

# Sea kayaking guide and one of his clients die during Down East excursion

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The wife of the client is rescued by a lobsterman after a squall capsized their boats and she spent hours in the 52-degree water.

A licensed Maine kayaking guide and one of his two clients died Wednesday during an ocean excursion off the coast of a Down East fishing village that turned deadly when the paddlers were caught in a squall.

The kayaking guide had been leading tours for 14 years, and had a waterproof marine radio with him when he capsized, but apparently wasn't able to use it, his wife said. Cheryl Brackett said her husband, Ed Brackett, 63, was an experienced guide and had rescued several people from the water before.

But the tour he was leading off Corea Harbor was hit by a powerful squall that spawned 5-foot waves Wednesday afternoon, sending him and his two clients into the 52 degree water, she said. Corea Harbor is located south of Gouldsboro near the mouth of Gouldsboro Bay, and is about 10 miles east of Mount Desert Island.

Each kayaker was paddling a single-seat kayak with a rudder and spray skirt that seals around the paddler and the boat's cockpit. They were wearing life jackets and dressed in shorts and T-shirts, the Coast Guard said.

"It was just a beautiful day, and then the squall hit, and then it was a beautiful day again," said Cheryl Brackett, also 63. "I figured they holed up somewhere and were going to paddle back."

Also killed in the incident was Michael Popper, 54, of Plainfield, New Jersey. His wife, Jennifer Popper, 48, was rescued by a local lobsterman, Bruce Crawley, according to Michael Hunt, a lobsterman and the assistant harbor master in Gouldsboro.

Hunt, who also helped with the search effort, said Popper had a core body temperature of 82 degrees.

"She didn't have many minutes left," Hunt, 41, said by phone Thursday night. "Bruce definitely saved her life."

As of 9 p.m. Thursday, Popper's condition had been upgraded from critical to good, according to Donna Stanely-Kelley, a nursing supervisor at Eastern Maine Medical Center. Stanley-Kelley then read a written statement on Popper's behalf.

"I appreciate the good wishes, prayers and thoughts of the community and feel I am in good hands with my team of caregivers. While I have no other information to share at this time, I may have more to share when I am feeling better."

Ed Brackett held a current guide license and has been registered since 2002, according to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. Cheryl Brackett did not know whether her husband had access to his waterproof radio, which was protected in a dry bag, she said.

The Bracketts, who live in Birch Harbor, have run SeaScape Kayak and Bike out of Winter Harbor for 14 years.

The float plan was to tour the leeward side of the Sally Islands, where the seas are typically calmer, but when the group of three did not return to Corea Harbor by 4:30 p.m. as expected, Cheryl Brackett said she contacted authorities.

The water was roughly 52 degrees when the trio capsized, the Coast Guard and the Maine Marine Patrol said. There is no standard to how long someone can survive in cold water, said Lt. Dave Bourbeau, a Coast Guard spokesman. Everyone reacts differently depending on their body composition and how they're dressed, he said.

"There is no indication of any wrongdoing on part of the kayak business," Bourbeau said, adding that an investigation into the incident is ongoing.

The rare death of a Maine guide and a client in his care highlights the precautions that paddlers need to take when heading into the open waters off Maine's coast.

Common safety themes emerged in interviews with three registered kayaking guides, including two master guides with more than a decade experience each. They include wearing life jackets and appropriate attire (including a wet or dry suit especially in open ocean, or when the water is below 60 degrees), knowing the latest weather forecast and having a VHF radio easily accessible. The guides also emphasized the importance of leaving a float plan with the planned route and an estimated return time.

"I always stress: dress for the water not the air," said Mary McCauley, a registered guide since 2007 who owns Cross Current Maine Guided Adventures in Bath. "I wear dry suits right now because the water is so cold. If something happens, I want to be able to get back into my boat quickly and help my clients."

McCauley, 57, said she postponed a tour Wednesday afternoon because the weather forecast called for high winds and a storm.

Zach Anchors, owner and co-founder of Portland Paddle, said kayakers need to be prepared for all kinds of weather, especially in Maine. Inexperienced kayakers, who cannot re-enter their boats after rolling over, should stay close to the shoreline, while experienced kayakers heading into the open ocean should wear a wet or dry suit in addition to a life jacket. At a minimum, paddlers should wear non-cotton clothing, such as polypropylene or wool, and carry a change of clothes in a dry bag.

"On the Maine coast, the conditions are so dynamic," said Anchors, a 36-year-old master guide with 16 years experience. "The currents and the wind and fog and other factors can change quickly and create conditions that aren't expected."

A person must have a license to accept payment for guided sea kayaking tours and Maine has one of the most rigorous testing process to earn that license, according to Travis Journagan, a 39-year-old master guide with 15 years experience. That process includes both a written and oral exam, with an additional requirement to be CPR and First Aid certified, he said.

The state requires different tests and licenses for guides working in tidal waters, rivers/lakes and whitewater, said Journagan, who owns Tidal Transit in Boothbay and offers three-day classes for people preparing for the exam.

Journagan said paddlers should always have their VHF radio within reach and preprogrammed to the emergency channel so the U.S. Coast Guard can be notified of an emergency and easily locate those in distress.

“It’s basically a personal location beacon,” he said. “All you have to say is ‘Mayday, Mayday, Mayday’ and the Coast Guard is coming right at you.”

Journagan said the Corea Harbor incident is the only one that he can recall where a licensed guide had died as a result of an accident during a tour, and possibly the first time someone had died because of an accident while under a guide’s care. That information could not be verified Thursday night.

The bodies of those who died in Corea Harbor have been transported to the state Medical Examiner’s office, which will examine them to determine the cause and manner of death.

Jennifer Popper was pulled from the water about 8 p.m. Wednesday by a local lobsterman, more than three hours after she was scheduled to return to the mainland, the Coast Guard’s Bourbeau said.

The bodies of the two men were found about 8:30 p.m. and 10 p.m., authorities said.

Hunt, the assistant harbor master, said he was about a mile away when Crawley discovered Jennifer Popper. Soon after, Crawley found Popper’s husband, said Hunt, who was called over to pull Michael Popper aboard his boat.

The three were pulled from the water about halfway between Cranberry Point and Petit Manan Island, about 2.25 miles from the islands the group was touring, and about 3 miles from Corea Harbor.

In 2015, 71 people across the United States died in kayak-related boating incidents, with 80 percent from drowning, according to Coast Guard statistics released in May.

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