

# On the Water, what is a Safe Operating Speed? It Depends!



Provided by Pamlico Sail & Power Squadron based in  
Washington, NC

While visiting family up in Maryland recently, we learned of a July 4th hit and run death of a friend on the Magothy River in Ann Arundel County just off the Chesapeake Bay. Laura Dixon Slattery, 63, was hit and killed by a boater, likely under the influence, who was travelling at high speed in low light and who fled without stopping to render assistance. A search is underway for the boater, who remains at large. Her husband, who was on the boat with her but was uninjured, is devastated. “She’s irreplaceable. She was wonderful, and she loved us all very much, and we all loved her,” reported daughter Sarah Slattery. “I just had talked to her earlier that day and just couldn’t believe it had happened. Just devastation,” added her son, Brian Slattery. “I’m 25. I’ve (got to) live the rest of my life without a mom now. And the person that did it left. We don’t know who it was,” cried her other daughter, Amber Slattery. The Slattery’s were returning home from a fireworks show. Their family--and the boater who took her life--will never be the same.

This tragedy and others like it can be avoided by simple adherence to basic boating safety, maritime regulations and plain old common sense. Firstly, never mix drinking and boating. The captain of the vessel is obligated to look out for the safety of all passengers and fellow boaters while adhering to all applicable regulations. Second, constantly monitor your speed and the three main factors that help determine the speeds at which it is safe to operate. Those factors are: Visibility, water conditions, and traffic density.

**Visibility** - When boating in low light conditions or after dark, take care to properly illuminate your path and identify your vessel with port and starboard bow lights, anchor and stern lights as required. Take extra care around bends, bridges and points—which may obscure other boats at anchor or underway.

**Water Conditions** - Heavy wind, precipitation and rough seas or choppy waters all require reduced speed and extreme diligence at the helm. Limit your speed when your visibility is impaired due to weather, darkness or your own capacities as an operator of your vessel. If a mishap occurs, stay on the scene and render necessary aid.

**Traffic Density** - Especially after holiday celebrations or community events and around highly trafficked areas like Taylor Creek around Beaufort and Morehead City—requires extra diligence. If you doubt this, you have never been on a boat on the Washington Waterfront when the fireworks end. Even in this no wake area, it can feel like boats are coming at you from all directions.

When in doubt about a possible collision, slow down and maintain a steady course. If a boat is aiming to cross your path from the starboard (right), they have the right of way and you should pass to their stern. At night, you'll see a red light moving across your horizon from right to left. If another vessel is approaching from the port (left) side, you have the right of way and should maintain your speed and direction. At night you'll see the green light moving from left to right. Especially on busy holiday weekends, however, understand that many boaters may not adhere to these Right of Way rules. Regardless of right or wrong, it is always your responsibility to avoid a collision. At the risk of stating the obvious, boats don't have brakes! So enjoy that event on the water, and remember that reducing your speed is always a good way to negotiate a safe way home for you and your loved ones.

This article is given the courtesy of your local America's Boating Club of the Pamlico. Keep us in mind for your boating education and skill building that includes advanced courses as well as 2 - 4 hour seminars. To learn more about our boating courses, email our Education Officer at [psps@gmail.com](mailto:psps@gmail.com). We invite you to reference our website at <https://pamlicosailandpowersquadron.org> to learn more and to keep up on the education opportunities offered.