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FWC starts holiday patrols *Operation Dry Water begins*



FWC Officer Paul Schulz

Story, Photos and Video

By Jeff M. Hardison © June 30, 2017 at 11:47 p.m.

LEVY COUNTY -- Launching into the Suwannee River from Joe Anderson Park in Dixie County, a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) officer began a three-hour ride-along tour on Friday (June 30) for a Florida journalist as the start of what would probably be a set of 10-hour days for the state law enforcement officer.

<https://youtu.be/XG2274ZrHDE>

In this video, FWC Officer Paul Schulz operates the boat on a relatively empty Suwannee River late Friday afternoon (June 30). About six boats were checked for safety equipment in the first three hours, and several people were helped in other manners by the officer. At the very end of this short set of clips, some of the glassy smooth water on the river is seen from Friday afternoon.

FWC Officer Paul Schulz, 26, issued a couple of written warnings and about a half-dozen boat safety certification stickers in the first few hours of his participation in the national Operation Dry Water June 30-July 2, and extending through the July Fourth holiday.

He found opportunities to speak about banded water snakes and manatees as well.

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A swallow-tailed kite drinks water from the Suwannee River. (It's the light crescent shape in the center of the picture.) This moment was the first time that FWC Officer Paul Schulz had seen that happen.



The FWC patch shows a buck, a swallow-tailed kite and a fish.

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The open river.

From a wildlife perspective, one first for the officer who is about to enter his third year in the FWC field of law enforcement, was a swallow-tailed kite taking a sip of water from the Suwannee River as it flew down for a quick nip in front of the boat.

The officer mentioned that the bird may have noticed its likeness on the logo of the FWC, which is on the left sleeve of his uniform shirt.

On this shift, Officer Schulz was assigned to Levy County.

The first boaters he had an opportunity to inspect included a staff member from the Levy County Courthouse, where he visited earlier that day.



Matthew Swilley and Ashley Swilley speak with FWC Officer Paul Schulz. Their boat proved to be safely equipped.

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As he edged the 14-foot vessel next to the other boat, Ashley Swilley said “Hi Paul.” She and her husband Matthew Swilley of Chiefland were out enjoying the sun and water.

A review of their vessel showed the required life jackets, throwable personal flotation device, a functioning horn (or whistle), and a charged fire extinguisher. If they were on the Gulf of Mexico, a set of marine flares would be required as well.

Officer Schulz said all of the officers on the FWC seek to help keep people safe. The Fourth of July weekend is the busiest on the Florida waterways during the year, he said.

Last July, there were the most fatalities in one month, and in 2016, there were the most deaths in Florida on the waterways. Eight people died last July and there were 96 reportable accidents that month in Florida, he said.

Twenty-four percent of the 2016 fatal boating accidents included alcohol or other drugs as contributing factors, he said.

Exposure to the sun, wind and vibrations intensify the effects of alcoholic beverages on a person, he said. There are no brakes on a boat, he said.

Drinking alcohol reduces a person’s reaction time and their coordination.

That is why it is extremely important to operate a boat without being intoxicated, he said.

In 2016, there were 280 BUI criminal citations issued.

According to Florida Statute Section 327.35, the penalties for Boating under the Influence (BUI) provides as follows: by a fine of not less than \$250 or more than \$500 for a first conviction; not less than \$500 or more than \$1,000 for a second conviction; and by imprisonment for not more than six months for a first conviction; and not more than nine months for a second conviction.

As for lesser safety violations, such as not having life vests, horns, throwable personal flotation devices and fire extinguishers, those citations are \$90 each.

The start of the tour of duty on Friday for Officer Schulz began at the Joe Anderson park and went south on the river toward the Gulf of Mexico.

The officer first motored into the area of Fanning Springs State Park.

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At least a dozen people enjoy the cool waters at Fanning Springs State Park.



A great white egret stands among the cedar knees at Manatee Springs State Park on Friday afternoon (June 30) looking for a late lunch.

