

Wading Safety Tips

by Steve Taylor



It was a blustery winter afternoon below Carpenter Dam on Lake Hamilton. I was in Hot Springs to catch some trout.

Instead, I saw a man nearly drown while he waded below the dam.

While rigging a fly rod that afternoon, an amber light flashed at the dam. I scanned a sign that said water levels can change suddenly when the light flashes, but the message didn't register. I focused on finding a fishing spot instead.

Another angler said the water was low enough for wading, but fast currents would make it tricky. He waded through shallow water to a gravel bar, while I fished a calm spot until the cold and lack of strikes persuaded me to move. Returning to the car, I heard a warbling sound.

I looked back at the river, shocked to see it had risen more than a foot in just a few minutes. The warbling siren was a warning from the dam's operators.

The other angler was still out there.

Sirens sound at dams when water releases begin or increase. In the tailwater below the dam, water depth and current speed can change abruptly at any time.

I suddenly understood the importance of flashing amber light.

The other fisherman tried escaping the rapidly disappearing gravel bar, but his shallow crossing point was now waist-deep. Water gurgled and gushed, pushing him downstream as he struggled to stay upright. Some boaters offered to pick him up, but he yelled back he was OK.

He didn't look OK to me.

The angler was chest-deep when he lost his footing and disappeared. He surfaced, but the raging current washed him down-

stream, headfirst, like a piece of driftwood.

He finally maneuvered into slower water and crawled out. He was safe but bruised, shivering from the cold water and still grasping his fly rod.

As we walked to his truck, he sheepishly said, "I only caught one little trout. Wasn't it, huh?" He was lucky to get out before hypothermia set in. He soon left for the warmth of home.

This angler was fortunate to reach shore with no damage other than wet clothes, flooded fly boxes and waterlogged pride. According to P. J. Spaul, a spokesman for the Little Rock District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, such incidents sometimes end tragically. "There have been lives lost in tailwaters below the dams in the past,"

he said. "Public safety is a big concern."

The Little Rock district operates 24 dams. Dam operators must follow an extensive tailwater safety policy. According to Jack Johnson, an outdoor recreation planner with the Corps, operators turn on flashing lights, sound sirens and use bullhorns to notify waders who don't react to other warnings quickly.

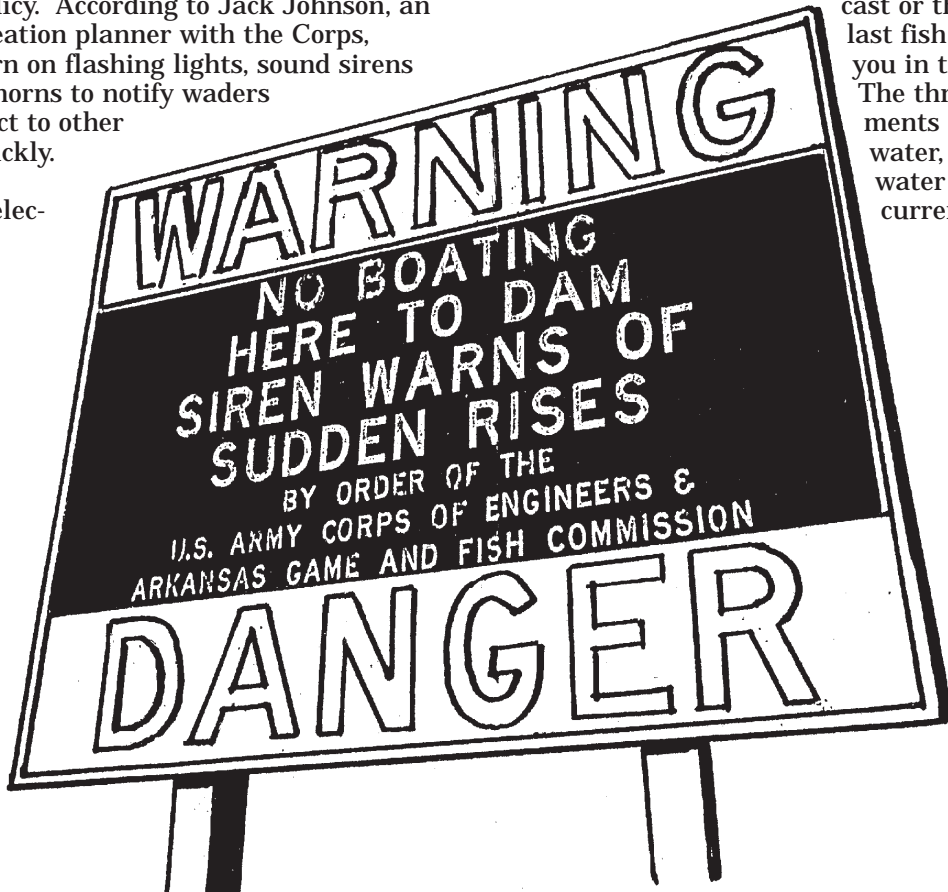
Arkansas Energy, an elec-

tric utility, also operates hydroelectric dams.

