

Struck by lightning



Tarmo Hannula

Robyn Mueller, left, and Kirsten Olson receive help after lightning bolt struck them.

Girls burned as storm sweeps area

By KATHY SALAMON
and LISA JAFFE
STAFF WRITERS

Two girls were struck by lightning yesterday afternoon at Twin Lakes State Beach as an electrical storm created havoc in the harbor area of Santa Cruz.

The girls, Kirsten Olson, 13, of Quincy, and Robyn Mueller, 14, of Campbell, were taken to Community Hospital of Santa Cruz for treatment of burns they suffered in the lightning strike. A Community Hospital spokeswoman said this morning that the girls are in stable condition and were kept overnight for observation.

Jim Hart, chief ranger for

the Pajaro Coast district of the state parks, said the incident happened around 5 p.m. yesterday at the beach near Seventh Avenue.

When rescue workers arrived, he said, they found the girls were burned over about 20 percent of their bodies.

"I was near the beach around 14th Avenue," Hart said. "You could see the lightning was right there on the spot."

Since lightning will seek out high objects near water, Hart said, it is very dangerous to be on a boat at sea or on a beach during an electrical storm.

"I contacted a number of

people on the beach where I was and brought them back to a safer area," Hart said. "We hardly ever get lightning here, so people don't know what to do. Then, it hit so fast and instantly, the whole thing was over in three minutes."

A fishing boat, the Carol Cee, was also struck by lightning three times, the harbor patrol said.

The boat made it back into the harbor with minor damage and no injuries.

The storm caused some power outages in the Santa Cruz area. Radio station KSCO, which is located near the harbor, was knocked out for about half an hour after the storm.

In the southern part of the county, the Freedom Fire Department reported a small grass fire started by a strike.

Firefighter Sean Stumbaugh said lightning struck a utility pole on Rancho Road, blowing the transformer off the top.

"It was right around the time the girls were hit," he said. "It all happened within few minutes of each other."

Stumbaugh said the average bolt of lightning has at least 200,000 volts of electricity running through it.

Fire is one of the main concerns for officials during a thunderstorm, especially in

a drought situation when there is little moisture associated with the storms. Santa Cruz and Watsonville reported rainfall ranging from small amounts to mere traces.

The Department of Forestry in Monterey and San Benito counties said there were six lightning-related fires reported yesterday. Ron Miller, an member of the Emergency Command Center, said they were anticipating more fires in the next few days.

In Santa Cruz County, the Department of Forestry reported only one fire.

"Basically, we lucked out," said Fire Captain Kirk Mathew. However, he said, lightning fires do have a tendency to hide out and pop up later, so the department will be taking a plane out to survey the area later today.

The State Parks staff were in the midst of the storm as well. Ray Jenkins, the district superintendent, said that once you are away from the ocean, you can see the changes in the clouds that indicate thunderstorms are approaching.

"We have to watch for that build up," he said.

Concerns were high yesterday not only for the people out using the beaches, but for the open lands as well.

"We had one guy up at Wilder Ranch who called in and reported eight strikes just during our telephone call," he said. "It was scary out there for our staff."

Jenkins had some advice in case lightning strikes.

"If you are on the beach and can't get off, lie down," Jenkins said. Running for shelter near a tree, he said, could be a fatal mistake. "I've seen lightning blow trees apart."

According to the National Weather Service, there is a chance of more thunder and lightning today.

The NWS is calling for a 20 percent chance of afternoon thunderstorms today.

Aside from the forecast for thunderstorms, conditions are fairly normal for this time of year, Mike Smith, a weather service spokesman, said. But the thunder and lightning have taken everyone by surprise.

"We are not as prepared for this as other parts of the country," Smith said. "Here it's more a spectator sport."