



**HELPING HANDS** As the crowd builds for the annual Yellowstone Boat Float, FWP game wardens Paul Luepke and Derek Fagone patrol the water downstream from Four Banger rapids near Big Timber. Many boats capsize in the whitewater.

# CALLING THE WARDENS

## How FWP game wardens keep boaters safe—sometimes even from themselves

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Photos by John Warner

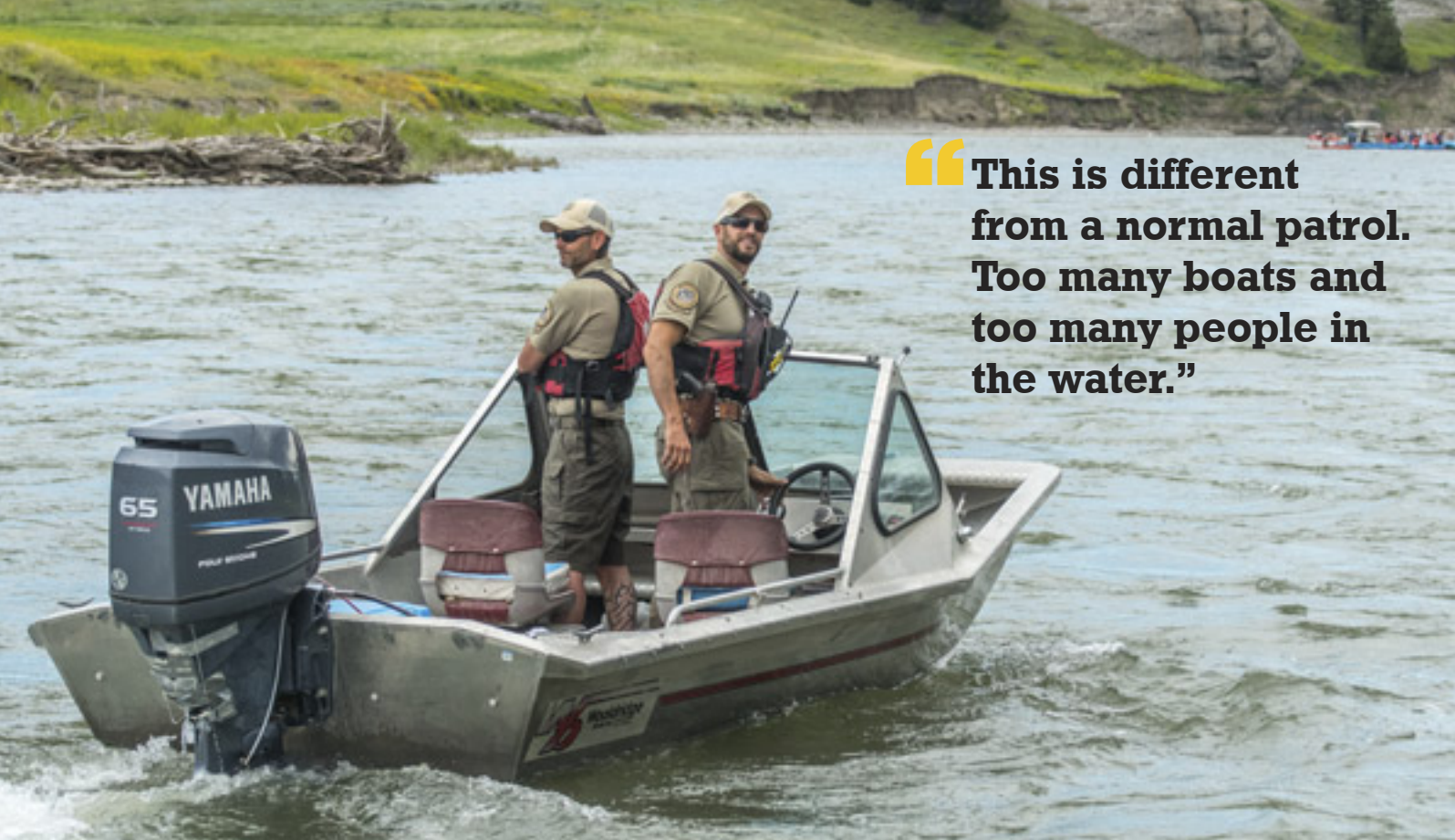
THE INFLATABLE POOL FLOAT, with its collapsible sides and Loch Ness monster neck that ends in a unicorn head, is not the typical watercraft you'd expect to see carrying four people on one of Montana's largest rivers. But this warm July morning on the Yellowstone River is no typical day. Accompanying this and other inflatable toys are rafts, kayaks, and inner tubes plowing through or bobbing over a set of rapids known as Four Banger. Named for four large and distinct waves, these rapids just downstream of Big Timber form some of the most turbulent—and dangerous—whitewater on the lower Yellowstone. Some floaters, doused

by the cold waves breaking over their heads, raise a fist in celebration. Shouting loudly to onlookers onshore, they holler "Boat Float!" The beached boaters echo their call, hooting and cheering. Other floaters have a tougher time negotiating the waves and four-foot-deep troughs, which buck them into the water or flip their craft. Coolers, sandwiches, sunglasses, and beer cans are swept into the current. When they surface from the sudden submersion, the floaters' expressions often convey fear mixed with shock at how intensely cold the water is, even on this sunny midsummer day. Fortunately for them, Montana Fish, Wildlife