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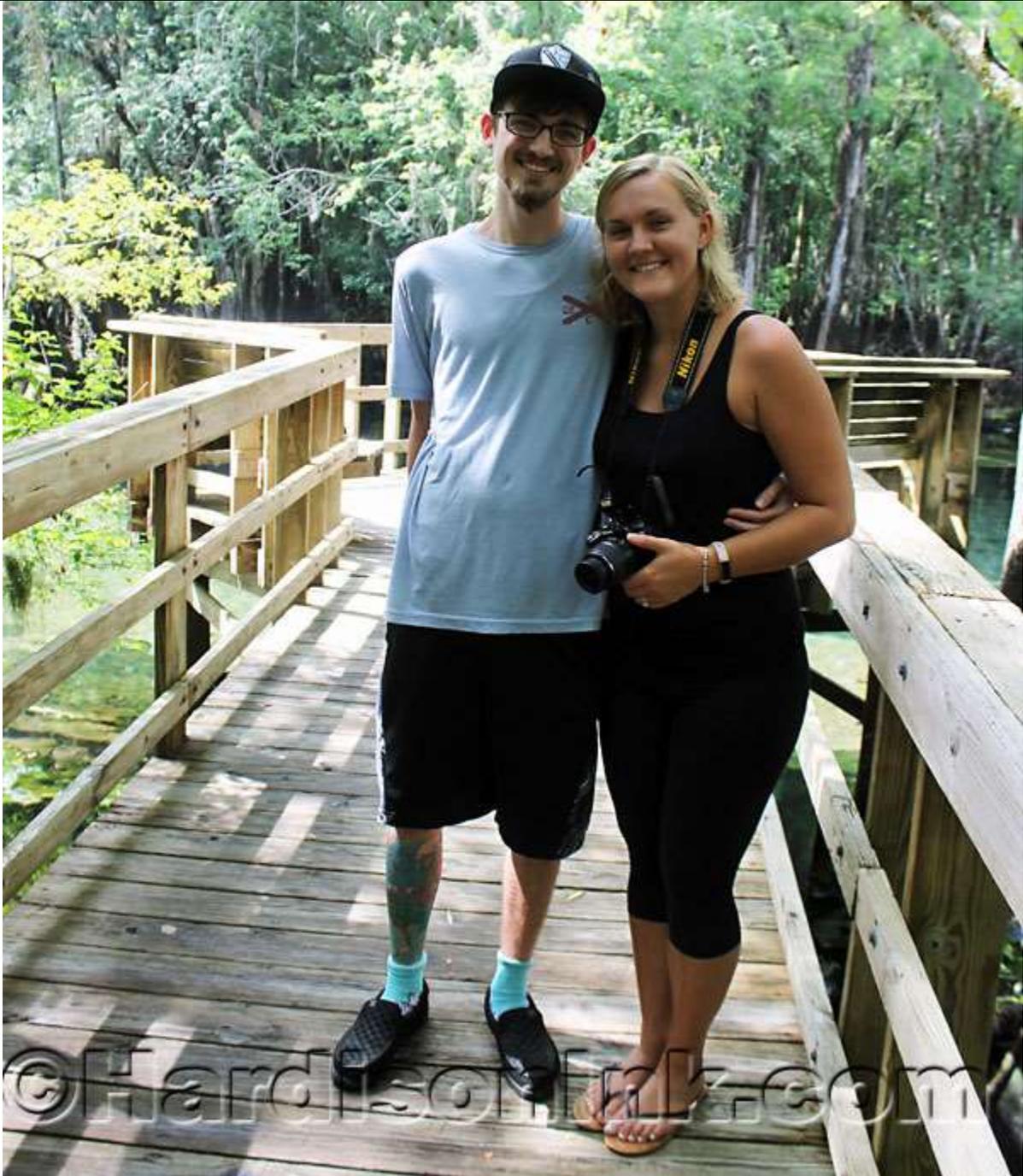


More than a dozen people enjoy the cool waters at Manatee Springs State Park.



A banded water snake rests in a tree near the boardwalk of at Manatee Springs State Park.

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Taylor Sakal (left) and Kayla Mullen enjoy Manatee Springs State Park. The couple mentioned that they plan to marry each other in the future.

He checked safety equipment on several boats.

He also docked at Manatee Springs State Park and disembarked from the boat to walk on the boardwalk to and from the springhead.

During that tour, he spoke with some visitors who wondered about manatees. Schulz mentioned these mammals are more often seen at the spring run or in the river at that

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outlet from the springs during the cold days of winter, as they go there to become warmer.

And with some proper guessing by the visiting journalist, the visitors learned that a group of manatee is called a “herd.” Schulz mentioned manatees are also known as “sea cows.”

Taylor Sakal, 24, and Kayla Mullen, 21, both of West Palm Beach had found a banded water snake. This is a non-venomous snake.

Another snake that swims in Florida, though, is the venomous water moccasin or cottonmouth (*Agkistrodon piscivorus*).

Adult cottonmouths are large and capable of delivering a painful and potentially fatal bite. When antagonized, they stand their ground by coiling their bodies and displaying their fangs, which shows the inside of their mouths as being as white as cotton.

These snakes are aggressive and should be avoided.

The banded water snakes are not dangerous.

Another swimming creature that presents a danger in the summer along the Suwannee River is the sturgeon. These prehistoric fish are a protected species.



This sign reminds people about the danger of jumping sturgeon. Jaylon Leighann Rippy died on July 2, 2015. She was only 5 years old.

They jump from the water and if they hit a person, they can cause serious injuries and even death.

Alligators, which are also in the Suwannee River, do not generally present a danger. Do not feed or harass an alligator, not only because it is against the law, but because it is dangerous.

Officer Schulz said the FWC officers enforce state laws to help protect people from property loss, injury and death. He said if people read that operating a boat while intoxicated, or operating a boat without safety equipment causes injuries and deaths,

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and those people as a result abide by the law and enjoy safe boating experiences, then that is excellent.

The FWC is not out to issue citations just for the sake of issuing citations. The officers are on patrol, however, to help protect life and property. Sometimes citations must be issued, and sometimes suspected criminals must be put in handcuffs and taken into custody.

In his first three years on the job, Officer Schulz has had to arrest people for BUI, and he has even had to arrest a person for driving a vehicle while under the influence of alcohol.

Another tough duty that he has had to perform in his first three years on duty was to recover a body from the water.

Accidents happen. However, a person operating a boat while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs is not accidental.

And so the first few hours of Operation Dry Water began with no arrests of a BUI suspect by that FWC officer.