

Wildlife Officer: 'They should not have been in the water'

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LOWELL — Flooded river waters took the life of one of two kayakers on South Fork Catawba River near Lowell Saturday.

Eric Walker Bohanan, 48, of Stanley, died in the swollen river after he failed to pull himself out of the water when his kayak capsized, said Officer Eric Norwood with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

Fellow kayaker Stephen Bryan Wright, 43, of Dallas, also had his kayak capsize but was able to make it to shore, Norwood said.

Typically that stretch of the South Fork from the Spencer Mountain access to the Dixon Road access takes about two and half hours to complete, Norwood said.

"It turned into a 20-minute ride," Norwood said. "Basically the situation is you've got a lot of melting snow from the mountains."

Bohanan and Wright capsized about 30 feet from each other, but Wright wasn't able to get to his friend on the other side of the river, Norwood said. Both men had life jackets on, Norwood said.

A log struck Wright in the back, taking off some of the pressure from the raging water and allowing him to climb on the shore, Norwood said.

Bohanan was able to pull himself up with a branch from a tree, but the branch broke, submerging Bohanan in the water.

"He died there," Norwood said.

Wright told Norwood that Bohanan wanted to go kayaking, but Wright tried to talk him out of going. Wright is an experienced kayaker, Norwood said, and Bohanan had not been kayaking that long. Wright ended up going with his friend so he wouldn't be there alone, Norwood said.

Bohanan's family told Norwood that Bohanan liked adventure and couldn't be talked out of something once he made up his mind. Bohanan leaves behind a fiancée and teenage children, Norwood said.

"They should not have been in the water," Norwood said. "It ended up turning into a tragic situation."

This time of year the water is still cold and the swift moving current is dangerous, Norwood said.

"If you see the rapids, the white water, you should not get in," Norwood said.

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