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Ask The Captain

By Capt. Lyman Louis

Other than your life jacket, a working VHF radio is probably the most important piece of safety equipment. With an average working range of at least 10 nautical miles, the VHF works in areas where cell phone coverage is poor or non-existent.

However, for most people the VHF is not used for emergencies but for more benign communications. Where are the fish biting? Does anyone have a set of jumper cables? Where should I park my boat for this weekend's cruise?

These types of calls are perfectly acceptable so long as they are not made on a restricted channel. The most common error I hear people make is to hail another vessel on channel 16 and then carry on a conversation instead of switching to a working channel. (Don't fret; the professionals make this mistake too.)

When you hail another vessel, make it a habit to suggest a working channel as soon as you establish communications. In other words, when the boat you're trying to talk to answers, tell them immediately that you'll meet them on another channel.

For example, "Diquanda to the vessel hailing, switch and answer on channel 68." This keeps channel 16 open for its primary purpose: emergency and distress calls.

In most areas of the country boaters have gotten away from using channel 16 for hailing in favor of using channel 9. I monitor both while on the water and rarely hear anything but fish reports on channel 9; it's a good alternative.

Another VHF issue is the overuse of channel 68. While it is a popular channel for recreational vessels, it is by no means the only working channel we can use. While monitoring the radio pay attention to what channel people are using so you can select an alternative if one is busy.

Some of the channels you can use are 68, 69, 71, and 72. Spread your usage around so the airwaves are never too crowded.

And since I brought up monitoring, keep your radio on at all times while you're on the water. You never know what you'll hear and you may be able to assist another boater in distress.

In addition to monitoring 9 and 16, I keep a watch on 13 (ship-to-ship so I know if there's traffic I should steer clear of), as well as on channel 22A (the Coast Guard's working channel). Most newer radios are capable of scanning as well as being programmable. This way you can keep an ear open for problems that may be coming your way. It's a little like listening to the traffic reports during rush hour.

Radio checks are necessary prior to departing the dock, but there are some problems with the way many people do them. If you have two radios like I do, you can check them on your own for function though not for range. Still, that's better than no check at all.

The Coast Guard does not like receiving radio checks from the general public. Since they are a military organization, and since much of their work goes on behind the scenes, many times they are extremely busy even when their radios are silent. Don't call the Coasties to check your radio.

When you need a radio check, start on channel 9 and ask, “any vessel hearing, please reply for a radio check.” When you get a response make it worth your while and ask for their position. What’s the point of checking your radio for function if the person responding is less than a hundred feet from you?

A final radio issue that seems to come up all too frequently. Don’t let your kids play with the microphone. It’s not a toy and I’ve heard several calls where playing around has resulted in search and rescue operations commencing. As recently as a couple of weeks ago a child’s voice announced “we’re sinking near Oregon City” and was never heard again.

This call was answered with resources of the Coast Guard and several other law enforcement agencies as well as by a private salvor. Despite the likelihood that the call was bogus, the response was necessary to confirm that there was no one actually in distress.

If your kids want to play with a microphone get them a karaoke machine, but keep them away from your VHF.

Good morning Captain,

As a floating home owner on Multnomah Channel, I can agree with some of your views [on wakes and complainers about wakes]. A flare gun!! Who ever fired it should be put in jail for endangerment.

I have talked with both Columbia and Multnomah County River patrols on the water and have been told that when we have problems with boats that throw large wakes we need to: 1. Get the registration number, 2. Write a description of the vessel, 3. The name of the vessel, 4. A picture of the person at the helm. 3 out of 4 is about all that is possible.

Of the 3 or 4 times that owners have done any of the above and sent to Columbia and Multnomah Counties, we have not seen any results. Most of the operators that get flagged or have a horn blown at them by owners will slow down. Since we live 1/2 way down the channel, we see traffic both ways and for the most part it only takes once or twice for a captain to understand what is happening.

The problem boaters are the ones that flat don't care because they know that if they are stopped they'll receive nothing but a warning. This has happened repeatedly over the last three years. If an officer stops a vessel for wake violations, why won't they write the maximum fine and let the violators learn the hard way?

As far as the VHF is concerned, I have had an operator say that they can't go any slower because they have twin motor's. Right ... well shut one down! I do hope that the new licensing law will help boater awareness. Of course, we will still have the people that don't care, and they should be the one's that pay the fines.

By the way, does any of the fine monies go to the County that writes the citation? It Should.

Don Vandehey, Rivers Bend Marina

Dear Don:

Thank you for your letter. I'm not sure what the breakdown is regarding fines for on-the-water infractions. I believe that most of those monies do go back to the issuing jurisdiction, but it's an interesting question.

In an unrelated conversation with a marine patrol Sergeant it was relayed to me that the preferred outcome is compliance. In other words, they would rather not write a ticket in most cases unless the operator is intoxicated (they also strictly enforce the juvenile life jacket laws). I'm not

sure if the former is a good policy or not, but it is the policy of at least one regional marine patrol.

I do know that the Coast Guard started writing tickets to fishermen and women who were anchored in the channel last Fall. Those tickets were as much as \$1500 and once the word got around the channel started clearing up for commercial traffic.

In my humble opinion, the river patrol officers should start writing more infractions for no-wake zone violations.

Hope to see everyone at the Portland Boat Show,

Capt. Lyman

Capt. Lyman Louis will respond to your questions on safety, maritime law, and other issues of general interest to boaters in the area. You can reach him by e-mail at:

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