

The Critical Importance of Running Lights

Boating Tips

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Decades ago a tug pushing a barge at night ran over a fishing boat killing three adults, a teenager, and a child. The fishing boat was drift fishing in a commercial channel with no lights. Also, no one was on watch. Having running lights lit would have prevented this tragic, loss of life.

Our sounds and rivers comprise a wide array of types and sizes of boats, recreational as well as commercial.

At night do you recognize the light pattern of a tug pushing a barge or a commercial fishing boat hauling nets? Can you distinguish the light pattern of an anchored sailboat? If you boat at night, become familiar with the light patterns of vessels in your area.

To assist you, here are generalized running light regulations.

- By law, from sunset to sunrise and during limited visibility, running lights shall be displayed.
- Next, vessels less than 65' in length must display a red light to port, the green light to starboard plus white lights bow and stern or 360°. These lights shall be visible for 2 miles, minimum.
- Even a john boat, dinghy or inflatable under power must display running lights. Only when rowed may the boat display a single, 360° white light.
- Vessels at anchor shall display a single 360° white light at their highest point.

For commercial vessels encountered after dark on our sounds and rivers plus because of our boating area, I've outlined inland rules only.

- A fishing vessel shall display red over white on its mast while a trawling vessel shall display green over white. A trawling vessel hauling nets shall display green, white, white and red. There are additional rules for other activities so consult Rules of the Road.

Rule 24 applies to barges pulled or pushed. Then because of our boating area, I've outlined only inland rules.

- Tug pushing or pulling a barge shall display two vertical mast lights, two vertical stern lights
- Barges pushed or towed shall be lighted as a vessel under power, red to port, and green to starboard. Pushed barge shall also display a flashing yellow light on its bow. Because of weak batteries and dirty lights, this yellow light is very difficult to see. When you spot any flashing yellow light, be extra cautious.

The Internet provides quick, easy access to Navigation Rules of the Road. Additionally, the US Coast Guard, United States Power Squadron/America's Boating Club plus similar organizations offer smartphone and tablet apps.

What about the new, low power, LED running lights? LED's must meet the 2-mile visibility requirement. Some do not so confirm before buying. Still, LED lights consume much less power, especially when at anchor.

CAUTION: The US Coast Guard issued an alert on August 15 "Marine Safety Alert" noting it received reports of LED light interference with AIS, automatic identification systems and DSC, digital selective calling. Interference hampered search and rescue efforts in several incidents. Before finalizing LED light installation, check for interference. Turning off all LED lights. Adjust a radio's squelch to where audio goes off. Turn on the LED lights and if interference returns, the LED lights have raised the interference floor. Reposition VHF, AIS and DSC devices, purchase non-interfering LEDs or forego LEDs altogether.

Remember, running lights on...to see and be seen!

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