

From the December 1999 issue:



Get ready for spring boating

Time to test, tune-up and
tweak your boat for a safe
season.

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Modern boats are remarkably well made – resistant to weather, water and steady use. While it's common to have a boat, motor and trailer for 15 years or more, the equipment still needs maintenance, and there's more to getting ready for the boating season than driving to the lake and launching your craft. There is a lot more to consider to ensure a season of safe, enjoyable outings.

Getting ready for the boating season each spring is a bit like buying a house or opening your summer cottage for the season —before you move in you want to check the the electrical, plumbing and other key systems are working. You also might want to spruce it up as it's easier to paint the rooms before they are full of your stuff.

A boat that has been left unused over the winter is a lot like that vacant house. Everything may be working, but you want to check it out before you use it. Perhaps mice have chewed through the wiring, standing water has rotted a support or rust has stiffened up a cable.

The damage is often hard to see, until the consequences are more serious. Each year brings new sad stories of boaters who forgot to put the plug into the stern and the boat sunk within minutes of launching . Or a boater who left at midday to go fishing and stayed out after dark only to discover that the boat lights didn't work. And how many times have you seen a boat towed down the roadway with trailer lights that didn't work so the rig couldn't safely signal turns or braking?

Unfortunately there are even sadder stories of early spring boaters who lost engine power, didn't have a paddle or anchor in the boat, and died because they couldn't stop drifting into a downstream dam. Or a boater who pulled his rig down the road and noticed his boat passing him on the highway at 55 mph because the hitch came loose and there were no safety chains attached to the car, resulting in a serious car accident.

A few precautions will add to your enjoyment and safety on the water. Let's check things out one piece at a time, from the ground up.

Your trailer

Trailer maintenance is a function of trailer use. If yours is used once a season to move your boat from storage to a ramp, it doesn't have to be inspected as often as a trailer that hauls boats down dirt roads to unimproved launches several days a week. Check the frame for signs of rust. Clean and repaint them. Check and tighten bolts that may have rattled loose from bouncing down dirt roads or over gravel. Check trailer hitches, safety chains, rollers and pads.

The "big three" on your trailer that wear most quickly and seem to need repair are lights, tires and wheel hubs.

Your lights are touchy because electrical systems just don't do well when immersed in water. Most launch sites have a fairly steep grade at the shoreline so your boat will float off the trailer as you back up before the back tires of your car get wet and lose traction. On most trailers, this means the lights are going under water. Take the time to disconnect or switch off your trailer lights just before you launch the boat. You can often make your trailer lights waterproof by caulking the taillight housing to prevent leaks. Even so, water often finds its way into the housing, and the prepared boater always carries a few hand tools and some spare trailer bulbs.

The bane of every boater seems to be trailer lights. Many designs are tender and touchy. The prepared boater would rather fidget, fuss and fix his trailer lights in his garage in April than curse at them just before a big trip. Clean off the connections, check for wear and test that the turn signals, brakes and lights are all properly in sync between your tow vehicle and your trailer lights.

Launching the boat often means backing the trailer into water that is deeper than the wheel hubs. The hubs get darn hot as wheel bearings whirl around the chase and allow the wheel to turn freely.



Inspect, clean and grease cables to keep winches moving smoothly. Bob Queen, © 1998

When you get to the launch site, particularly after a long ride, pull off to the side and let the wheels cool for several minutes while you load up gear before launching. Otherwise cold water gets drawn into the bearing as the hot hubs hit the water. This can rust up the bearings.

I strongly recommend installing bearing protectors which are spring-loaded caps that hold in grease under pressure. These protectors keep out water and grease can be pumped into the bearings through handy zirc fittings. It's a lot less work than removing the wheels and hand-packing the bearings a few times during the season.

A blowout on a boat trailer tire is real trouble. Broken axles, spilled boats and serious accidents can happen quickly. Most trailer tires blowout from old age rather than punctures. Check the tire tread, keep the tires inflated to the pressure indicated on the sidewall and inspect the tire for signs of wear. