



[Prevention of Collision at Sea – The Christmas Tree of Lights](#)

VINCENT PICA

You have probably gone out for an afternoon and found yourself coming back in the dark. It can be unnerving if you don't know how to interpret the rising lights, so we'll focus on those Rules that govern – Rules 20 – 31. We got started with Rules 20 – 22 in January, so let's move on to the “Christmas Tree” section.

Rule 23

Why do I call it the “Christmas Tree” section? Because many vessels exhibit so many lights that they look like Christmas Trees underway. Rule of thumb – the more lights, the bigger a problem it'll be if it hits you...and “yellow” as usual means “caution.” In fact, I teach that yellow lights mean “stay well clear.” Rule 23 specifically speaks about power-driven vessels – from ours up to the leviathans. Anything over 50 meters requires two masthead lights – one forward and one aligned with it, abaft (behind) and above it. To the uninformed, this can look confusing since it is common practice to align the side lights under the aft masthead light! This puts this solitary white light ahead and can appear, to the uninformed, that it is a large vessel underway in reverse!

Rule 24

Rule 24 is about what lights – and “shapes” (diamond shape where it can best be seen) – towing vessels shall (must!) exhibit. A towing vessel must have two masthead lights in a vertical line, one above the other. If the towed object is more than 200 meters (over a tenth of a nautical mile) astern, there must be three masthead lights in a vertical line. She must also have a towing light above her stern light. All her other lights must conform to a power-driven vessel.

What about the towed vessel? It has to show sidelights – and shapes if the towing vessel also exhibits one – just like a power-driven vessel except it doesn't need a masthead light.

Unfortunately, this has caused, from time to time, the uninformed to try to go between what they believe is two vessels... with catastrophic results. You can imagine the tension on the towing hawser. Rule 24 has a brace of other issues related to multiple towed vessels, side tows (“on the hip”) and more...Remember my rule of thumb – the more lights, the greater the distance to stay away!

Rule 25

It covers sailboats and “vessels under oars.” With respect to sailboats, the Rules look to find a way to telegraph to you that the vessel you are closing on at night is underway, but not a powerboat. How? Well, it’s lighted like a powerboat except it has no mast light! Sailboats are required, like powered vessels, to have sidelights (red and green) and a stern light – but no mast light. What if you come upon a vessel at night that’s exhibiting the sidelight- stern-light configuration of a sailboat but also, high above, you see two lights – red over green? Under Rule 25 (c), a sailboat may also exhibit the red-over-green configuration at the top of her mast to make her easier to see – “red over green, I’m sailing tonight and want to be seen!” Under Rule 25 (d), a sailboat under 7 meters (~23 feet) “may” exhibit the lights configuration of her larger cousins but, if she isn’t fitted with them, she “shall have ready at hand an electric torch [a flashlight, Bunky] or lighted lantern showing a white light which shall be exhibited in sufficient time to avoid collision.” Often, the sailor will shine the light on the sail as it creates a larger palette.

Row, Row, Row Your Boat...

What about rowing – which includes kayaks that are now among the highest sources of accidents and death on the water. The Rule for (wo)man-powered vessels – of any size – is just like 25(d) for sailboats above. How many kayakers out there have a flashlight under their decks? Or life jackets on them? Don’t be a statistic! Are sailing vessels required to display a Shape, and when? Yes, there is a Shape for sailing vessels but only to be used under power – it’s called the “cone, apex-downward.” Just remember that there are no “100-0” accidents out there. She is still unable to respond as quickly and sharply as a powered vessel since her sails give her considerable “windage.” Sailing vessels under 12 meters (~40 feet) “may” exhibit the Shape, but are not required to.

Captain Joe Vojvodich is the Captain of the Port and Sector Commander for US Coast Guard Sector Long Island Sound. Captain Vojvodich is responsible for all active-duty, reservist and auxiliary Coast Guard personnel within the Sector. Vin Pica, Chief of Staff for the First District Southern Region in the US Coast Guard Auxiliary, works closely with Captain Vojvodich and his staff to promote boating safety in the waters between Connecticut, Long Island and 200 nautical miles offshore. Sector Long Island Sound Command

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