

Opinion: Don't let distracted boating get you

By Scott Croft

Just like Americans' hectic Thanksgiving Day holiday travel habits, July 4 is recreational boating's biggest holiday of the year. The nonprofit BoatUS Foundation for Boating Safety and Clean Water predicts crowded launch ramp and marina facilities with significant recreational boat traffic congestion on lakes, rivers and coastal waters. Operator inattention, improper lookout, operator inexperience, machinery failure, and alcohol use rank as the top five primary contributing factors in accidents according to the U.S. Coast Guard, and each could come into play on boating's biggest time of the year.

Here are five July 4 safety tips from the BoatUS Foundation:

1. Stop the distractions: Being distracted – even for an instant – can make a good day go bad. Before you head out on the water, learn how to use your GPS at the dock, rather than with your head down, trying to figure out how to toggle between screens while underway. Can you move your hand between the throttle and wheel without looking? Do you know the locations of the trim switch, running lights or bilge switch by feel? If not, spend some time memorizing the locations of your boat controls. When running, try to zone out of unnecessary conversations that are going on around you, with the exception of valuable input from a helpful lookout. Texting and boating is a dangerous activity, just as it is in a car.

2. Hold off on the alcohol until you're safely ashore or tied up for the night: Added to the effects of sun, wind and waves, alcohol lowers situational awareness. Bring lots of water and

other nonalcoholic beverages.

3. The best life jacket is the one you will wear: Spending the extra money on a comfortable life jacket means your chances of wearing it greatly increase. Check out the newer, small lightweight inflatable-style life jackets that are nothing like the uncomfortable life jackets of old. And it's also always wise to have everyone aboard in life jackets when going to fireworks shows – accidents can happen very quickly, especially after the shows end and the mad dash for home begins. If you need a right-sized kids life jacket, you can borrow one for free from one of 550 locations by going **online**.

4. Some help just for paddlers: Paddlers should understand all of the nautical rules of the road, practice defensive paddling and assume no one can see you. At night, show a white light (glow sticks hung around the paddler's neck do not qualify). Avoid crowded anchorages and congested ramp areas.

5. About that broken down boat: The nationwide TowBoatUS on-water towing fleet traditionally reports hundreds of requests from boaters needing assistance with battery jumps and anchor-line disentanglements over the July 4 holiday. To avoid having to contact BoatUS 24-hour dispatch (BoatUS.com/App) monitor your boat's battery drain during the long day on the water, go slow while hauling your anchor line, watch for wakes, and be super vigilant so you don't run over someone else's anchor line after the fireworks show ends.

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