

Boating Safety

by Joe Udvari

Background - Jim McCarty and I were talking about fishing offshore and somehow got on the topic of boating safety. Jim thought a brief presentation at one of our PGIFC meetings would benefit some of our newer salt water anglers and reinforce some key aspects that more experienced members know (but sometimes fail to implement or enforce).

My first thought was there is no such thing as a brief presentation on this topic. As I thought more about this important but possibly boring topic to many (especially to those that assume they're invincible and are just wanting to go out and catch fish at any cost), my next thought was to just recommend taking a boating safety course taught by the experts. These courses are regularly given locally by the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary and also by the U.S. Power Squadron for a nominal fee. You can also study up on boating safety essentials online and get reduced insurance rates by passing associated tests. I believe everyone, regardless of birth date, who operates a boat should have successfully completed such a course anyway before getting their boat registered. But if I made it that easy on myself by just deferring to others, some likely would have dubbed me a slacker.

Since it's off-season and attendance at meetings is down this time of year, I opted for a "brief" article that provides some references and highlights, which can then be posted on our website to better serve our membership as a whole. I obviously can't go into detailed coverage here, but plan to cover some of my pet peeves as well as my own reckless behavior in order to get you to take boating safety more seriously every time you leave port.

Introduction - There are many very important components to keep you and your crew/passengers safe, and specific requirements/recommendations for some of these vary depending on the size of your vessel and where you boat/fish. Review "A Boater's Guide to the Federal Requirements for Recreational Boats - and Safety Tips" published by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Coast Guard Boating Safety Division. That is an 84-page pamphlet that is a handy primer/refreshers and also a useful resource to keep on your boat. It's free and can be picked up at any boat show and is usually in stock at the Fisherman's Village Dock Masters Office. See Figure 1 & Table 1 for this pamphlets Cover & Table of Contents, respectively.

After reviewing this pamphlet to make sure you have what's needed, get a vessel safety check done on your boat for free by a local member of the CG Auxiliary or Power Squadron. If you fail the inspection, you are not keel-hauled or fined, but instead get a nice checklist of deficient items which you can correct and then get re-inspected. After passing the safety check, you get a dandy sticker for your boat that might even expedite any on-the-water stops by law enforcement like FWC, the Sheriff's Marine Patrol, the Punta Gorda Marine Patrol and/or the Coast Guard. Do these safety inspections annually.

Pet Peeves

- Nothing infuriates me more than seeing a boat anchored or underway at night without the appropriate lights turned on. Collisions are a serious risk and tragedies including loss of life have recently occurred locally due to such reckless behavior. Check to see if the lights are working after you press the switch and also periodically while you're underway. Electrical contacts oxidize routinely in our humid saltwater environment which causes malfunctioning lights. Clean the contacts regularly especially if they are post mounted lights not hard wired permanently. Keep spare bulbs on board if you boat at night (between sunset and sunrise).
- Not knowing who has the right of way, including converging or crossing vessels, sail boats under power, etc. But, if you technically have the right of way, don't assume the other vessel sees you. Take the high road and yield to them, divert your course or just slow down to avoid collisions. Auto-pilots are great but without someone at the helm to keep a look-out, they don't steer around obstacles yet, including but not limited to boats, kayaks, crab pots, navigational markers, etc.
- Not using one's VHF or ship to shore radio properly. Might as well not have one and save yourself some money if you don't know which channels to use and when. That way you can avoid fines and potentially even prison time. Turn it on, monitor Ch. 16 so you can hear distress calls from others in need of help, and use it to hail assistance or your buddies if you want to check in with them. But better to use calling Ch. 09 to hail your buddies to relieve congestion on Ch. 16. However, quickly request to switch to recreational voice communication channels such as Ch. 68, 69, 71 or 72 (USA Channels). When you're done bragging about what you've caught, switch back to Channel 16 so you are in compliance with the law.
- Buzzing shorelines or other anglers fishing (anchored, casting, free-lining, drifting, trolling or fighting a fish, etc.) without care or regard to the disturbance being caused, such as possible damage to shallow seagrass/manatees/porpoises; creating prop scars; and/or cutting off lines or an anchor rode. Maybe not always a safety issue unless the buzzed party (not referring to alcohol or other medicinal substances here) has a gun on board or heavy sinkers they can hurl. Included in this pet peeve is dive boats setting up shop right next to you while fishing which requires you then to keep your distance of up to 300 feet from the dive flag even though you were at that location first. Be considerate if you expect others to be considerate of you.
- Not speaking clearly when using a VHF radio. The goal is to be heard and understood. Example: The Coast Guard announces 3 times in a row (usually very clearly) their identity and broadcast location, but then switches to their 'auctioneers' rate of speak to deliver their actual message. Maybe they could also repeat the actual message and coordinates 2 or 3 times so boaters know if they're potentially in a location to respond or if the broadcast is even relevant to them. Maybe the Feds will fix that when they decide to equitably distribute the red snapper resource among commercial, charter and recreational anglers, and forbid shrimping in a National Estuary comprised of 5 aquatic preserves. I digress. Back to boating safety, but these two sidebars could become safety issues.

- Not having enough rode to anchor securely or slow down the drift. If you lose power or are in distress, why make it harder for those coming to your aid just because you can't maintain your reported position? A 100' long anchor rode when fishing depths greater than 100' won't help.

