



From the Captain of the Port

Cold Water Boating: Spring Isn't Far Away, But Warm Water Is

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We've had a few mild days. This reminded many of us that spring is here – and my wife to say, “You're not thinking of putting the boat in the water already, are you?” Well, much as I'd like to, I'll bet Ol' Man Winter has one or two surprises for us before spring finally chases him away. But even then the water will be cold for several weeks and you need to be aware of how dangerous that can be – if you aren't prepared and savvy. This column is about that.

Warm Air + Cold Water = Risks!

I like a warm day early in the season as much as the next mariner. But the water itself is just about as deadly as it is in the deep of winter. Remember that water takes heat from your body 25 times faster than air of the same temperature. You can impress this on your young boaters – and yourself – quite easily. Lay out a glass of water before you turn in one night. It will be room temperature by the morning. Now take two ice cubes from the freezer. Put one on a dry napkin next to the room-temperature glass on water. Drop the second ice cube into the glass. Now, in theory, they are both exposed to the same temperature – room temperature. But when the ice cube on the napkin starts to show a damp line around itself, the ice cube in the glass will have melted away. This is why hypothermia is so insidious and dangerous (see *WindCheck*, Cold Water Survival, Hypothermia, Rescue & Recovery, December 2011)

Precautions? Yes!

OK, it is a beautiful day in April and you're just dying to tool out for a while. And why not? How great is it when the waters are too cold for the algae and other microscopic sea life so you can see all the way to the sandy bottom? Great indeed, but don't make way without a few simple but important precautions.

Step #1

Has the engine been prepped from its long winter snooze? Are you fueled up? Is there some fuel enhancer thrown in? Certainly, there is likely to be some condensation in the tank and that water will precipitate down to the bottom of the tank...and some might get sucked up into the engine...So, engine prepped, fuel tank full and fuel enhancer thrown in – or no-go!



Step #2

Did you file a float plan with somebody? Do it – or no-go. (see *Atlantic Maritime*, “Seamanship - Float Plans - Nothing but Upside”, 2/2/11.) If you do end up in trouble, getting the “rescue clock” started ASAP is imperative. The environment is inherently more dangerous when the water is cold. So, leave a plan with someone you trust and who will follow up. “Hello, Mystic Marina, is my nephew there with the M/V ‘Charlie’? What? He's not?!” That float plan and a call to the US Coast Guard can be the difference between a rescue – or an unhappy recovery...

Float Plans Save Lives!

It's vital to file a float plan with a trustworthy individual on shore, especially in the early season when the water's cold and other boats are few. Here's an example of the information a basic float plan should include:

1. S/V *Hejira*
2. 4 people on board
3. 39' Concordia yawl
4. Depart Black Rock, CT on Thursday, April 19
5. Arrive Newport Shipyard, Newport, RI on Saturday, April 21
6. Emergency phone # 203-257-1234

Step #3

If you don't have cold-water life jacket gear, you're playing Russian Roulette with your own life. When we put to sea, if the water temperature is 60-degrees F or less, USCG regulations require us to be in “mustang” suits (pictured), which aren't as encompassing as a drysuit but certainly offers us significant protection in the event of an immersion. Admittedly, when the air is warm, those “mustangs” are like Turkish steam baths but we're safe. At the very least, a float coat provides warmth and at the same time doubles as a life jacket that will float a person. Just acknowledge that it isn't as safe as a “mustang.”