

Wardens polish their

By Joanne M. Haas/DNR Bureau of Law Enforcement

It's like a hockey puck on steroids. It demands keen eye-hand coordination, a healthy load of guts and a sprinkling of good luck. This rocket launcher of the boating world goes where no other boat can.

And it will keep screaming ahead—across ice, water, snow—until the operator rips a hockey skater stop. That's a 180 spin—on a dime. Whoosh!

Yup, this amphibious gem has no brakes. If you're clinging to a treetop above rising flood waters filled with a lot of debris, the airboat with a trained DNR warden at the helm is your ticket to getting your boots on the ground. If you're watching the thin ice crack beneath your feet and you're more than a mad dash to the shore, the airboat most likely is your ticket to drier climate.

Wisconsin is heading into airboat season—also known as flooding—and DNR conservation wardens are wasting no time getting prepped to help anyone in need.

"We are gearing up for our flood response," Regional Warden Rick Rosen of Wisconsin's west central counties says. He leads the wardens whose territory includes the mighty Mississippi River—one of the most researched and well-traveled rivers in the world.

This is why last month seven Wisconsin conservation wardens joined Minnesota Department of Natural Resources wardens and several Minnesota county sheriff departments for training with the highly specialized airboats. It is not for the weak of heart—nor sensitive of stomach.

"We tested our skills on all sorts of nasty ice conditions, open water, mock rescues and nighttime operation," Rosen says of the all-hours training in real-time scenarios on snow, glare and breaking ice. "Believe me, it will raise the hair on your

neck if you've never experienced it."

Here's one of those authentic drills that comes precariously close to real life:

The warden gets a call at night there is a person clinging to a tree top in rapidly rising flood waters.

A regular rescue boat is not going to be able to get to that person due to debris and the vegetation swirling in the flood waters.

It's a call for the airboat, which can travel on the surface and negotiate the debris beneath it.

And the warden in the airboat now must negotiate maneuvering as rapidly as possible through and over debris, ready to pull off one of those hockey skate stops at any moment.

"The training teaches you what an airboat can and cannot do," Rosen said. "But more importantly, you learn how to handle them and how to know your limits and boating capabilities in a controlled setting."

The DNR wardens of the Mississippi River team have three airboats. But this will change.

Rosen says plans are in the works to buy a larger one—possible 16 feet—in the coming weeks. The airboats are based with the La Crosse wardens but they can be sent anywhere on demand.

"We are a deployable asset for our state—as well as neighboring states. The relationship that we built with

airboat skills before

(Minnesota law enforcement agencies) means we are just a phone call away. And it's the other way around."

Minnesota DNR Warden Scott Fritz and his fellow airboat trainers should be highly commended on their airboat training program, Rosen says, adding the Wisconsin wardens were thankful to be invited.

"The relationships and operational preparedness that is established during these training events will undoubtedly pay off during an emergency," Rosen said.

As flexible as these boats are, Rosen says there are a few cases when the boats will not function. That includes a wet sandbar, thick mud or extremely heavy wet vegetation when a winch may be the only way to get out of the situation.

"You'll find them in shallow water and other areas where out-drive motors are not going to function," Rosen said. "You'll find them where you have ice to water to slush. An airboat can run on land, water, ice or snow. They are so versatile."

However, the airboat is not the first choice for deep water because they do not have the stability found in standard boats. With an operator and a large motor perched up high, their center of gravity shifts and makes them more top heavy. The larger airboats can hold six people while smaller airboats can hold about

three.

To operate, Rosen says you need good hand-eye coordination and a lot of practice. "Ideally, you'd want 30 to 40 hours a year in differing conditions to maintain your skills. This is not a traditional boat."

Rosen says it's more like "running an airplane on the water."

Just before the operator fires up the airboat, the operator must yell 'CLEAR!'

"That's because you need to always be aware of what is behind you and in front of you," Rosen said. "Whatever is behind will suffer the consequences of heavy prop wash debris and whatever is in front threatens to be sucked into the propeller with devastating results."

The airboat comes in different sizes. It has an aluminum hull and is lightweight.

Years ago, airboats were equipped with airplane motors and with wooden propellers.

"We still have one from the 1970s," Rosen said. "Now, most of the airboats have vehicle engines like a truck motor. And instead of a wooden propeller in the back, you may see one of composite materials."

The boats hulls often are coated with quarter-inch polymer, which allows them to skim across surfaces with less friction and more protection. Some also are fitted with a grass

spring flood season

rake in the front that knocks down vegetation while better protecting the prop as it glides along.

During the training wardens learned if the airboat enters the water from a height of 2 feet or more, the bow likely will plunge underwater but eventually it will float up. This is where nerves of steel, experience and timing come into play.

“You can’t overreact. You have to stay calm for a few seconds to let the bow come back up,” Rosen said.

“Yes, you will be taking on water, but the bilge pumps will manage that later. Heavy acceleration at this point would undoubtedly submarine the boat to the sinking point.”

While the chances of spring floods can make anyone nervous, Rosen says he hopes the public can take some sense of calm knowing their wardens are gearing up for what nature may throw in Wisconsin’s way — even if it demands a whole slew of those hockey-skater stops.



A warden with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources shoots across an ice floe in the Mississippi River during an airboat training exercise held last month with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. (Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources)