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## Parkway rangers urge drivers to pay attention

*Karen Chávez*

The Blue Ridge Parkway motto on signs and key chains tells visitors to: "Enjoy the View. Watch the Road."

It might sound like an oxymoron, but staring at the spectacular scenery while driving on the curvy parkway is what gets a lot of people into trouble, into an accident or into a hearse.

Last year there was a sharp increase in motor vehicle accidents after years of steady decreases. As the high-volume spring and summer season heats up, parkway rangers are trying to get the word out that visitors need to slow down and keep their eyes on the road, with safety initiatives like lowering speed limits in commuter zones, increasing safety signs and doing periodic road checks.

"The summer for us started about two months ago," said Tim Francis, Pisgah District Ranger for the parkway. "We started seeing traffic picking up, wrecks starting to happen."

Accidents are not only starting earlier in the year, but are on the increase, Francis said. After a 10-year low of 277 motor vehicle accidents on the parkway in 2006, the number jumped to 306 in 2007, including six fatalities. About half of the accidents and four of the deaths involved motorcycles.

"The biggest factor is people not giving their full time and attention," Francis said. "Besides the view, there are other obstacles, such as bicycles, talking on the cell phone. People need to slow down and pay attention."

Inexperienced motorcycle drivers also seem to be a factor in many wrecks, said John Garrison, the parkway's chief ranger.

"The motorcycle wrecks are mostly up in the higher elevations, in scenic areas on bright, pretty days," Garrison said, indicating that the culprit is riders checking out the scenery rather than bad weather. "The Blue Ridge Parkway is not the place for new riders. One curve is not like the next."

Francis said the so-called commuter zone — that stretch of parkway from the intersection with U.S. 191 north to the intersection with U.S. 70 — is one of the most heavily used sections with the most potential for speeding and for accidents.

The area of highest volume is between U.S. 74 and U.S. 25.

"Between 7 and 8 in the morning, as many as 1,000 cars go by," Francis said of the four-mile section. "It can be bumper to bumper. That's the same number of cars that go by (in the five hours) between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. I'd estimate that 99 percent of those people are using it to commute."

While there's nothing wrong with driving the parkway to get to work, rangers say it's not the road to use if you're in a hurry.

Last week, the parkway extended the 35-mph zone from just north of the new parkway Destination Center to the intersection with U.S. 74, about one mile long. The speed limit on the rest of the parkway, unless otherwise marked, is 45 mph.

The parkway, which is the most visited unit of the National Park Service, stretches 469 miles from Virginia down to Cherokee. It was built during the 1930s as a recreational roadway.

"The parkway has two missions: protection of the resource and recreational enjoyment," Garrison said.

“We’d rather people not use the parkway as a commuter zone, but if they use it to regain their thoughts and relax for 15 minutes, then it’s worth it. You need to be in the same mind-set between highway 191 and 74 as you are when you’re going to Mount Mitchell. You need to slow down and pay attention. You can’t use it to drive 65 mph.”

## Road closed

The section of Blue Ridge Parkway from Milepost 367, just north of the Craggy Gardens picnic area, north to Milepost 355, near Mount Mitchell, will be closed for road repairs through spring 2009. The picnic area will be open May 16, but the Craggy Gardens Visitor Center will remain closed. Mount Mitchell State Park is open and accessible from the north. For updated road and weather conditions, call the parkway’s automated line at 298-0398.

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