

Cars and water...avoiding a tragedy

Last September a tragedy struck a family of seven children. The family Land Rover plunged into the River Witham at Tattershall Bridge, near Coningsby resulting in the drowning of four of their children, ages ranging from two to eight.

The youngest child drowned at the scene, while three others were taken off life support once in hospital. The survivors were the parents and two children who managed to escape from the vehicle, and one other child who recovered in hospital.

This event emphasizes a worrying trend of drowning that occurs after vehicles crash into rivers, lakes, waterways and ditches, and even in swimming pools, where drivers and passengers have been trapped inside, the cause of death being drowning, not injuries sustained in the crash itself.

The latest statistics available show that in 2005 there were 28 people who drowned in vehicles. This is 6percent of all accidental drownings in that year. Twelve of these victims were in just three events and the majority of these events were due to driver error.

Road Casualties Great Britain records 33 accidents during 2005 that involved a vehicle being submerged where 27 of these occurred on non built-up roads. Further to this another 1,846 vehicles crashed into a ditch. RoSPA drowning statistics for 2000-2005 show that there were more than 100 accidental drownings throughout this time period related to driving, this brings the average to more than 20 victims per year. These statistics show that:

- Around one in five of these events resulted in multiple fatalities with between two and five victims. We believe this figure is significantly higher than the average number of multiple fatality accidents per year in the UK for all road accident fatalities.
- At least 73percent of these fatalities were male.
- Around 50percent of these males within the age range of

By Elisabeth Walker

15 – 45 years old.

- Most commonly this type of fatality occurred in a lake
 - Roadside ditches are a concern that is particular to Norfolk and Suffolk. Of note in these areas are the sustainable urban drainage systems that run alongside the road, presenting a great hazard to the driver who may lose control.
 - Over all there seems to be peak period over the winter in November and December where there are often more victims of this sort (28percent of the incidences from 2000-2005) continuing into January and February and then again in June and July.
- Leaving the road in a car in any environment can be dangerous, and the primary way of avoiding this fate is to drive carefully. Always drive at a reasonable speed below the limit, adjusting your driving for the prevailing weather conditions. A vast majority of the above mentioned fatalities were due to speeding or driving

unsafely for the weather conditions, ending in a loss of control of the vehicle. Driver fatigue is another common reason why vehicles lose control and leave the road. It is safest to plan journeys in advance, and never drive when you feel tired.

Wearing a seatbelt is always important and despite what we

Staying calm is paramount as panicking aggravates a bad situation, lessening your ability to make judgments

may be inclined to believe, it will be far more likely to decrease the chances of serious injury then keep a victim trapped in a car due to an inability to unbuckle it. It will increase chances of survival by lessening the impact of the crash, giving you a greater chance at maintaining the ability to help yourself afterwards. If you do enter water without your seatbelt on your impact injuries are likely to be such that you are left unconscious and unable to attempt escape.

The best way to avoid this situation is to be aware of the

above safety precautions. However, if you have the misfortune of finding yourself in a situation where your car has crashed and entered water with the potential of escalating into a possible drowning situation, the first thing to remember is to stay calm and to get out of the vehicle as quickly as possible. Staying calm is paramount as panicking aggravates a bad situation,

lessening your ability to make judgments and to carry through actions that can save your life. Vehicles often float for around 30 seconds to two minutes (before the water reaches the bottom of the side windows) after which the weight of the engine pulls the vehicle under; this small pocket of time may allow the driver of the vehicle and/or passengers to make their escape if they are aware and able to act quickly and calmly. Unfortunately cars are not airtight, and when the car sinks occupants cannot rely on it forming an air bubble for survival

What can happen

20 year old male drowned in October 2005, when the car he was passenger in lost control and landed upside down in a swimming pool in Limpley Stoke, near Bath. The driver, who survived with one other passenger, was twice over the drink-drive limit and was jailed for causing death by dangerous driving.

A family of two children along with the parents and a grandfather were swept away whilst driving in two cars along a wave-swept causeway in the Western Isles in Scotland in January 2005 while attempting to escape storm conditions

June 2005 a 27 year old male skidded and overturned his car into a drainage ditch filled with water on a tight corner near St Brides in Wales, drowning himself, his 25 year old brother and two of his friends, ages 26 and 30. At the inquest the driver was found to be unlicensed and traveling to quickly around a tight bend, he also had drugs and alcohol in his blood.

23 year old mother sped away from an argument, driving two children aged three and six in February 2005. She crashed into the River Lee in Hertfordshire where all three in the car were drowned. An accidental verdict was returned.

under water, so the sooner you can escape, the better. Chances of escaping decrease as the vehicle sinks into the water. Pressure on the doors and windows exerted by the outside water makes them very difficult, even impossible, to open.

