

DISPATCHES

News, Notes and Know-How From the Waterfront



The Chaos Is Real

A SLEW OF NEW BOATERS SEEKING FUN DURING THE PANDEMIC ARE TURNING WATERWAYS INTO DANGER ZONES

Steve Morlock has been working on the water for about 40 years in roles that range from harbormaster to his job of the past 12 years, running TowBoatU.S. out of Oyster Bay on New York's Long Island. In all that time, he's seen plenty of things go wrong for all kinds of people aboard just about every type of boat. But he's never seen anything like summer 2020.

"It's like Fourth of July every weekend," he says. "When I pull alongside somebody who's in trouble, it seems like I'm hearing it every day. 'Oh, I just bought this boat.' Or, 'I've never had a boat before.' My head has to be on a swivel. On more than one occasion this year, I've had to stop and reverse and hit my horn, with people coming right at me."

Experts from New England to the Midwest and the South say similar scenes are playing out all across the United States as an unprecedented influx of new boaters takes to the waterways. With the Covid-19 pandemic keeping people close to home and encouraging outdoor, socially distanced activities, boating has become the nation's new favorite pastime—and the newest source of challenges

for experienced boaters and first responders just trying to stay safe while out on the water.

It's too soon to have a full picture of statistics related to boating accidents and injuries nationwide for summer 2020, but as of mid-July, the Coast Guard Office of Boating Safety was projecting a 30 percent jump in on-the-water incidents along with a 4 percent increase in deaths versus 2019.

One basis for those projections was a number of states, including Texas, Tennessee and Florida, having reported more boaters and incidents than usual. Capt. Tim Dunleavy with the New Hampshire State Police Marine Patrol Unit says he definitely has been seeing the same trend on his state's waters too. "I wouldn't say that our injury numbers are up, but the calls for assistance have increased probably 30 percent," Dunleavy told . "Weekends have been extremely, extremely chaotic out there. This is different. It is at a higher level, a more intense level of boating activity than I've seen in my 32 years with the agency."

According to the National Marine Manufacturers Association, new boat sales in May—when the first Covid-19 lockdowns began to ease up—were the highest they've been in a decade. People who had been cooped up at home wanted to get out and play as states began to reopen, right at the same time summer was starting. Boat dealers began to report huge jumps in sales, including sales to first-time owners, so much so that by midsummer, dealerships were pretty much sold out. The NMMA reported that entry-level craft such as



Left: Boat sales to first-time owners are up significantly this year, but some new boaters fail to learn the basics—such as putting life jackets on children—before firing up the engines and heading out.

PWCs, saltwater fishing boats and jet boats experienced levels of single-month sales that the industry hasn't seen since prior to the Great Recession in 2007.

"This strong rebound underscores a heightened interest in boating as a way to enjoy the summer with loved ones while staying close to home, especially as summer camps, sports leagues and vacations have been canceled amid the pandemic," says Ellen Hopkins Bradley, the NMMA's chief brand officer and senior vice president.

All of those new-boat sales, though, aren't necessarily coming with new-boater education. While organizations ranging from the U.S. Coast Guard to the U.S. Power Squadrons, along with local and state agencies, can direct boaters to online education courses, a lot of new boaters are failing to learn the basics before grabbing the paddles or firing up the engines.

And perhaps even worse, experts say, a lot of new boaters don't even know how their boats work. In some cases, new buyers aren't meeting dealers in person before taking delivery. People are shopping online as the pandemic wears on, clicking to have a boat delivered and then having it show up in their driveway on a trailer, ready to launch.

"When you have sales going out the door so quick that you can't keep inventory in, you probably don't have time to sit down with the person buying the boat the way you might have before," says Cody Jones, who is based in Texas and serves as the chairman of the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators. "And if you're buying the boat, you want to get out on the water right away."

Jones saw the lack of basic knowledge firsthand with a friend who was forced, because of the pandemic, to cancel a big anniversary trip. Instead, the husband surprised the wife with a new 23-foot runabout. "She is soaking up the education courses, but her husband, he says he's been on boats all his life and doesn't need any of that,"

Jones says. "We talked about engine-cutoff switches, and he said, 'Well, this boat isn't equipped with that.' And I said, 'Well, funny thing, it actually is.'"

Morlock says the lack of basic knowledge among new boaters is resulting in calls for assistance that sometimes leave him shaking his head. "Some of them, I've even got to explain that the battery switch is off," Morlock says. "One didn't even have the knowledge that you need to switch it on to start the boat. He thought he was out of gas."

In Minnesota, homeowners watching boats from shore are calling the authorities more often about dangerous behavior, says Lisa Dugan, the state's boat and water communications coordinator.

"It seems like there's been an increase in citations for the basic boating violations," she says. "We've seen a lot of PWCs out after the time of operation, which in Min-

nesota is 9:30 a.m. to one hour before sunset, and people are just saying they didn't know. Officers on the water are busy with those basic violations, things like paddlers not knowing they have to have life jackets. Boaters, too, not even having life jackets on the boat. It's not that they might not fit or there aren't enough—they don't even have them."

Dugan says she's encouraging experienced boaters to share her office's social media posts. At least three a week are about boating safety. When educated boaters share the information, she says, it filters to their friends who may not understand that they need to know it.

"Normally, we're speaking to boaters in those messages, but this summer, we are making the messaging very basic: If you're boating, you need a life jacket. You need safety equipment," she says. "It helps when the boating community can pass along those messages, so it gets to people who otherwise wouldn't see it."

And out on the water, Morlock says, experienced boaters should assume not only that other boaters may not know the rules of the road, but also that they may not even know where they are.

"They're unaware of their surroundings," he says. "I did a tow of a kayak a couple of weeks ago. Two guys in a kayak flagged me down and said they rented it but didn't know how to take it back. They never left Huntington Harbor, and they were probably 2,000 yards away from where they rented it, but they had no idea how to take it back."

Dugan also says experienced boaters should take every possible precaution to avoid newcomers who may not realize they're causing a problem.

"They haven't taken classes, they haven't done any hands-on, they haven't come up in families where generational knowledge gets passed on," she says. "It's their first time on the water, their first time on a boat, and they don't know navigational things, even how to cut across a wake safely."