

Long Island Press

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They Can't Help You If They Can't Find You

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You had better have flares on board.

If you have troubles on the water, when does the rescue clock start? When someone sees or hears your cry for help.

Get that clock started as fast as possible with the visual distress signal.

U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) requirements for visual distress signals are:

Three handheld red flares (day and night).

One handheld red flare and two parachute flares (day and night).

One handheld orange smoke signal, two floating orange smoke signals (day), and one electric distress light (night only).

In short, you need three USCG approved and unexpired flares or devices for day and night. Check the dates on the side of the flare. They are manufactured with three and a half years of life. But don't expect to pass a USCG boarding if they aren't "good to go" as the boarding officer looks at them.

All boaters should be able to signal for help and instructions for use are printed right on the device. First, unless you are truly "in extremis," don't set them off unless you can see or hear help nearby (BTW, if you can see lights on the land, that constitutes help nearby—just don't use them all in case no one is looking.) Shooting flares into a dark sky might prove to be useless, especially if someone happens along later and you have no way to signal them.

Secondly, if you are using handheld flares, hold them out over the boat. If a piece of the burning slag drops off and lands on your fiberglass deck, be prepared to watch it burn straight through to the sea below. You can't put out a burning magnesium compound.

Third, if a flare pistol or handheld rocket-propelled distress signal is used, be sure to take the wind into account. In generally calm winds, keep your arm at approximately 45 to 60 degrees above the horizon with the wind at your back.

As the wind increases, increase the angle of your arm upwards but do not fire the device straight up or in such a direction that it may land on your boat (such as into the wind) or another boat.

By USCG regulations, who is required to have these visual distress signals?

All vessels used on coastal waters, the Great Lakes, territorial seas, and those waters connected directly to them, up to a point where a body of water is less than two miles wide must be equipped with USCG Approved visual distress signals. Vessels owned in the United States operating on the high seas must be equipped with USCG-approved visual distress signals. Regulations prohibit display of visual distress signals on the water under any circumstances except when assistance is required to prevent immediate or potential danger to persons on board a vessel.

The following vessels are not required to carry day signals but must carry night signals when operating from sunset to sunrise:

Recreational boats less than 16 feet in length

Boats participating in organized events such as races, regattas, or marine parades

Open sailboats less than 26 feet in length not equipped with propulsion machinery

Manually propelled boats

But think of our motto: Semper Paratus—always prepared. And don't forget that the USCG auxiliary gives free vessel safety exams. They are not a regulatory event—no one “turns you in” if the boat is missing something.