The Environment and Conservation

TN State Parks and TWRA offer affordable 'Kayaking 101' classes to launch National Boating Week for safety and fun

NASHVILLE – Tennessee State Parks and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) are teaming up with paddlesports leaders across the state to offer low-cost beginner kayaking classes Saturday, May 17 to kick off National Safe Boating Week.

For more information, visit https://tnstateparks.com

Now in its fourth year, the initiative has helped hundreds of Tennesseans safely dip their paddles into kayaking for the first time. Last year, 115 students received training at Tennessee State Parks at the coordinated "Kayaking 101" event. The effort was recognized last year with the National Safe Boating Council's Communications Community Impact Award.

The event is supported by instructor volunteers across Tennessee who are certified to teach paddlesports by the American Canoe Association (ACA), whose nationally recognized standards guide paddlesports instruction for the event.

Participating Tennessee State Parks are:

Big Ridge State Park
Booker T. Washington State Park
Harpeth River State Park
Harrison Bay State Park
Hiwassee/Ocoee Scenic River State Park
Johnsonville State Park
Long Hunter State Park
Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park
Seven Islands State Birding Park
Warriors' Path State Park

"We're proud to do this again, and we are grateful to the instructors for this event," said Greer Tidwell, deputy commissioner for Conservation at the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC). "We are fortunate to have TWRA as our partner, and we look forward to the success of this year's training."

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"We welcome Tennesseans to experience paddling and kayak fishing on our beautiful waterways," said TWRA Executive Director Jason Maxedon. "Safety is our number one priority, and our officers are proud to support this important outdoor recreation initiative."

"Our volunteer instructors are excited to help people build the confidence to get out on the water and love it," said Andrea White, ACA Southeastern Chair. "One good day of training can turn a nervous newbie into a lifelong paddler."

Each class costs just $15 per person, including kayak rental and all necessary gear – to receive training that typically costs between $75 and $150.

Each park's session is limited to 15 participants. Instructors are ACA-certified Tennessee volunteers backed by experienced safety teams. Tennessee State Park Rangers and TWRA officers will be present at select sites to reinforce paddlecraft safety and awareness.

Returning for its third year, the Adaptive Kayaking 101 class at Booker T. Washington State Park offers specialized gear and instruction for individuals with physical disabilities.

For the first time, this event will also include Kayak Fishing 101 at Long Hunter State Park. Participants will need to have a valid Tennessee Fishing License to participate.

In the wake of Hurricane Helene, paddlesports volunteers who typically support this event at David Crockett Birthplace State Park are unable to hold a class due to hurricane damage at the park. But demonstrating the long-term community partnerships the event has built, volunteers from Appalachian Paddling Enthusiasts are planning to work with park rangers for a short educational video on how to recreate on rivers safely.

Supporting organizations for the event include volunteer instructors certified by the American Canoe Association; Appalachian Paddling Enthusiasts; Blues City Kayaks; Bluff City Canoe Club; Catalyst Sports; Chattanooga Therapeutic Recreation Services; Chota Canoe Club; East Tennessee Whitewater Club; Nolichucky Outdoor Learning Institute; Team River Runner-Atlanta; Tennessee RiverLine; Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association; Tennessee Valley Canoe Club; Tennessee Kayak Anglers; and West Tennessee Canoe and Kayak Club.

Space is limited. Registration begins today at the Safe Boating Week page on the Tennessee State Parks website. A free online course is also available, but in-person instruction with a certified instructor is strongly encouraged.

Hegseth looks at refocusing resources and service members standards

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say, 'we'll stop shooting at your ships we'll stop shooting at your drones,' this campaign will end, but until then, it will be unrelenting."

On May 5, 2025, the situation in the Red Sea changed.

"President Trump announced that the Houthis, exhausted by our nearly daily operations, have capitulated and do not want to fight," Parnell said. "President Trump has been very clear from the beginning: freedom of navigation is the objective; whether the strikes continue is up to the Houthis."

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In an additional executive order, the president also classified gender dysphoria as incompatible with military service, stating, "Consistent with the military mission and longstanding DOD policy, expressing a false 'gender identity' divergent from an individual's sex cannot satisfy the rigorous standards necessary for military service."

In keeping with that direction, Hegseth signed a policy memorandum in February 2025, which detailed, among other things, that service members must serve in accordance with sex, that gender dysphoria is incompatible with military service and that service members diagnosed with gender dysphoria will be processed for separation by their respective services.

Actions by the department regarding that memorandum had been paused due to legal challenges until this week.

"On Wednesday, the Supreme Court allowed President Trump's ban on transgender military service to take effect," Parnell said.

With the decision, the department will now move ahead with the president's and the secretary's direction.

"Service members who have a current diagnosis or history of or exhibit symptoms with gender dysphoria may elect to separate voluntarily," Hegseth said. "There's a timeline here. And then eventually, involuntarily, if necessary."

Finally this week, Hegseth attended the Special Operations Forces Week conference in Tampa, Florida, where he addressed operators in attendance.

"He pledged to keep standards high and to leave wokeness and weakness behind," Parnell said.

During the event, Hegseth thanked the SOF community for maintaining their own high physical standards and noted that standards must also be high throughout the military services.

"The standards need to be high, and they need to be gender neutral," Hegseth said. "If you can do the job, you're in that formation. And if you can't, you're not. That is restoring the warrior ethos, and it's something we're seeing across all formations that the troops are responding to."

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