Recklessness or Invincibility - Although Charlotte Harbor and its tributaries are fairly shallow with mostly a soft sandy bottom, it's still deep enough to drown in and has some hard oyster shell bottom which can mess up your boat, motor and/or life. When I moved here six years ago, I was told it's not if you will run aground, but rather when you will run aground. Unless you're knocked unconscious or are bleeding profusely, you can generally get out and push smaller boats off shallow sand bars, wait for a higher tide to float you off, walk or swim to shore or call SeaTow or Boat U.S. to give you a tow. Just ask others in the Club if you don't believe me. Jim McCarty (aka Dr. Runaground) might know a thing or two about it. By the way, make sure you get a towing membership. The annual price pales in comparison to the cost of a tow from Boca Grande Pass to home, let alone a tow home from 30 miles offshore. Plus you get a discount by being a PGIFC member.

Thunderstorms during summer months in Florida are not to be taken lightly. They can be fierce so seek shelter immediately. It helps if you have a weather app or radar (especially beyond 10 miles offshore out of cell phone range) to monitor their movement so you can steer around them. But that doesn't always work out.

In general, when fishing offshore in the Gulf as far as 50 miles out of Boca in my single engine 22' bay boat or 24' center console, I check the weather forecasts carefully and often. This includes Windfinder for wave height, direction and period, wind velocity and other factors, as well as Weather Underground's Marine forecast and radar imagery. In a center console 23' to 25' boat, I've learned it's best not to go out if it's blowing or gusting 20 mph and the wave height is 2' or more with a period of 3 seconds. I also don't like beam seas so I plan my fishing location according to wind and wave direction. In my 22' bay boat that has low gunnels, I cut the wave height and wind velocity maximums in half, and want to see similar or better forecasts the day before and the day after my planned trip. I also installed a second bilge pump in that boat and make sure all loose rags and gear that could potentially clog scuppers are properly stowed. With unexpected waves crashing over the bow you need quick drainage off your boat deck. Plus it's nice to have foul weather gear on board, even with full sunshine and 90 degree temperatures.

A PLB is a Personal Locator Beacon and an EPIRB is an Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon. These work off two satellite systems to convey your position to the Coast Guard and also provide a homing beacon to get them to within 300' of your location. If you fish offshore, please get one or both. I'm just following Jim Hoffman's lead here who recommended I get one when I started going offshore in my 22' Skeeter. Although I procrastinated a while, I finally bought a PLB after he asked me if my life is worth a couple hundred bucks. Thanks for your persistence Jim. Talk with him about on-board briefings before you shove off and other good safety tips he has. As an ex-Navy guy, he's got the know-how (stow the bait in the boat lockers if your sinking and throw empty coolers overboard for use as extra floatation devices). Do you really want to tread water with chum next to you?

Conclusion - Take boating safety seriously and follow up on the recommendations above. There are many more essential safety items you need to have or should have with you when heading out on the water. Some required, and some just a good idea or backup system (compass; charts; potable water; sunscreen; bolt or heavy duty wire cutters; a properly fitting self-inflatable hydrostatically activated and comfortable enough life vest that you will wear, especially when fishing by yourself; etc.). Do it not just for yourself, but also for your family, friends and fellow PGIFC members. Don't let the thrill and excitement of a day on the water get in the way of being safe.

Information on recreational boating and boating safety is also available from the following organizations:

U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary
www.cgaux.org


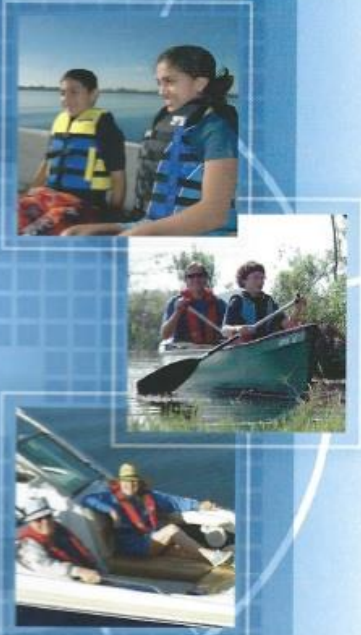
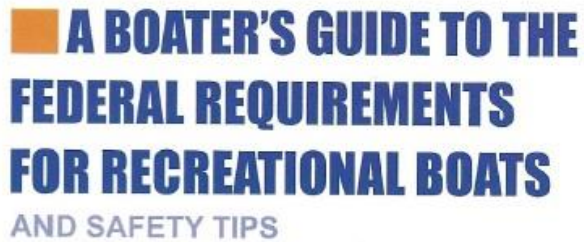

United States Power Squadrons®
(888) 367-8777
www.usps.org

National Association of State Boating Law Administrators
(859) 225-9487
www.nasbla.org

National Safe Boating Council
(703) 361-4294
www.safeboatingcouncil.org

National Water Safety Congress
(440) 209-9805
www.watersafetycongress.org

Produced by the
U.S. Coast Guard Boating Safety Division 2012



- Navigation Locks
- Trailer Safety
- Digital Selective Calling
- Rescue 21
- Naval Vessel Protection Zones
- America's Waterway Watch

To learn more, contact:

Boating Safety - Figure 1





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Boating Safety – Table 1