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Avoid the road rage

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PORTSMOUTH - It's hot and humid, and you have just been stuck in traffic that hasn't moved for miles.

The cars have finally started moving, but the person driving behind you seems to think you're not going fast enough. The car races forward and abruptly merges to the next lane to pass you.

It's a situation like this that can escalate into aggressive driving, and sometimes violent acts of road rage, that Seacoast police say they observe all the time.



State police in Maine and New Hampshire agree the summer tourist season is when reports of aggressive driving increase, with this Fourth of July weekend expected to be no exception.

"The roads don't get bigger in the summer," New Hampshire State Police Lt. Michael Hambrook said. "They're the same roads and only capable of handling so much traffic."

Maj. Randall Nichols, of the Maine State Police's Operations Division, was quick to point out the difference between aggressive driving - which he said is a growing problem - and road rage.

Aggressive driving includes disregarding traffic controls, following another vehicle too closely, speeding, and unsafe lane changes, Nichols explained.

Road rage, he said, is a criminal act in which "an operator or passenger intends to harm someone through the use of their motor vehicle or another weapon."

He said police try to stop aggressive behavior before it starts with special enforcement patrols in areas with a high number of aggressive driving-related accidents, such as Route 236 in Eliot, Maine, or Route 1 in Kittery and York, Maine.

Nichols said the alleged case of road rage that happened May 26 on Interstate 95 in Kittery

is a rare case.

"Road rage is not a serious problem in the state of Maine," he said.

In that incident, Vincent Nigl Jr., of Old Orchard Beach, was arrested for allegedly flashing a gun at another driver after the driver accidentally swerved into Nigl's car as he attempted to pass him.

In New Hampshire, on the other hand, Hambrook had a different opinion.

Although state police records do not track the number of road-rage reports, Hambrook said he has observed an increase in aggressive behavior on the roads.

"Just based on my experience, I think if you were able to graph it, it would definitely be an upward curve," he said.

In the past two months, two men were arrested in separate road-rage incidents involving guns.

Christopher Mooneyhan, 17, of Derry, was arrested on June 5 for allegedly firing shots at another teenager's truck as he drove along Route 125 in Newton. Before the alleged shots were fired, Mooneyhan had allegedly been tailgating the truck driver, who slammed on to his breaks, causing the two cars to collide.

On May 25, a State Police trooper caught William Jsirandanis, 19, on videotape as he swept across lanes of traffic, cut off a tractor-trailer, and chased another drive down and flashed a pistol at him on Interstate 93 in Hooksett.

Locally, Hambrook said the problem may be in part due to the Seacoast's population growth in recent years. He said rush hour across the Little Bay Bridge in Newington and weekend traffic near the Hampton tolls are constant trouble spots.

Hambrook said he'll be "curious to see" if the installation of E-ZPass in New Hampshire this summer will reduce some of the aggressive driving behavior at the tolls.

Hambrook said he also sees changes in people's lifestyles that have caused aggressiveness on the Seacoast and across the country.

"You didn't have the fast-paced society you have now," Hambrook said. "I look at the microcosm of my own life: three kids, my wife and me, and we're trying to be a million places at once. It can be very stressful."

But Portsmouth Police Capt. Jim Tucker said he doesn't see much of a difference between drivers today and years ago. What's different is people's ability to report aggressive driving to police.

"It's reported more often now because everyone has a cell phone," Tucker said. "Cell phones make reporting of road rage more prevalent."

## **STOP THE RAGE**

Here are some tips to avoid losing control on the road:

- Give yourself plenty of time to get to your destination.

- Limit cell phone use: Distracted driving behavior like weaving in and out of lanes or following too closely can upset other people on the road.
- Recognize the consequences of your actions: Speeding, tailgating and other aggressive behavior can cause serious accidents.
- Ignore it: If someone is driving aggressively near you, don't make eye contact or hand gestures. Just let them pass by.
- Call police: If another driver just won't leave you alone, call police for assistance.

-Courtesy of AAA of Northern New England and The New Hampshire Traffic Safety Institute.

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