Although we recognize that each crash is different and circumstances vary according to situation and ability, if you are able to undertake the actions below following an accident into the water, your chances of survival will increase:

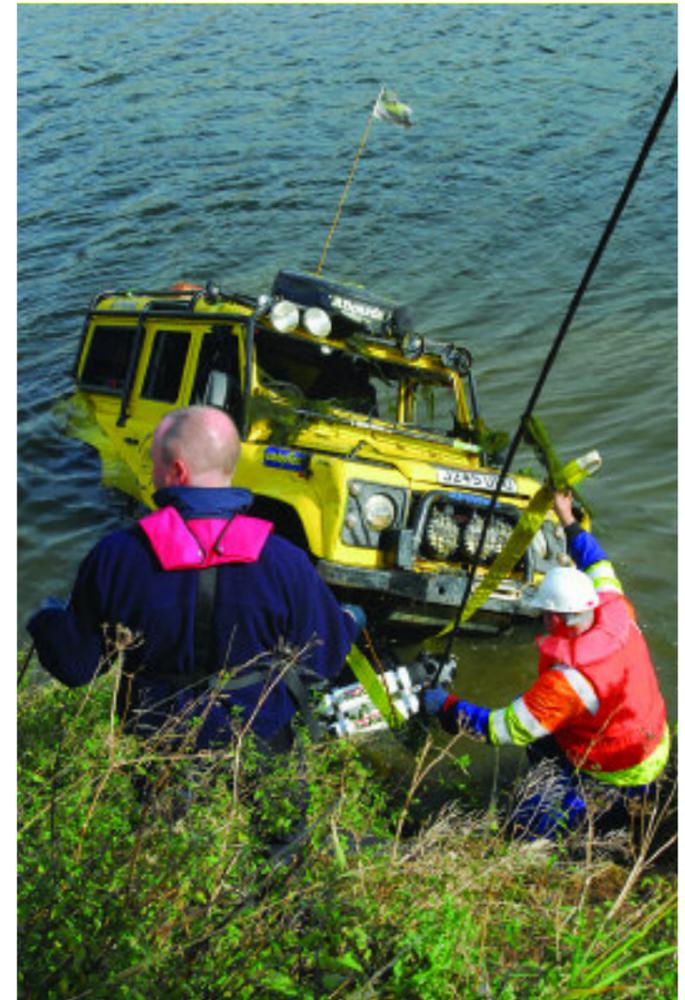
- Unbuckle your seatbelt first, ensuring your passengers follow suit. Children may need help from yourself or anyone else able in the car to unbuckle and get out of a window.
- Open the window as soon as possible as this will provide you with a way to escape. If the window will not open, try break it using a heavy object or a 'life hammer'. Side windows are usually weaker than windscreens; try to break a side window in the corner where it is weakest if it cannot be wound down.

- Do not open the door because this will allow water inside and the vehicle will sink faster.
- If possible assist children to escape through the window, then get yourself out.
- Call the emergency services if you are able as soon as possible after exiting the vehicle.

Of particular concern are those who are driving during times of flooding. In these conditions drivers can easily become trapped by rising floodwaters when rivers are in spate. During the flooding in 2007, a 68 year old respected county court judge became submerged when attempting to cross the swollen River Avon in Drakes Broughton, Worcestershire. He was unable to free himself from the vehicle. It only takes six inches of water before a driver can lose control of a small vehicle.

If it is necessary to drive at times of flooding, the following precautions can be taken:

- Leave early to avoid being marooned on flooded roads.
- Ensure you have enough fuel for your car.
- Follow recommended routes



Pictures - Lincolnshire Echo

– although tempting, flooding is not the time for sight seeing.

- Monitor the weather broadcasts while traveling.
- Watch out for washed-out roads, earth-slides, broken water or sewer mains, loose or downed electrical wires, and falling or fallen objects.
- Be aware where rivers or streams may suddenly rise and flood, for example highway dips, bridge, and low areas.
- If the road ahead is flooded choose another route, do not attempt to drive over it – it is easy to underestimate the power of fast-moving water.
- If you are inside a vehicle and

water is rising rapidly around you, abandon the vehicle immediately.

- If you have to leave your vehicle be very careful if the water is moving quickly, be wary of strong currents and debris.

Further information

RoSPA produce advice and information for both water safety and road safety, which can be found on their website at <http://www.rospa.com/roadsafety/>.

Advanced Driver training can help minimize road accident risk. Further information can be obtained by emailing furtherinfo@roadar.org or calling 0121 248 2099.