"Our dams at Lake Catherine and Lake Hamilton in Hot Springs can respond quickly to the threat of brownouts or blackouts," said Doug Sikes, manager of the company's hydroelectric operations. "That means water levels can change quickly. Before we begin generating or increasing the load (increasing the flow of water), we sound a siren, turn on an amber flashing light, and the dam operator makes sure people within sight are responding. If not, operators use a bullhorn to warn them. Our procedures are very much like what the Corps of Engineers uses."

Rising water creates conditions that entice anglers to stay. "When water rises in a tailwater," said Spaul, "birds become more active, and so do the fish, because rising water stirs up food. That's a temptation for anglers to stay in the water. But that one last

cast or that one last fish will get you in trouble. The three elements of cold water, rising water and swift currents com-



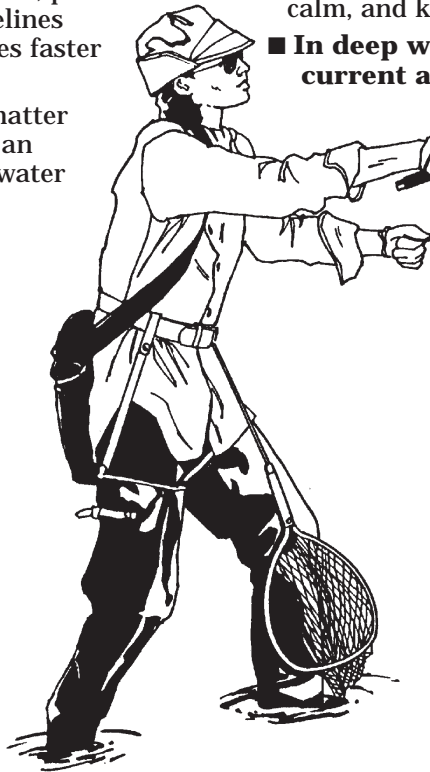
bine to make a very dangerous situation.”

You can wade safely when you follow this common-sense advice from Spaul, Johnson and Sikes:

- **Assess the situation.** Take time to see what’s happening around you before you wade right in.
- **Read warning signs.** Study them all, and take them seriously.
- **Ask whether the water is rising, falling or steady.** Ask other folks what they’ve already observed. Such information is critical when you’re miles from a dam and can’t hear sirens.
- **Heed warnings.** Assume any unusual noise coming from a dam is a signal to leave the water.
- **Monitor water levels.** Use stationary rocks or logs as water-level gauges and check them often, especially when you’re far from a dam. Other signs of rising water: the sound of rushing water changes pitch, birds and fish become more active, plant material from inundated shorelines floats downstream, water moves faster or becomes cloudy.
- **Plan an escape route.** No matter where you wade, always have an escape route through shallow water in mind.

- **Carry a wading staff.** Fast water can sweep you off your feet. A sturdy stick, wading staff or ski pole helps you maintain at least two points of contact with the streambed.
- **Accept help.** If you’re stranded or struggling, you’re in danger. If someone offers help, take it. If no one offers, ask for it.
- **Recognize your limits.** Don’t exceed the limits of your strength, agility and endurance. A tired wader traversing rising water and slick rocks is inviting tragedy.
- **If water overcomes you, get rid of equipment.** Grandpa’s rod or your fishing vest mean nothing if you don’t live to use them again. Jettison gear if a free hand or less weight could save your life.
- **If you’re swept away, float on your back, draw your knees up to your chest, and point your feet downstream.** This position protects your head from rocks and other obstructions. Use your arms to steer into slow or shallow water, remain calm, and keep your head above water.
- **In deep water, swim with the current and diagonally across it.**

Avoid using all your strength to fight the current. Conserve energy by working downstream,



then stand only in shallow, slow water.

In our eagerness to fish, we sometimes overlook wading safety. Arkansas's tailwaters offer beautiful scenery and world-class fishing, but they're not worth risking your life. Respect our tailwaters. Use common sense when wading, and you'll live to enjoy them again and again.



Arkansas Game & Fish Commission
2 Natural Resources Drive
Little Rock, Arkansas 72205

(April 1998)