

SPORTS, 1C

**UNC KNOCKS
TEXAS OUT**



LOCAL & TEXAS, 1B

**ELM MOTT FIRE
OFFICIAL SPEAKS**



BUSINESS, 5A

**SUMMER AT
MOVIELAND**

Waco Tribune-Herald

119 years serving  the Heart of Texas

uesday, June 21, 2011

In God we trust

AIRPORT BEACH DROWNINGS

Hidden dangers at the lake

Shallow water
may be cause
of tragedies

By Jessica Chia
Tribune-Herald staff writer

In a tragic twist of fate, one contributing factor to three drownings this month in Lake Waco may have been lower-than-usual lake levels.

The lower levels are causing area swimmers to venture farther into deeper and more turbulent waters, park officials and visitors said.

The water level at Lake Waco has dropped about 2½ feet below the normal lake level of 462 feet above sea level, a city water quality

See **SHALLOW**, Page 3A



Staff photo — Rod Aydelette

Morgen Cleveland (left), 7, plays on Airport Beach at Lake Waco on Monday with his twin brother, Jordien; sister, RubyAnn, 3; and mother, Jodie Cleveland. The Bellmead residents were swimming in the designated area marked by yellow buoys.

SHALLOW

From Page 1A

manager said.

Swimmers gathered at Airport Beach on Monday — the location of three drownings in three weeks — said the area roped off as safe for swimming now is too shallow for swimming.

"If you go out to the yellow line, it goes to your waist, so you really can't swim, said Leta Carroll, a 47-year-old Bellmead home health caregiver who frequently visits Airport Beach.

"So you're going to think, 'Let me go farther, let me go farther.' It's only natural," she said.

Dangerous areas

All three drownings occurred outside the designated swimming area, officials said.

Even before the recent drownings, park rangers spent a lot of time talking to lake-goers about water safety, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers park ranger Elizabeth Anderson said.

When they encounter people outside designated swim areas, they emphasize that roped-off portions of the lake are safer because they have a gradual slope and are free of hazards such as drop-offs, boulders or trees.

But swimming in other areas is not against the law, so park rangers can't force people to move, Anderson said.

Rangers also can't force people to wear life vests. But it's a smart idea, even if people are in designated swimming areas, Anderson said.

People often say they don't need them because they are strong swimmers, Anderson said. But people tend to overestimate their abilities, and even accomplished swimmers can fall prey to a circumstance such as a leg cramp, she said.

The corps offers life vests at lake parks that people can use for free.

"It's not a swimming pool," Anderson said. "There are hazards associated with the lake. You can get into trouble very quickly."

Dennis Carroll, 48, who grew up swimming in the Atlantic Ocean, said he goes out to the buoys when he actually wants to swim now that the water levels have dropped. But he said, "You've got to know what you're doing, be careful. Kids don't do that. They're daredevils."

Jodie Cleveland, a 34-year-old Bellmead mother who brought her children to Airport Beach, said she thinks the shallow depth of the designated area makes swimming outside of it more appealing: "Teenagers want to swim out there, but it's there for a reason. My kids get in trouble if they even think about crossing that line."

Cleveland, a former life-guard and swim team coach, said that anyone can drown, depending on the circumstances.

But "you have a better

chance of getting help in the yellow area," she said.

Dustin Westerfield, a 17-year-old La Vega High School senior, said he always swims out to the buoys because, "You can't touch (the bottom of the lake)."

His brother, Matt Westerfield, a 21-year-old TSTC student who has been coming to Airport Beach since he was young, said "We used to get a bunch of people to grab the yellow lines and push them out deeper."

He said a lot of the danger comes from people who overestimate their aquatic ability.

"People think they're stronger than what they are. He thinks he can swim across the lake," said Matt Westerfield, gesturing toward Dustin. "But he can't."

Gusting winds

Lolly Grunski, 85, of Hewitt, wrote in a letter to the Tribune-Herald that said wind also can be a dangerous factor in the lake.

Grunski recently swam out to the boundary of the swimming area and described being "pulled under constantly" by high winds as she tried to make it back to shore.

"My husband came to my rescue and helped pull me to shore. I truly think I would have drowned if he had not been able to help me," Grunski wrote.

Anderson said there are no tides or currents in lakes, but that high winds do affect the surface of the water.

"I think the wind is a fac-

tor. ... It almost knocks you off your feet when you're standing there on the ground, so I could certainly see it adding to the danger in the water," she said.

Waco police spokesman Sgt. W. Patrick Swanton said wind lowers visibility, which makes it harder to see someone in the water, and it also makes it likely that they will not be in the same place they were seen going under.

If a situation arises where someone is drowning at the lake, the corps recommends the "reach, throw, row and go" approach, Anderson said.

The first thing onlookers should try is to reach out to the person with an object, Anderson said. It could be a life vest, swim noodle or inflatable toy. The goal is to get the person to grab the object so he or she can be dragged back to safety, she said.

The next option is to throw something that floats to the person, Anderson said.

If that doesn't work, onlookers can try to get on something inflatable themselves and row or paddle it out to the person. The final step is to scream for help or go find someone who can help.

"Anything to keep you out of reach of the person in trouble," Anderson said.

A person who is drowning is usually panicking, Anderson said. That can result in the rescuer also being pulled underwater and drowning.

Tribune-Herald reporters Kirsten Crow and Cindy V. Culp contributed to this story.