



Boat Talk: Clearing up confusion over navigation lights

Published: Saturday, June 23, 2012, 8:30 AM Updated: Saturday, June 23, 2012, 9:08 PM



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By

MICHIGAN -- Another week is coming to a close, and with it, we have another installment of Boat Talk.

The column will continue to address boating safety issues each week through Labor Day in hopes of keeping your lakeside experience a safe and enjoyable one. Have a question you'd like to see answered? Don't be shy. Email hfenton@mlive and I'll include it this summer.

Before we jump into this week's discussion — addressing a reader's question about navigation lights after dark—I thought I'd offer some information about water-related events going on this weekend around West Michigan. If you're looking for something fun to do today, I won't make you wait until the end (You can thank me now!).

- First off, a 140-foot Coast Guard tug-and-barge combination will be docked along the Grand Haven Channel Saturday morning for the public to see. Guided tours will take place from 10 a.m. to noon and from 1 to 3 p.m.

The tug, known as the Cutter Mobile Bay, is home-ported in Sturgeon Bay, Wis. and supports the Coast Guard's domestic ice-breaking mission during the winter months.

- In Holland, kids can enjoy this year's Lakeshore Boating & Water Safety Day, planned for 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at Yacht Basin Marina. The location is on the North side of Lake Macatawa, at 1862 Ottawa Beach Road.

Kids will enjoy marine radio lessons and activities with the Ottawa sheriff's patrol boat.

It won't be all fun and games on the water. In Barry County, the sheriff's department will be out in full force this weekend as part of Operation Drywater conducting breathalyzer tests and searching for intoxicated boaters. Boating under the influence was reportedly the lead contributing factor in boating fatalities last year.

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Now, on to navigation lighting.

An MLive reader recently wrote in with a question about an inflatable boat:

“I own an 8 foot inflatable with a small outboard engine & operate it on the Black River in South Haven. What are the lighting requirements for operating after dusk?”

The reader questioned whether only a white handheld light is all that’s needed, or if a red and green light should also be mounted on board.

I turned to Barry County Marine Patrol Sgt. Julie Jones for her thoughts on that question. She advises the boater to have both red and green navigation lights as well as an all-round light.

New to boating and find that confusing?

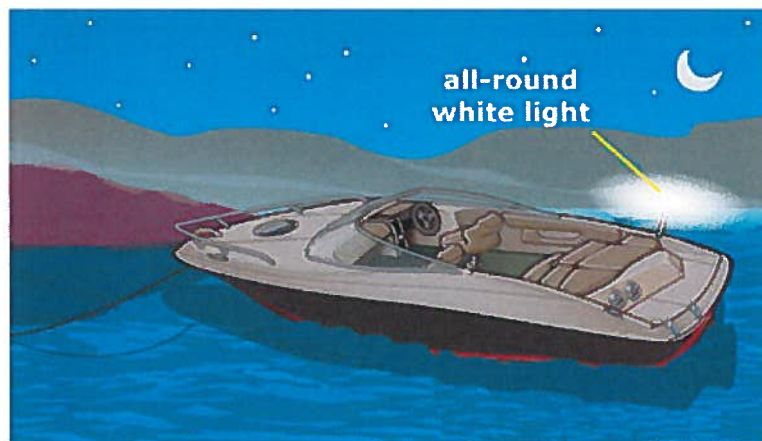
Here’s some background on Michigan law requiring navigation lights.

- **Unpowered vessels**—sailboats or those that are paddled, poled, or rowed—that are 26 feet or longer must have red and green sidelights visible from a distance of at least 2 miles away. A stern light must also be mounted and visible from a distance of at least three miles away.

- If an unpowered vessel is less than 26 feet long, a boater must have at least one lantern or flashlight shining a white light at all times while in motion.

Things are a bit different for motorized watercraft.

- Michigan law requires power-driven boats less than 26 feet long to have red and green sidelights visible from a distance of at least one mile away, and an all-round white light. The white light should be higher than the sidelights.
- If a powered boat is 26 feet or longer, it should have red and greens lights along with a masthead light and a sternlight—though an all-round one is not necessary.



courtesy photo/Michigan Boating License study guide

This graphic shows the proper lighting display for a vessel docked on a Great Lakes waterway or body of water connected to a Great Lake.

- All vessels anchored on water that is part of the Great Lakes or connected to them must have an all-round **white light on at all times** between sunset and sunrise.

Quite a bit to take in at once, but not too complicated if you consider how the information may apply to a specific watercraft.

The most important thing?

Don't head out unprepared, assuming you'll make it in before dusk. Jones thinks of the navigation lights like traffic lights on the road. If a boater cannot see the red and green signals, it's like trying to avoid other vehicles at an intersection without causing problems.

"On the waterways, it is everyone's responsibility to avoid a collision," she says. "Maintain them so that when the sun sets, they work."

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