& Parks game wardens Paul Luepke and Derek Fagone are standing by. "The challenge is deciding which people need help and then scooping them out of the water as fast as possible," says Luepke, who works from nearby Columbus. "It's difficult managing the boat in this fast current." Ordinarily, game wardens don't patrol Four Banger. On a normal summer day, maybe a dozen boats would run this section of the Yellowstone. But this is the annual Yellowstone Boat Float weekend, when hundreds of revelers float from Livingston to Billings over three days each July. Many participants safely ride in aluminum-

frame, self-bailing whitewater rafts, but some lounge in inflatable swans, party islands, and tanning floats designed for swimming pools. The wardens' priority is to keep people from drowning. "This is different from a normal patrol," says Fagone, who works from Big Timber. "We don't even have time to check for life jackets. Too many boats and too many people in the water." When they aren't pulling people from the river, Fagone and Luepke shout out advice. They point out that one of the worst ways to float moving water is tied to another rig. "It's almost impossible to maneuver boats, inner

tubes, and pool toys when they're all connected," says Luepke. "If one hits a downed tree or snag, all the other floaters can get dragged in." A major concern of the wardens is that many floaters view the rapids as a Disney-type ride. "They start out okay when they capsize," Luepke explains, "but when they don't have a life jacket, it's not long before they're exhausted and struggling. That water is cold and it's fast." **► Constant policing required** The Yellowstone Boat Float is an extreme example of the challenge that FWP wardens



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**READY FOR RETRIEVAL** Fagone (left) and Luepke (right) watch as boats, rafts, kayaks, and other watercraft tumble through the Four Banger. The rapids are among the largest on the lower Yellowstone and the epicenter of the floating party that surrounds the annual Yellowstone Boat Float. Though the July event is not a typical weekend on the Yellowstone, say the wardens, the work they do keeping boaters safe exemplifies what they and other wardens do elsewhere on Montana rivers, lakes, and reservoirs each summer.



**FLIMSY FLOATERS** Above: Passengers in a professional-grade raft make it through Four Banger. Others won't be so lucky. With the increasingly lower cost and greater availability of inflatable pool toys (below left), more and more people are putting the devices on rivers and reservoirs—and putting themselves in danger, according to FWP game wardens. “They just aren't made for a big river like the Yellowstone or a reservoir like Fort Peck where big winds can blow up anytime,” says Luepke. Below right: Floaters riding a seaworthy raft and wearing life vests demonstrate how to have a good time while staying safe.

face to keep boaters safe. The potentially dangerous combination of inexperienced operators and unsafe watercraft crops up every summer across Montana. Large lakes and reservoirs like Canyon Ferry, Flathead, and Fort Peck attract hundreds of boaters on a single summer day. That requires constant policing to ensure that people on and in the water don't end up injured or worse. “I spend pretty much the entire summer on a boat,” says Josh Leonard, a Townsend-based warden who patrols nearby Canyon Ferry Reservoir.

Game wardens routinely check to see that all watercraft have a wearable Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device (PFD) aboard for each person on board. Boats 16 feet and longer are also required to carry an additional throwable flotation device. Wardens stop boats to check boater registration and registration decal displays, and make sure underage children aren't

operating boats and that motorboat operators aren't under the influence of alcohol or drugs. They also enforce laws that prohibit boaters from driving too close to dams, or entering restricted areas set up to protect swimmers, divers, and wildlife such as loons and waterfowl. “We make sure that people know what the rules are and follow those rules to keep people safe,” says Phil Kilbreath, FWP's boating law administrator.

► **Accessible for more people**

That job is getting tougher each year, as the variety of water-based activities increases. According to a 2019 report by the National Sporting Goods Association, “Open water sports and outdoor activities have experienced consistent increases over the last three years.” Smaller craft like stand-up paddleboards (SUPs) and fishing kayaks make water-based recreation accessible for more people. In addition, fishing remains one of the most popular outdoor activities in Montana, and many anglers fish from boats.

Kilbreath says Montana has 80,000 to 100,000 registered boats and up to five times

more nonmotorized craft—for an estimated total of 400,000 to 500,000 watercraft.

Despite the growing number of people on the water, FWP wardens have helped keep per capita fatalities low compared to other states. On average, Montana records roughly 25 boating accidents a year, about 8 of which result in fatalities. By comparison, roughly 200 people die in vehicle accidents in Montana each year. “The number of people using the water increases every year, but the number of accidents is stable,” Kilbreath says. “So we're holding steady against the tide.”

