

HOW TO BOAT SAFELY AND ENJOYABLY AT NIGHT

Scott Ferguson

Most of us have heard of tragic boating events at night. Running aground. Collisions. Someone getting hopelessly lost.

Some of these events are recent. Others date back decades. Many were fatal. All are very sad and regrettable.

I believe that almost all were preventable. This article guides you to boat safely and enjoyably at night.

NIGHT BOATING CAN BE SPECTACULAR!

Having grown up with an island cottage, I was introduced to night boating as a child. I love it. Some of my favourite boating memories are of travelling down Lakes Joseph, Rosseau and Muskoka almost to Gravenhurst in a single run on a hot summer night beneath the peace and majesty of summer's night sky.

Night boating is not “unnatural”, as some people seem to describe it. It can be a beautiful and rewarding experience. If you do it, embrace it. The more optimistic and positive you are, the more confident and competent you be to enjoy it and perform it safely.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Many boast, “I’ve been driving a car for years – I can handle a boat”. Boating at night is not like driving a car.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT NIGHT BOATING?

Apart from the obvious – it’s dark out there – keep five factors in mind.

1. **Loss of Context:** As you look out to decide, “Which way is my cottage?”, you have a lot less information to go on at night. Familiar landmarks that guide you in daylight are invisible. You will likely set your trajectory based on a very short view of the lake rather than a long view, increasing the probability that you will start yourself off-course. That’s when people say, “Why do islands move at night?” ... and ... “That rock was never there before!”.
2. **Shadows of Your Mind:** On a moonlit night, shadows of trees and other objects lie on the water and create the illusion that the shoreline has moved outward. I especially experience this in narrow passages such as channels, the Indian and Joseph Rivers, the routes to and from Bala and aside steep rock islands in southern Georgian Bay. This can cause us to veer away from the shadow only to hit something or someone further offshore or to pass on the wrong side of a buoy.

3. **Lack of Reflection:** To some boaters, the answer to all of that darkness is obvious –headlights! Car-style headlights now appear on more and more models at annual boat shows. The trouble is, light reflects information back to us by bouncing off something solid like a highway. At night, water does not reflect light that way. The beam of a headlight travels straight to the bottom of the lake and provides us with little or no information about our surroundings. And worse, all of that light shrinks our pupils and makes us nearly blind. We might as well go boating at night with our eyes closed. Meanwhile, our headlights blind other boaters from knowing where they are or where they are going. The combined result can be chaos on the night water. Completely preventable.
4. **Unlit Natural Obstacles:** Some argue that every rock or small island ought to be equipped with an **aid to navigation** such as a warning light. That’s not going to happen. The Federal government painstakingly documents natural obstacles on nautical charts, which are available for most waterways in both paper form (which the law requires to be on board both day and night) and on GPS.

Some people rarely look at a chart, arguing, “I know where my cottage is”. Charts are not merely for getting directions. They are an essential **navigational aid**.

If your waterway is “uncharted territory”, literally, it is probably small enough for you to memorize the natural obstacles along your chosen night path.

5. **Unlit Boats:** This is the most dangerous night obstacle of all because it is unexpected and it moves. Add to that a skipper who is impaired, and you’ve got a guided missile. Factor in a couple of hundred horsepower, and that missile can go ballistic. By the way, for those boaters who believe that only the bow light is “necessary” (the stern light is optional?), and there are many who do, a quick review of recent tragic events should change their minds.

12 TIPS TO ENJOY SAFE NIGHT BOATING

In the context of “don’t boat while impaired”:

1. **Be positive** – Adopt the view that night boating can be a spectacular summer experience. Embrace it. Focus your mind, not on what can go wrong, but on how you will make everything go right, which is what this article is about. An optimistic, appropriately confident boater is usually a safer one.
2. **Study the chart** – not in the dark as you are about to cast off, but in the light of day when you are alert and you can see all of the details clearly. Use a brightly coloured highlighter to mark the natural obstacles along your path. Also, note all **aids to navigation** such as beacons and buoys. They can be your best friends at night.
3. **Get hitched!** – To enjoy night boating beyond routine shuttles to the marina, invest in GPS and hitch yourself to a star, or at least to a satellite. Load the chart chip (not the “map”) for your region. A single chart chip covers a vast area such as central and southern Ontario, upper New York State and much of the St. Lawrence Seaway. GPS shows your exact location (often to within a metre of a buoy) to keep you on course and, unlike a paper chart, lets you to zoom in to view fine detail.

4. **Be prepared and equipped** – Check weather reports and forecasts to avoid lightning, rain, fog or high winds.

Have all of your safety equipment. Bring a well-charged cell phone. Consider a floatable, water-proof cell phone pouch (widely available), tied to you, that allows you to make calls and take photos without ever removing your phone. If your route is beyond cell coverage (something you should find out ahead of time), acquire a satellite locator such as “SPOT”. Know how to signal SOS in Morse Code with a whistle, horn or light (••• – – – •••). Bring flares if you travel on “big water” such as Georgian Bay. On some waters, flares are required.

Supplement your “statutory flashlight” with a powerful beam to light up **aids to navigation** such as beacons and buoys (and no, your phone light won’t cut it). Encourage passengers to wear PFDs or lifejackets, each with a whistle to signal their location if they end up in the water.

Locate that mysterious little red cord and tether yourself to your boat’s emergency shut off switch to stop the boat if you get injured, suddenly become ill or get thrown overboard by an unexpected wave.

