Scouts BSA Safety Scenario for April: The Day-Two High-Water Crossing

For Scouts BSA (Ages 11–16)

Your troop is on **Day 2** of a three-day backpacking trip in a national forest. The first night brought **heavy rain**, and everyone wakes up to soaked tents, muddy trails, and a noticeably louder river nearby. After breakfast, the Patrol Leader checks the **trail map**, which shows a river crossing about two miles ahead. The map notes the crossing as "shallow—ankle to mid-shin in normal conditions."

When the troop reaches the crossing, it's clear the river is **much higher than usual**. The water is **above the knees** in the center, cloudy from runoff, and moving faster than normal. The rocks that are usually visible are now hidden beneath the surface.

The Patrol Leader says, "It's deeper, but the map says this is the crossing point. We can just go slow and help each other."

The first Scout steps into the water and manages to cross, though the current pushes hard against their legs. The second Scout follows but steps onto a submerged rock covered in algae. Their foot slips, and they fall sideways into the river. The Scout scrapes their shin on a rock and briefly goes underwater before popping back up. Their backpack is soaked, and they are shaken but able to stand.

Another Scout says, "You're okay, right? We don't need to tell the adults. The map said this was the right spot."

Leader's Guide: The Day-Two High-Water Crossing

Purpose of This Scenario

This scenario helps Scouts understand:

- How weather changes trail and river conditions
- Why maps are helpful but not substitutes for real-time hazard assessment
- How slips and falls in water can escalate quickly
- Why reporting injuries and near misses is required
- How to evaluate risk using the **SAFE Checklist**

Key Teaching Points

1. This Was a Real Injury With Serious Potential

The Scout scraped their leg and briefly went underwater, but the situation could have caused:

- A head injury from striking a rock
- A twisted ankle or broken bone
- A Scout being swept downstream
- Hypothermia from cold water and wet clothing
- Loss of essential gear for the remainder of the trip

This is both an **incident** and a **near miss**.

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2. Apply the SAFE Checklist

The SAFE Checklist (Supervision, Assessment, Fitness & Skills, Equipment & Environment) is a required framework for evaluating Scouting activities.

S — Supervision

- Youth attempted to assess the crossing without adult involvement.
- Adults must evaluate water hazards, especially when conditions change.
- Leaders should have recognized the increased risk after heavy rain.

A — Assessment of Risks

- The river was **above knee height**, a known danger threshold.
- The current was stronger than usual.
- Rocks were submerged and slippery.
- The map described *normal* conditions, not *current* conditions.
- Heavy overnight rain should have triggered a reassessment.

F — Fitness & Skills

- Scouts were carrying full backpacks, raising their center of gravity.
- Not all Scouts had experience with high-water crossings.
- Hip belts should have been unbuckled to prevent entrapment underwater.

E — Equipment & Environment

- Trekking poles or sticks should have been used to test footing.
- The environment had changed dramatically due to rain.
- Cold water increased risk of shock and reduced reaction time.
- A safer crossing point upstream or downstream should have been sought.

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3. Environmental Analysis: What Clues Did the Scouts Miss?

Encourage Scouts to identify the factors that made this crossing unsafe:

- Heavy overnight rain
- Water above the knees
- Faster current
- Submerged hazards
- Cold water
- Heavy backpacks
- Over-reliance on the map ("We've crossed here before")

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4. Connect to Scouting America Safety Expectations

Reinforce:

- Youth should not cross water above knee height without adult approval.
- Maps show typical conditions, not real-time hazards.
- Alternative crossings should be sought when water is high.
- Hip belts should be unbuckled before crossing.
- Trekking poles or sticks should be used to test footing.
- Adults must assess water hazards, not youth alone.

Ask Scouts directly: **"What does the Guide to Safe Scouting say about water hazards and river crossings?"**

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5. Teach Safer Decision-Making

Discuss with Scouts:

- When to stop and reassess
- How to identify safer crossing points (wider, shallower, slower water)
- When to turn back or change the route
- How to communicate concerns within the patrol
- Why "the map says it's fine" is not a safety plan

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6. What Leaders Should Do After an Injury

- Provide first aid
- Evaluate the Scout for shock or hypothermia
- Document the incident
- Submit the required Scouting America incident report
- Review water-crossing procedures with the troop
- Re-train youth leaders on hazard assessment
- Debrief the patrol on decision-making and communication

Suggested Leader Discussion Prompts

- "What signs showed the river was unsafe to cross?"
- "How did last night's heavy rain change the situation?"
- "How does the SAFE Checklist apply here?"
- "Why is knee-deep water a critical threshold for safety?"
- "How should we use a trail map without relying on it blindly?"
- "What safer options could the patrol have chosen?"
- "Why is reporting this incident important for future trips?"

Takeaway Message for Scouts

Maps show the route—but conditions change. When we use the SAFE Checklist, reassess hazards, and report injuries and near misses, we protect every Scout on the trail.