FWP posts 100 game wardens on the water each summer. Another 65 volunteer members of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary also patrol major reservoirs and lakes. The 32,000-strong all-volunteer auxiliary is part of the U.S. Coast Guard “family” and promotes recreational boating safety on inland lakes and reservoirs nationwide.

Ongoing training and workshops help, too. Using federal funds, FWP and the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary conduct safe-boating workshops at schools, businesses, and events. FWP also partners with other state





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**OVERBOARD** The human and plastic contents of a raft that flipped at Four Banger swirl in the cold, deep current as Fagone and Luepke carefully but quickly approach to rescue the passengers. Josh Leonard, a Townsend-based warden watching nearby from his own FWP boat, says that the combination of cold water and powerful current can cause people to panic and struggle, increasing the chances that they breathe in water. “If they’d just relax and go with the flow, they’d be far less likely to drown,” he says. Below: Fagone reaches for a boater tossed from his raft below the rapids. “It’s a good thing he was wearing his life jacket,” the warden says later. “Otherwise they are extremely hard to fish out of the river.”



conservation agencies across the West to coordinate boater safety training and education materials, and to recommend policy to the U.S. Coast Guard. “It’s a concerted effort to improve boating safety across the region,” Kilbreath says.

A growing challenge is the accessibility of inexpensive kayaks and paddleboards, says Sara Smith, education coordinator for FWP’s Recreational Boating Safety Program. “They’re affordable, fairly easy to learn how to use, don’t require a trailer, and there’s no maintenance,” she says.

Smith notes that neither training nor certification is required to use a kayak, canoe, SUP, or sailboat. Children ages 13 and 14 must take an FWP boating safety course to operate a boat or personal watercraft like a Jet Ski by themselves, but training isn’t required for older teens or adults. “We still encourage all boaters to take our online boating education classes,” Smith says. “It provides tons of great information on laws, regulations, safety, and just general boating know-how.”

Smith helps newcomers learn the basics before taking to the water. After “wear your PFD,” her No. 1 piece of advice: “Until you gain some experience, do your first floats with people who know what they are doing.” Other tips include checking the weather forecast to avoid lightning and high winds, and understanding the threat of hypothermia—even in summer. FWP offers a free boating education pamphlet with advice on motorboat registration, what to do in an emergency, items you should carry on your boat, and navigation rules. Obtain one from Smith by calling her at (406) 444-5280 or download it from the FWP website at [fwp.mt.gov/recreation/safety/boating/](http://fwp.mt.gov/recreation/safety/boating/).

FWP also co-sponsors on-the-water paddling clinics to give newbies hands-on advice. “Most people don’t understand that



**TO THE MAX** Thrill-seekers push their limits on Four Banger. Most boaters make it through the turbulent whitewater, but if they don’t, Fagone and Luepke are standing by to help.



paddleboards are still vessels that have to comply with basic boating regulations, aquatic invasive species monitoring check station inspections, and life jacket requirements,” Smith adds.

► **Sucking in water**

This is Luepke and Fagone’s 14th year of plucking people and boats from the Four Banger rapids. Their office today is a 17-foot aluminum jet boat powered by a 65-horsepower engine. With Luepke at the helm, the duo deftly maneuver the boat into position below the rapids and calmly and efficiently pluck one floater after another from the water. “If they don’t have a life jacket, they’re a priority,” Luepke says. “Some of them panic when they hit the water,” Fagone says, explaining that with the first shock of cold water, people often gasp—sucking in a lungful of the Yellowstone.

“Panic is what gets them,” adds Josh Leonard, the Townsend warden, who has volunteered to help on this busy day. “If they’d just relax and go with the flow, they’d be far less likely to drown.” He adds that remaining calm after being dumped from a boat, kayak, or inflatable toy is much easier if you’re wearing a PFD that keeps your head above water.

By midmorning, boats begin pulling to the riverbank along Four Banger to watch and cheer on the braver souls paddling through the roaring waves. By noon, more than 60 boats line the bank. Revelers wearing superhero costumes, sombreros, and Viking and gladiator helmets shout, drink, and ooh and aah as floaters crash through the waves.

A newcomer to the spectacle might be surprised how many unseaworthy boats attempt the rapids. A fellow who goes by “Capt. Tim” says that one year someone tied 200 empty Clorox bleach bottles together with polystyrene rope, threw the contraption into the river, and jumped aboard. “Another year, a family had a round 20-foot-diameter water tank, like you put out for cattle, with lawn chairs set up around the edge with a cooler in the middle,” he says.

A large inflatable pool float—with a 6-foot-tall peacock head and a round 12-foot-diameter base—is wisely beached nearby. In similar watercraft, bikini-clad women and shirtless, sunburned men float past and yell their appreciation to Fagone and Luepke. “Thank you for serving!” one rafter with a two-day beard slurs as he raises his beer in salute.

“I’ve never seen so many people who like wardens so much,” Leonard says.

Here, where boaters and bystanders can see exactly how these FWP law enforcement officers save lives, the game wardens’ value becomes crystal clear. 🐻