

Boat Safety This Summer



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Lake Conroe continues to be a destination of choice for recreational enthusiasts from the Houston metropolitan area as well as other areas across the State of Texas. If you've spent much time on the lake, you know how congested it can be, particularly throughout the summer boating season.

Unfortunately, many people are under the false impression that starting the engine and placing a vessel into gear are all that a person needs to know in order to go boating. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Practically anyone can start the motor and put a vessel in gear; only those with specific training and experience can safely operate a vessel from start to finish. Safe boating requires a fundamental understanding of a wide range of topics, including but not limited to: docking and anchoring; boating laws; safety equipment; navigation rules; boat operation; trailering; and storing/protecting your craft. As someone who works on or around the lake every day, I get to see firsthand the often disastrous results that can come from inexperienced or untrained boaters taking to the water.

As stated above, nothing can substitute for proper training and experience. For many, though, it's also required by law. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) mandates that any boat driver born after September 1, 1993 must achieve a passing grade in an approved boating safety course. The exceptions to this rule are made for those us-

ing paddle crafts, vessels with motors of less than 15 horsepower, and sailboats less than 14 feet in length. Of course it is highly recommended that everyone participate in a boating safety course before getting behind the "driver's seat."

That being said, there are some simple things that you should always keep in mind prior to taking to the water as either a driver or a passenger. First of all, you must be aware that conditions on the lake can, and often do, change in an instant. You might cruise to your destination on peacefully calm waters only to find yourself faced with lake conditions that are not conducive to safe boating on your way back to the dock. As a result, it's important that you keep an eye on the weather and make good decisions as to when and when not to set out. Often the best decision is to stay put.

Here are a few other common sense reminders: always keep alcohol consumption and boating separate; communicate to someone that is not going with you, where you plan to go and when you plan to return; take a waterproof cell phone on board with you; keep a list of emergency numbers handy; wear your personal flotation device (PFD); keep a first aid kit on board; and bring plenty of water for every passenger. The law requires that certain equipment be kept on board at all times, and other items are simply a good idea. You can obtain a complete list of both required and recommended equipment through the TPWD

website at <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/>.

The numbers don't lie. In 2010, statewide, there were 152 boating accidents that resulted in 136 injuries and 27 fatalities. The typical scenario surrounding fatalities includes: an open motorboat; weekend operation between noon and 7 p.m.; the victim falling overboard; PFDs on board, but NOT in use; and an operator between 26 and 50 years of age. 33% of the time, alcohol is involved (Source: TPWD). Here on Lake Conroe, there were 19 boating while intoxicated (BWI) arrests made during the 2013 calendar year.



Lt. Timothy Cade and Dep. Mathew Wiese dock their patrol boats.

Fortunately, in the Lake Conroe area, we have a number of boating experts to look to for advice and guidance. For example, the Montgomery County Precinct 1 Constable's office maintains a Marine Division on Lake Conroe that operates from the west end of



the dam. Lieutenant Timothy Cade and his staff of dedicated officers patrol the lake on a daily basis. Their patrol duties consist of tasks ranging from routine boat-safety checks to emergency rescue operations. They also enforce San Jacinto River Authority (SJRA) rules and regulations and partner with SJRA in operating and maintaining the reservoir. Texas Parks and Wildlife Game Wardens also man the lake, enforce the Texas Water Safety Act, and provide a wide range of other law enforcement functions. The United States Coast Guard Auxiliary (USCGAUX) was formed in 1939 to assist the Coast Guard in promoting boating safety.



Today, there are more than 31,000 members nationwide who receive special training to help the Coast Guard with non-law enforcement functions such as vessel safety checks and boater education. The all-volunteer staff of Flotilla 069, conducts the all-day TPWD "Boat-Texas" course here at the Lake Conroe dam throughout the spring and summer. This course is an excellent and convenient way for area residents to obtain basic boater education. Another course that is offered to the public is "Suddenly in Command." This 4-hour boating safety primer is designed for those not generally driving a boat and will equip the attendees with the basics in case of an emergency.

Finally, Gary Lewis and his staff at Tow-Boat-U.S. provide 24-hour per day/7 days per week vessel-rescue services. These brave men and women will venture out into just about any conditions that Lake Conroe can produce to help save lives, protect property, and/or tow watercrafts to safety. Keeping their phone number close at hand is an absolute must. ♦

Resources:

United States Coast Guard Auxiliary: pcatala1@gmail.com; 936-588-3322

Montgomery County Sheriff's Department Dispatch:

Texas Parks and Wildlife Game Warden Dispatch: 281-842-8100

Towboats US 24-hr line: 936-524-0448



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