

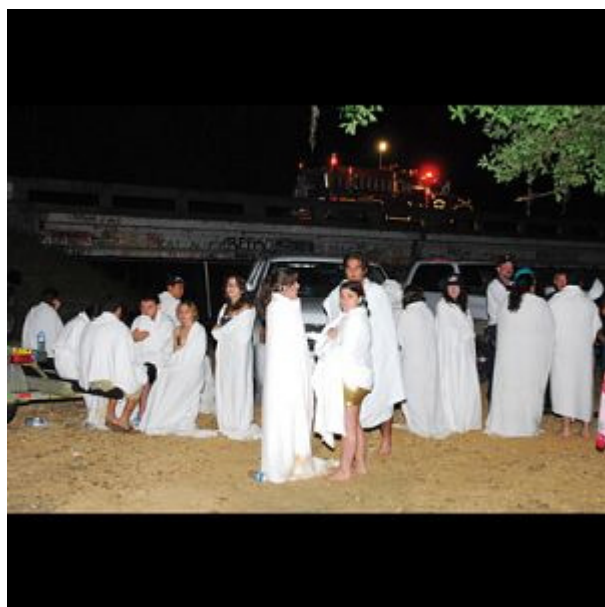
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More details on river rescue



— Mark Skinner / Floridan

People rescued from the Chipola River Saturday night are wrapped in blankets to get warm at Magnolia Landing.

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Rescuers plucked more than dozen people from Spring Creek and the Chipola River Saturday as darkness descended on Jackson County and left the tubers struggling to find their way out of the water. In a press release from the Jackson County Sheriff's Office, authorities released details of the multi-agency rescue operation.

The sheriff's office credited private citizen Johnny Barfield with rescuing several of the stranded tubers, and summoning help for the others in distress he could not reach.

Barfield said he heard people yelling for help around 6:15 p.m., and that he put as many as he could in his boat when he found them.

The people he rescued told him there were others, and that the group had been separated as they floated

down Spring Creek toward the Chipola River.

Barfield told authorities the water near the creek was flowing in reverse, which sent some of the tubers tumbling back into that waterway rather than allowing them to reach the river.

Many of the distressed tubers were clinging to trees and fallen branches, Barfield reported as he brought those he could to shore.

The sheriff's office dive team and officers from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission responded. Launching their boats at the Magnolia Boat Landing, they headed north up the river toward Spring Creek.

All along the way, people floating down river toward the landing reported there were a number of tubers still stranded along the creek and river.

Those initially rescued reported that the gathering darkness and thick vegetation made it difficult to see. "Many of the tubes were entangled and deflated," authorities reported in the press release. "Floats and debris were scattered along the waterways and into the swampy areas along the creek."

The dive team found six people stranded on the bank of the Chipola River about a quarter-mile south of the Spring Creek entrance.

The rescuers continued toward Spring Creek and heard voices screaming for help as they entered the creek.

About a mile into the creek, they found eight more tubers and loaded them onto the rescue boat as well. Ricky McAlpin, who owns Bear Paw Canoe Trails, had rescued three tubers before the county and state teams arrived.

Other civilian volunteers had helped seven more people who had been stranded on the creek.

Two people managed to get out of the water on their own, and were picked up by Fish and Wildlife officers as they walked along the State Road 71 railroad tracks seeking help. Four others walked to safety on their own and were located at Arrowhead Campgrounds.

Jackson County Fire Rescue received the rescued tubers on shore, and treated those who needed further assistance. Their biggest complaint was being extremely cold, according to the press release.

McAlpin said some of the tubers were his customers and some were not — the three he picked up were not, he said.

He said he was impressed by the county and state rescue teams.

"They did an excellent job getting those people out of the water," he said. He said he also wished to clarify one issue.

At some point, McAlpin said, a deputy commented he was under the impression that Fish and Wildlife had asked McAlpin not to put anybody on the river that day because of flooding.

In fact, he says no one had asked him not to do business on the river Saturday. Furthermore, he said, the river had crested Thursday below flood stage and was not flooding at the time the drama unfolded.

He said that on Sunday, after the fact, a Fish and Wildlife officer did ask him to refrain from putting people on the river for a time, and he honored the request.

McAlpin said he thinks the situation unfolded as it did because some tubers elected to stay on the river too long. Some of the rescued tubers, several Florida State students in particular, have been quoted as saying they think they should have had better warnings about the river being as high as it was and with as strong a current as they encountered. But McAlpin said he believes he acted responsibly and that the crisis would have been averted if the tubers hadn't lingered on the river, rather than simply floating down and getting out.

He said he regularly advises his customers not to linger too long on the waterway and get caught on it after dark, and did so that day as well.