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Body found of kayaker who capsized on West River in southern Vermont

April 19, 2008

By Susan Smallheer Rutland Herald

JAMAICA — Friends of a missing 24-year-old Wardsboro kayaker discovered his body around noon Friday, ending a search that started Thursday, hours after he was seen being carried away down the swollen West River.

David Holcomb's body was found about half a mile south of West Townshend village, just off Old Route 30, according to Vermont State Police Detective Lt. Kraig LaPorte, who was helping to coordinate more than 80 searchers Friday morning.

LaPorte said that friends and family of Holcomb were searching for him as were police Friday and were the first to find his body, about two miles downstream from the Volunteer Bridge on Route 100.

"It's difficult for people to stay at bay," said the detective, who said that police preferred that under such dangerous conditions the search would be left to professionals.

Holcomb and a friend, Matt St. Peter, 27, had put their kayaks into the West River Thursday afternoon shortly after 3 p.m. at the Jamaica State Park, a popular site for the whitewater kayakers who traditionally flock to the river at this time of year.

LaPorte said that Holcomb and St. Peter had brought personal floatation devices with them in their kayaks, but hadn't put them on. Holcomb could swim, he said, and had some experience in a kayak on flat water, but he had "very limited" experience with whitewater kayaking.

Holcomb and St. Peter only made it about a mile down the West River before St. Peter got caught in debris in the river and abandoned his kayak, LaPorte said. St. Peter, who was behind Holcomb in the river, saw his friend out of his kayak, going down the river, but he didn't see what caused him to leave his kayak. St. Peter was able to get to shore, LaPorte said, and went for help.

The police detective said that Holcomb's body was found approximately four miles downstream from where he and St. Peter put in their kayaks, and about two miles from where searchers found his kayak on Thursday.

State police, aided by several organizations, had searched for Holcomb on Thursday afternoon and evening, but had suspended their search when darkness fell, and resumed Friday morning.

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LaPorte said that searchers were on foot and used ATVs and a helicopter. The helicopter crew confirmed the location of Holcomb's body before they had to leave the search because the chopper was running low on fuel.

The detective said that the water temperature was still very cold, about 34 degrees, but he said he didn't know how long someone could survive before becoming hyperthermic. Holcomb and St. Peter were wearing T-shirts and shorts, he said. The past few days have been unseasonably warm with temperatures touching 80, adding to the already high spring runoff.

He said the office of the chief medical examiner would do an autopsy on Holcomb's body but foul play was not suspected.

LaPorte said that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had reduced the flow at the Ball Mountain Dam in Jamaica on the West River in an effort to find Holcomb, and that the downstream Townshend Dam had been holding back water to help searchers as well.

Searchers used the Jamaica Fire Department as a base of operation, as Jamaica Fire and Rescue, Wardsboro Fire and Rescue, Townshend Fire Department, Brattleboro Fire Department, Upper Valley Wilderness Response Team, Stowe Mountain Rescue, Rescue Inc., Hartford Fire Department, Bethel-Barnard-Stockbridge Swift Water Rescue, New England K-9, Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife, Windham County Sheriff Department, the Vermont State Police Search and Rescue Team all collaborated on the effort.

Holcomb's death is the fourth drowning in the West River Valley in a week. An Elmore woman, Nicole Waring, visiting her parents in neighboring Wardsboro, killed herself and her two young daughters on Saturday.

The incidents took place about seven miles apart, and LaPorte said that many of the rescue crews and members of the state police who were involved in the Waring tragedy last weekend were back helping to find Holcomb.

"It's been a long week for fire and rescue crews, and the Vermont State Police," said LaPorte. "It's been a difficult week."

"But this is what emergency services do for a living," he said. "They don't hesitate to pick up and go to the next call."

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