



Members of the Wasaga Beach Fire Department prepare for one of several ice water rescue training scenarios on the Nottawasaga River.

Town of Wasaga Beach Photo

Keeping our community safe

Training for ice water rescue is all part of the job
for Wasaga Beach firefighters

It's a mild Saturday morning in late January and members of the Wasaga Beach Fire Department are gathered along the shore of the Nottawasaga River.

Firefighters train regularly for all kinds of scenarios they might encounter on a call

and the focus today is on rescuing people who've gone through the ice.

The firefighters are wearing what's called a dry suit.

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"It's an insulated suit that keeps the water out and at the same time it keeps you warm," Deputy Fire Chief Craig Williams said.

Prior to the training exercise, firefighters had to complete a swim test to ensure they are OK in the water.

"It involves them doing various tasks, such as being able to tread water for 15 minutes and being able to swim lengths of the pool with a PFD and without one," Williams said.

Once the swim test is done, firefighters attend a three-hour dry-land training course, where they go over the various pieces of equipment they'll use during an ice water rescue, as well as other aspects they must know before venturing on the ice or into the frigid water.

This training includes practice throwing ropes and tying knots.

"The suit we wear is very cumbersome and because your hands are covered you have very little dexterity," Williams said. "You're kind of like the marshmallow man. So it's a challenge and you need to get use to what it feels like to be in the suit and doing things in it."

On training day, at the river's edge, safety is reiterated by senior members of the department.

Firefighters always work in teams when involved in a rescue on the ice.

"We always try to approach a situation from upstream," Firefighter Jason Cameron noted. "That's just in case something happens. You don't want to be caught fighting the current to get back up to your patient."

Cameron joined the department in 2007 and was hired full-time in 2009. He's taken part in the ice water rescue training every year.

"It's an unnerving feeling if you've never done it before," he said. "Nobody thinks of ice water as enjoyable. So when you first go in you expect a big rush, a shock, and that you can't breathe, but once you get comfortable and use the equipment, put your trust and faith in it, you're OK."

Cameron says that with the dry suit on he's quite warm.

"I'm actually sweating in this," he said.

When an exercise begins, a member of the department volunteers to get in the water. Pretend radio calls to the dispatch centre are made and continued as firefighters "arrive" on the scene.

In one exercise, two firefighters travel on their knees across the ice, towards open water, where another firefighter awaits rescue.

As the two firefighters make their way across the ice, they bring with them a rope they will use to help retrieve their comrade.

Where the ice ends and the open water starts, one of the two firefighters jumps in. Cries for help can be heard from the man they are rescuing.

The rope that was brought out across the ice is placed around the person they are helping. The firefighter at the water's edge signals to two other firefighters closer to shore and they cautiously move across the ice with a small raft-like device.

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At the water's edge, firefighters help get the man they are rescuing out of the water and onto the raft. They then use ropes to drag the raft across the ice and back to shore.

Watch the rescue here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKcVzwWZGG0>

The whole exercise happens with clockwork precision.

"We need them to be comfortable in their skillsets and the potential emergencies they might face," Williams said. "This training also gives them an opportunity to understand their own limitations."

Every winter the department has to deal with real-life ice water rescue calls.

"I would say several times a year," Williams said. "We've had snowmobiles go through, cars, trucks. We've had people out walking on the river or the bay and they go through. So this is why we need to be prepared."

Williams said the public should keep in mind that no ice is truly safe to be on.

People that do go through the ice should remember what's called the one-10-one rule.

"What that means is when you fall through the ice you have one minute to calm yourself down. The best thing you can do is slow down your breathing, determine your environment, and calm down. After that you have about 10 minutes of purposeful movement before your muscles start to seize up," Williams explained.

During the 10-minute window, Williams said people should move towards the edge of the ice and attempt to get out of the water.

"You want to get your hands up on top of the ice and kick as hard as you can to get your upper body up onto the ice. And once that occurs then you should lay flat on the ice and roll to the shore."

Still, Williams said, the best thing is to just not go out on the ice in the first place.

- **Prepared by the Wasaga Beach Communications Department in partnership with the Wasaga Beach Fire Department.**