



Winter Boating Tips

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While many boat owners choose to store their boats over the winter, there's still plenty of boating in winter to enjoy—especially in climates like ours. Typically, our winter waters are less crowded with recreational boaters, less populated with crab pots, and, on the occasional warm day, may offer the gentle warmth of the sun and beautiful peace and serenity that is rare in the busier summer months. Migrating bird and fish species in our diverse estuarian habitat can make each day its own surprise. The spectacular recent visit of white pelicans rarely, if ever, seen in these parts--and the periodic appearance of speckled sea trout or dolphins well up into our bays and creeks are but a couple of examples.

During the winter months, however, whether you're boating in an open power or sailboat, a cabin cruiser, or even a kayak, you must respect the elements and be aware of the effects of cold air and water temperatures. Winter temperatures can rise and fall dramatically at dawn and dusk. While you should always have all the standard safety equipment when you go boating, here are some cold weather tips specific to enjoying cold-weather boating in winter.

LAYER YOUR CLOTHING. Bundle up for the early morning departure from the dock or boat launch, and if you're lucky enough to be out on the inevitable winter day when the temperature approaches 70 degrees, you can always shed those layers. Bring at least two pairs of warm gloves. Especially if you are fishing or sailing, one set of gloves is bound to get wet. Bring another dry pair for the cruise home. On really cold days, consider a float coat or survival suit. Wear water-proof shoes or boots. Anything that gets wet cools faster as water evaporates off your skin. In the summer this brings welcome relief from the heat, but, in the winter it can cause discomfort or worse. Stay dry! Consider using hand and toe warmers and be sure and cover your face and eyes as necessary. When simple sunglasses won't cut it, ski goggles can work well to provide UV protection and limit tearing at high speeds. When you're headed home at dusk against a biting northwest wind, remember: This is not a beauty contest! As the Scots like to say, there is no such thing as bad weather—only bad clothing choices. A warm balaclava or neck gaiter can be used to cover all exposed facial skin. Remember that the wind chill factor is multiplied the faster the boat is moving. Passengers can hood up and face the stern, preferably behind something (or someone) to block the wind. A cheap beanbag chair placed on the deck near the bow allows you to get low during long, cold, high-speed runs to your favorite fishing spot. If you're old like me, make sure you have someone to help you up off the beanbag so you don't lose your dignity trying to wriggle up out of it after a long cruise.

WEAR YOUR LIFE JACKET. While it's always a good idea to wear your personal floatation device (PFD); it is even more important in the winter. The shock of sudden entry into cold water demands cold weather boating diligence. If something goes horribly wrong, you have a better chance of survival in cold water if your PFD is already on, secured, and properly fitted. In 50-60 degree water, unconsciousness due to hypothermia can occur in as little as one hour. With fewer boaters on the water, response times in case of any emergency will be longer.

MAKE SURE YOUR BOAT, MOTOR(S) AND BATTERIES ARE IN GOOD OPERATING CONDITION. Before the colder weather arrives, give your engines a check up and ensure they're topped up with coolant and antifreeze. To guard against condensation, top off your tanks with ethanol free fuel and add Stabil or the fuel additive of your choice. Boat batteries, like car batteries don't like cold weather either, and they use more power to start than when temperatures are higher. To ensure your batteries are topped off, connect them to shore power if possible, or use a trickle or solar charger to maintain optimum capacity. Remember that diesel fuel becomes gelatinous at temperatures below 15 degrees Fahrenheit. Keep your diesel powered vessel heated if possible and remember to increase your warm up time the colder the temperature. Flush all lines containing water or waste with marine antifreeze and make sure all bilges, live wells, storage areas and fixtures are dry. Water expands as it freezes and can damage hoses, seals, clamps and fixtures—none of which you want to fail as winter weather moves in.

EXERCISE WINTERTIME PRUDENCE. Remember that condensation near or below 32 Degrees becomes frost that can make a concrete boat ramp as slick as an Olympic luge run. Docks may only look wet, but invisible ice can form in a manner of minutes in the right (or wrong) conditions. Bring a capable companion out with you who can help if needed. Let someone know your sail plan, when you expect to return and when to sound an alarm if you don't—and conduct a radio check before heading out. For several years, Sea Tow operated an Automated Radio Check System, which was available on VHF Channels 24 to 28 for local mariners from over 130 locations. This service was discontinued in October of 2020. The Coast Guard requests boaters use channel 9 (not channel 16) when conducting radio checks.

When heading upriver, remember that fresh water with little current will freeze first starting from the shoreline. Ice edges can damage gelcoats, so motoring too close to even thin ice is to be avoided if possible. If your moored boat becomes encased in ice, do not try to move it as doing so is more likely to cause damage. After a long cold snap, ice flows may come down the river as the weather warms. Some may be nearly invisible if covered with a thin coating of water. Look for subtle changes in the water's surface and steer clear. Some of these flows may possess enough bulk to cause hull or prop damage. The closer to the sound you venture, the greater chance that increased salinity and more moderate temperatures will reduce this risk.

With appropriate precautions and protection from the elements, winter boating can be very enjoyable. So get on out there—and stay toasty my friends!

This article is given the courtesy of America's Boating Club of the Pamlico (also known as Pamlico Sail & Power Squadron). To learn more about our boating courses that are kicking off this winter, email our Education Officer at psps@gmail.com. Or reference our website at <https://pamlicosailandpowersquadron.org> to learn more and to keep up on the education opportunities offered. Be sure to visit us on [Facebook](#) as well!