

Boating at Night

by Peter J. Wihto

A student in our Basic Boating Safety Course asked what they should be aware of when boating at night.

There are a number of considerations.

- First is don't do it.
- And if you do it, make sure that you very much know the area in which you will be boating while in the dark.
- If you are traveling from one port to another, make sure that you do not do your traveling out of or into a port that you do not know -- when it is dark.
- While you are traveling at night, keep your speed at a modest rate -- there are a lot of things in the water (junk, tree limbs and pulp wood, bigger things like other boats and occasional freight containers, plus lobster pot buoys -- with attached lines -- maybe, even a large, floating truck tire).
- Make sure that your own running lights are working, and are on, and that you can identify the various running lights for other types and classes of boats.
- Know and the locations of the lit and *unlit* navigational aids in your area.
- Beware of possible drunk boaters.
- Even on a pleasant evening sail with light breezes there can be some risks, so keep alert.
- An unappreciated, big problem when boating at night is the many lights along the shore. They tend to overpower or camouflage the running lights of other boats and navigational aids. Be constantly alert.

Whereabouts unknown. About 20 years ago a 35 foot sport fisherman left Block Island after dark to go back to the mainland. It and the people on it were then missing for about 5-10 years. Some scuba divers found the boat on the bottom. There was some bow damage and the windshield on the flying bridge was folded forward, as if the people on the bridge were hurled into it (major head injuries), when the boat crashed into something. None of the bodies were found. Each year about 2,000 freight containers are lost from ships. Some float for a while just at the level of the sea. And with blue water (ocean) sailors occasionally hit a whale and get the whale really annoyed.

New England hazard. There are a lot of lobster pot buoys off the New England Coast. And even during daylight, a significant number of boaters get their props fouled with the pot lines. You will not see these buoys at night.

Disoriented and lost. One of our other members and myself had Hingham Harbor as a home port. We knew this area quite well. But when we took the Power Squadron Boston Harbor instruction cruise, the second half of it was done at night. And once it got dark, the other member, who is a much more experienced boater, and I both were feeling slightly disoriented and uncomfortable. Actually that we were very uncomfortable is more accurate. We were riding in a Boston Harbor cruise ship, with double radar, double charting GPS with radar overlay, a big spotlight and a captain who was comfortable navigating here in the dark. Reality for the casual boater in Boston Harbor is that there are shallows and ledges and some of them aren't marked as well as we would like. And if you are not absolutely, positively sure of where you are you must stop and verify your position.

Marine Accident Report

Even the experts have problems boating at night. Here's a selective abstract of a National Transportation Safety Board summary of an accident involving two US Coast Guardsmen.

Marine Accident Report

Collision Between the U.S. Coast Guard Patrol Boat CG242513 and the U.S. Small Passenger Vessel Bayside Blaster, Biscayne Bay, Florida January 12, 2002

NTSB Number NTSB/MAR-02/05

NTIS Number PB2002-916405

Executive Summary: About 2013 on January 12, 2002, the 24-foot Coast Guard patrol boat CG242513, with two crewmembers on board, was on a routine recreational boating safety and manatee-zone patrol in Biscayne Bay, Florida, when it collided with the small passenger vessel Bayside Blaster, carrying 2 crewmembers and 53 passengers. Both Coast Guard crewmembers were ejected from their boat. The patrol boat continued running, circled to port, and struck the Bayside Blaster again. The unmanned Coast Guard patrol boat continued to circle for 10 to 15 minutes, striking a moored recreational boat two times and pilings near the shore. Police officers responding to the scene pinned the Coast Guard patrol boat to the pilings and shut off the engines. Five passengers who reported being injured were taken to the Coast Guard Station, where they were triaged. After triage, two passengers were transported to a hospital, and the others did not request further medical treatment. The two Coast Guard crewmembers were triaged by paramedics on Palm Island, taken to a nearby hospital for further examination, and released the morning of January 13. As a result of the accident, the Coast Guard patrol boat, valued at \$80,000, was declared a total loss. The damage to the Bayside Blaster was estimated at \$80,000, and the damage to the moored recreational boat was \$24,722. Damages from the accident were estimated at \$184,722.

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the collision between the Coast Guard patrol boat CG242513 and the small passenger vessel Bayside

Blaster was the failure of the coxswain of the Coast Guard patrol boat to operate his vessel at a safe speed in a restricted-speed area frequented by small passenger vessels and in conditions of limited visibility due to darkness and background lighting. Contributing to the cause of the accident was the lack of adequate Coast Guard oversight of nonstandard boat operations.