

FOCUS ON

Our Swiftwater Rescue Team: Swimming to the rescue

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If you ever find yourself literally up a creek without a paddle, did you know there's a whole team of people who will be there to help? Gwinnett has many recreational bodies of water, ranging from creeks and ponds to Lake Lanier and the Chattahoochee River, and in the Georgia summer heat, they're a great way to cool off. However, these types of water bodies can change in depth quickly and are most often filled with currents. This type of water is called swiftwater, and there's so much of it in Gwinnett County that the County's Department of Fire and Emergency Services has a special team called the Swiftwater Rescue Team.



*Members of the Swiftwater Rescue Team are pictured from left to right: Driver Engineer **Scott Robertson**, Lieutenant **Hayes Kiser**, Firefighter **Robert Fernandez**, Driver Engineer **Cody Baker**, Firefighter **Josh Spearman**, and Firefighter **Ethan Young***

Positioned at station 14 in Buford, the Swiftwater Rescue Team is made up of 30 swiftwater technicians who responded to 26 calls in 2012. In addition to their duties and training as firefighters and EMTs, these professionals volunteered for additional training in swiftwater operations. Initial preparation consists of an entire year of studying water, types of currents, rescue techniques, and the use of special equipment. They've even trained at the Thunder River ride at Six Flags Over Georgia to put their knowledge to practical use.

"The level of training and extra effort that the individuals on this team put forth is huge," said Lt. Hayes Kiser, who helps to lead the team at station 14. "They've voluntarily decided to take this on and go above and beyond firefighter training, and they should be applauded for that."

In addition to housing the fire engine, ambulance, and the Swiftwater Rescue Team, station 14 is also home to the swiftwater rescue boat and equipment. Most recently, the 2009 SPLOST sales tax program funded a custom-built truck that is designed to transport rescue crews and equipment to emergencies on the Chattahoochee River or Lake Lanier. The truck will be built on a Ford F-550 chassis to comply with codes and standards of the National Fire Protection Association.

In extreme conditions, the team knows how to swim, drive a boat, and rescue from the shore and in water, but they also are constantly learning and adapting to current needs. As we see more extreme weather and flooding, they are trained to handle it. In fact, the swiftwater rescue team played an instrumental role during the 2009 flood, rescuing residents from cars that were swept away and those who were trapped in their flooded homes. In 2009, the crew saw just how powerful water can be. "You can't overpower the water – it's relentless and will move anything out of its path," said Swiftwater Technician and Driver Engineer Cody Baker. During predicted extreme weather conditions, including recent storms, the team will staff another crew in an area of concern to be ready to respond.

The dangers of summer

As the weather warms up and residents want to spend more time outside, the Swiftwater Rescue Team knows it's their most dangerous time. Most calls come between April and September and following water releases from Buford Dam. "Some people don't know what the sirens mean or just choose to ignore them," said Swiftwater



Gwinnett's Swiftwater Rescue Team is trained to rescue victims from flooding and bodies of water such as the Chattahoochee River and Lake Lanier



The Swiftwater Rescue Team trains at the Thunder River ride at Six Flags Over Georgia

Technician and Driver Engineer Scott Robertson. The cold water from the dam can rise to 11 feet within minutes, so the team works closely with the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers and Hall County to make sure residents who are enjoying the river and lake stay safe. They run drills together and have close radio communication.

On peak weekends, such as Memorial Day, you'll see the Gwinnett County Swiftwater Rescue Team at the lake on standby for a save, but ultimately they're hoping to educate people about the dangers of swiftwater and the importance of safety. "If you're going to be spending time around water, please wear a lifejacket," said Lt. Kiser. "Even if you're not planning on getting in the water, go ahead and take the precaution."

For more tips on staying safe this summer, watch this video from Gwinnett County Fire and Emergency Services.