5. **Get dark!** – Turn off any car-style “headlights” (personally, I would disconnect them), spotlights and flashlights. Turn down the light emitting from your GPS. Dilate your pupils any way you can. There is more light out on the water than you can see from the dock. Your objective is to take in as much of it as possible.
6. **Rise above it all** – Stand (if your boat is large), kneel or prop yourself up so your head is above the windshield. Never, ever, EVER look through a boat windshield at night! The windshield reflection from your own lights can reduce your visibility to nearly zero.

What if it starts to rain? Provide cover for your passengers and create an opening in your boat top for your head to stick out. Is that uncomfortable? Of course. Necessary? Absolutely! Watching through a boat windshield at night in the rain is unacceptable. Period.

7. **Light up!** – When you know you are getting close to an **aid to navigation** (you studied your chart, right?), briefly shine your beam at it. Beacons and buoys bear reflective tape that a strong beam can light from a distance. They are numbered both on your chart and on their surface. If in doubt, read the number on the aid to confirm where you are. Then, turn off your light and return to the dark.
8. **Throttle it back and back away!** – With short visibility, we have much less reaction time. Slow down. Also, you must do everything possible to prevent “man overboard” in the dark. Hitting an unexpected wave at high speed can produce tragic results both inside your boat and over its edge. With your head above the windshield, you yourself may be a bit unstable. Keep your head well back from the windshield so you don’t get hit when you encounter an unexpected wave. Study the pattern of other boats to anticipate when a wave will cross your path.

Obey the speed limit. How are you supposed to see speed limit signs at night? Sign or no sign, the speed limit within 30 metres of shore or another boat is either 9 km/hr or 10 km/hr almost everywhere you will ever go boating – day or night! What does that look like? Further away and a fraction of what most people think.

Within ½ the length of a hockey rink, your bow must be down, your wake negligible, your boat merely “speed walking”. Otherwise, stay more than ½ a rink from shore. This can prevent you from running aground, threatening night swimmers or hitting unlit recreational objects such as swim rafts.

9. **Obey traffic lights!** – Traffic lights? At night, they are everywhere. Or should be. An approaching boat that displays its port light has the right of way. When you see that its light is red, veer, stop or slow down to yield. If the other boat’s light is starboard or green, proceed with caution. Just because another boat’s light is green doesn’t mean they know we have the right of way. This can be a fatal assumption both day and night. Always exercise caution.
10. **Analyze white lights** – If we approach a boat from behind, it has the right of way, which we must yield. How do we know it’s there? From behind, boats emit a white light. So do boathouses and cottages! Be careful not to become mesmerized by white lights. Look carefully to determine if each is a boat, moving or at anchor. But what if they don’t post a white light? Which brings us to ...
11. **Find the culprits!** – What about unlit boats? Rather than hope they aren’t out there, assume they are and that our job is to detect every one that crosses our path. My son asks, “How would you boat differently if you knew that no other boat had lights?”.

Find a light source such as moonlight or a lit boathouse or cottage that is generally in the direction you want to travel. Head toward that source and it will create a line of light that lies on the water right to the bow of your boat. The moment you see an unexpected object cut that light, you have detected floating debris or a boat without lights. Steer to avoid.

When my son was 21, he was returning from his waiter job at Muskoka Wharf at 2:30 am in pitch dark. As he followed a “line of light”, it suddenly vanished. He swerved hard and slowed down to discover a large sailboat that had escaped its moorings and now drifted aimlessly across Muskoka Bay.

By the way, if you turn on your boat’s “headlights”, that crucial line in the water disappears.

12. **Stop a collision!** – What if another boat bears down on us and doesn’t veer or stop? Chances are, they don’t see us. Perhaps they have too much light in their boat, they are looking through a windshield, they are distracted by passengers, they’re impaired or all of the above. I doubt they’ll hear your horn.

While you steer away to avoid collision, shine your strong light beam **straight into their eyes** with a couple of 1-second flashes (not a sustained flash) to get their attention. If you have passengers, make this their role and brief them on what to do when you give the order. Keep in mind, you have just startled the other skipper and shrunk their pupils. Veer far enough away to give them ample safe runway to slow down to figure out what’s going on.

With practice, these guidelines are easy to apply. As you do, you will open yourself up to a safe, rewarding and often magical summer experience.

The short version:

7 MOST IMPORTANT WAYS TO BOAT SAFELY AND ENJOYABLY AT NIGHT

Scott Ferguson

1. **Be unimpaired.** Period.
2. **Be positive.** If you want to boat at night, embrace it. A confident boater is likely a safer boater.
3. **Be prepared.** Be equipped. Check weather reports. Study your path on a chart beforehand.
4. **Get dark.** Turn off headlights, spot lights and other unnecessary lights. Dilate your pupils.
5. **Rise above it all.** Get you head above the windshield. Never, ever, EVER look through a boat windshield at night. Ever.
6. **Throttle it back and stay back.** Slow down. Obey all speed limits – ie: bow down and “speed walking” within ½ a hockey rink of shore or another boat, day or night.
7. **Watch for boats without lights.** Veer away.

Scott Ferguson is a life-long cottager in Muskoka. He qualified to join the Canadian Power Squadron at age 16, is a certified water ski instructor and, in his youth, piloted tour boats for several Muskoka resorts.

The ideas and opinions expressed are the author's.