

Shrinking Rock River reflects dry summer

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By Dan Hinkel /Gazette Staff

A patch of mud, grass and beer cans peeks through the surface of the Rock River at Janesville 's Monterey Park .

A monstrous dead tree clings to the Centerway Dam.

Up and down the river, the Rock bears the marks of schizophrenic spring and summer weather.

First came the rains.

The city absorbed 11.46 inches in May and June combined, the sixth-highest May-June total since 1948. The sky dumped 7.19 inches in May alone, the second highest May total since 1948.

Then in July and August, as chilly air stole the summer, the rain let up.

In July, precipitation was more than an inch lower than the average of 3.9 inches. As of Monday, 3.1 inches of rain had poured on Janesville , short of the August average of 3.8 inches.

The Rock River stood at 10.96 feet on June 1 at the Afton height gauge. On Monday, the gauge read just more than 4 feet.

The high-low spring and summer have left more visible debris in the river than in past years, said Cliff Englert, parks supervisor.

"There is more flotsam in the river than there normally is," he said.

Removing flotsam from the river is a standard chore that was only made worse with this year's high water, Englert said.

The city and contractors clear flotsam that accumulates at dams and bridges using a truck with a boom that scoops up debris.

But this was a special year for such projects, he said.

"This year the water got so low that the contractor had to bring in a boat and do some chainsaw work from the boat," Englert said.

The tree lodged in Centerway Dam is the responsibility of North American Hydro , Englert said.

The raised river also transported a heavy load of sand and silt down river, but the deposits are nothing the city worries about, he said.

"There may be more material there than is normally there, but it's not anything that we normally take action on," he said.

Englert recognized the frustration boaters feel, with boating restricted on the river for much of the summer.

"You couldn't get in the river, and then all of a sudden it's so low that you might not want to," he said.

But Englert said he doesn't think the low water should keep boats on land.

"I believe it's still safe to boat," he said. "We'll continue to watch it, and if there is a low water problem, we'll certainly be contacting the press and letting people know."

On the upside, intrepid anglers have hooked more fish this summer, said two Janesville bait shop owners.

Matt Henn and Debby Oliver, who own Watersedge Bait and Tackle near Monterey Park , said the high river kept some away and left more fish for hardcore casters.

"If you've been able to get out, it's probably been better this year," Henn said.

Oliver said some stripes of fish have bitten more than others.

"The crappies have just been awesome," she said.

A fisherman recently hauled in a walleye that stretched the tape past 29 inches, Oliver said.

The conditions are right for a good run of walleye this fall, Henn said.

"Right now, the water's pretty close to a perfect level," he said.

Henn would like to see rain keep the river at its current level.

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