August 18, 2016

An Open Letter to Gauley River Boaters

Dear Boaters,

The rangers and staff of the Gauley River National Recreation Area welcome you to the 2016 boating season. National Park Service employees have been working diligently to prepare the river access points, roads, and other public use locations. We hope that this season will prove to be safe and spectacular for everyone.

As many of you may already know, on June 23rd heavy rains fell over much of West Virginia causing massive flooding in the Gauley and Meadow River watersheds. The Gauley River set a record for water flow and Summersville Lake recorded the second highest water level in its history. Downstream, nearly every boat launch and take-out was damaged to some degree. Despite the severe flooding, the Tail Waters, Mason's Branch, Wood's Ferry, and Upper Swiss will all be open for Gauley season.

The Mason's Branch access road was washed out and undercut by the flash flooding. After the flood event, the Federal Highways Administration inspected the road and found it to be unsafe. As a result, on June 25th, the road was closed to the public access. On August 15th, the Park was able to begin emergency repair work so that Mason's Branch would be safe and operational by opening day. These repairs are expected to be completed by September 4th.

Parking is always at a premium during Gauley Season. American Whitewater continues to lease the Legg field above Mason's Branch. The field will be available throughout the season for private boaters when the parking below fills up. The walking trail from the river to the field has been cleared of fallen trees and any other obstructions and is ready for use. As in the past, the rangers will open Mason's Branch access road for unrestricted travel sometime in the afternoon. This will probably be around 1:00 pm, or whenever commercial bus traffic is through for the day.

Parking at Wood's Ferry will be managed like it has been in the past with few restrictions. Boaters are asked to park close together in an organized fashion to take advantage of available space and to create parking opportunities for others. On particularly busy weekend days, Wood's Ferry fills to capacity, so boaters should be aware that parking is available but not unlimited. The upstream end of Wood's Ferry is used for dropping off and picking up boats and gear and not for parking. Unattended vehicles parked at the upstream end will be towed.

The public take-out at Upper Swiss is the only Lower Gauley public take-out within the National Recreation Area. Parking is available to boaters in the field; however, camping is prohibited at the launch and in the field. The Park offers camping opportunities at the Tail Waters Campground and there are other private and public campgrounds in the area as well.

Camping at the Gauley Tail Waters Campground is free of charge and is on a first come, first served basis. Rangers will routinely conduct patrols of the campgrounds and register campers during their visits. There is a maximum of 8 people allowed at each campsite and there is a two (2) tent, two (2) vehicle maximum at each site. Quiet hours in the campground are from 10:00 pm to 6:00 am. Campers who bring their pets must keep their pets on a leash or otherwise crated or restrained at all times.

NPS river patrol operations will continue as in the past. The NPS provides daily river patrols during the scheduled releases with an emphasis on Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and water rescue. The NPS patrol boat carries an Automatic External Defibrillator (AED) and other medical supplies. The river patrol rangers are available to provide both routine and emergency boater services as they arise. The NPS continues to work with the US Army Corps of Engineers, the WV Division of Natural Resources, Norfolk Southern Railroad, aeromedical helicopter services, local ambulance providers, local fire departments, commercial rafting companies, landowners, and others to pre-plan and prepare for boater safety.

In the event of an emergency, Park Rangers or other local emergency personnel may request a reduction of the scheduled water release from the Summersville Dam. Such a request was necessary twice for emergencies during the 2010 season. To help boaters better prepare and respond to a sudden and unexpected drop in water level, the National Park Service has implemented an emergency public information plan that consists of signs and signal flags. In the event of an emergency, these signs and flags will be placed along the river as visual aids for the boaters. A press release will also be posted on the American Whitewater and Gauley River NRA website.

As the Gauley season planning efforts continue, information will be posted on the Park's website at www.nps.gov/gari and information will also be shared with private boaters through partnering organizations such as American Whitewater. The National Park Service appreciates all of the cooperation from the private boater community. It truly helps make the Gauley boating season safe, exciting, and memorable for everyone.

Sincerely,

R. Duane Michael
Chief Ranger
New River Gorge National River
Gauley River National Recreation Area
Bluestone National Scenic River