautions people to "use common sense."

"Make sure you watch your kids. Kids drown when someone else is watching them. If there is a red flag, don't go in. If you have two-foot waves, you've got a yellow flag going," he said. "It looks like fun to jump into big waves, but put a life jacket on. Even surfers wear a wet suit that helps them float."

While there are life rings on the piers, Koeman said they can be a "false sense of security." If a swimmer is struggling, throw out a life ring. But don't jump into the water, he said.

"Reach or throw, but don't go, unless you have the proper training and equipment," Koeman said. "Life guards will tell you unless you're trained on what to do, don't go in. It isn't like a rescue in a pool."

Vicki Cech of Grand Haven has made it her life mission to educate people on the dangers of Lake Michigan after losing her son, Andrew Fox, 17, to a rip current at Grand Haven State Park on Sept. 3, 2003.

A member of the Great Lakes Beach and Pier Safety Task Force, Cech said she works hard to spare other parents the pain of losing a child to drowning.

"It's very sad for me that my son had to go through it. It's still very hard," Cech said. "The beach is no longer an attraction for me anymore. I get emotional going down there. I was very discouraged with all the drownings last year."

The task force, which includes members from Ohio, Pennsylvania and Illinois, aims to educate people on how to escape a rip current.



Associated Press file photo

A city ordinance sign is posted on a pier in South Haven. Pier jumping has been a popular pastime for decades at many Great Lakes piers. But because of safety concerns, a number of pier jumpers have drowned or been badly injured over the years because of rip currents and large rocks commonly found at the base of the structures, some government officials have taken action to prohibit it.

The task force also has made additional water safety contributions, including distributing 11,000 copies of its DVD **"Respect the Power"** to schools throughout Michigan and the Great Lakes region, and lining the Grand Haven south pierhead and the state park beach with life rings that bear Fox's name, as well as the name of another Grand Haven teen, Daniel Luke Reiss, who drowned Nov. 29, 2003, after a wave swept him from the south pier.

Cech said as a basic rule, if the water is rough and there are waves, there will be rip currents.

"Stay out of the water or have some sort of device on; a life jacket or a boogie-board with a leash on it, something that will keep you up."



Vicki Cech

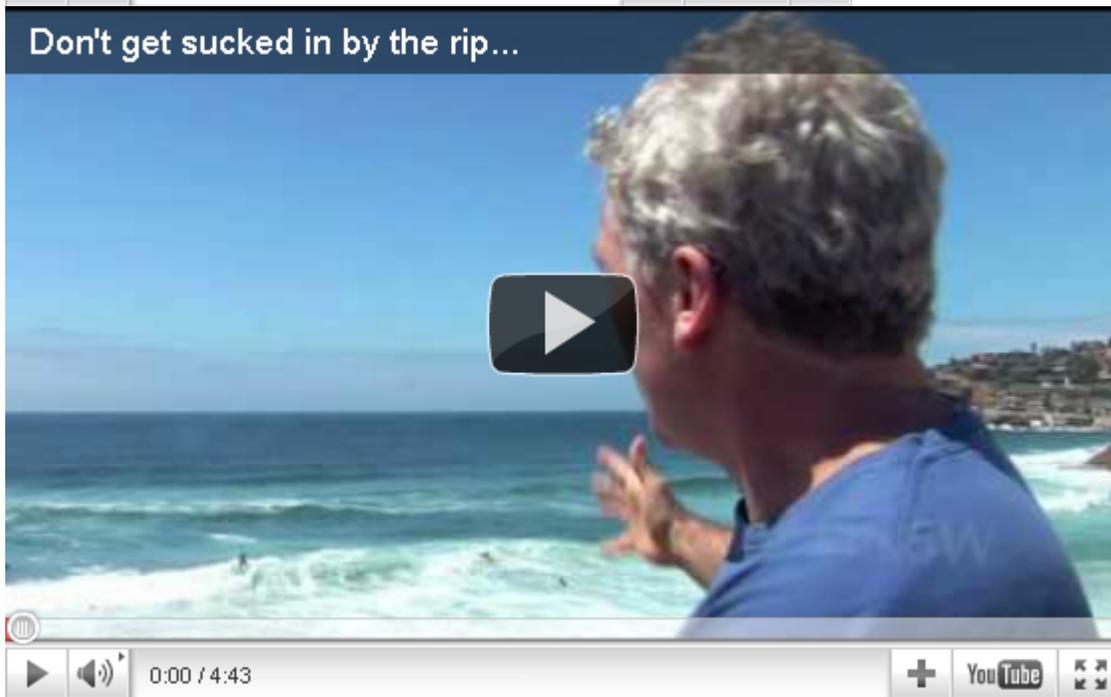
Fox had been swimming with a friend from one sandbar to another when he was overcome by the rip current, something Cech nor her son had encountered before.

"He didn't know what a rip current was, I didn't either," she said. "It's been almost eight years and it's still painful for me to talk about."

How to escape a rip current

Animated graphic shows how to escape a rip current





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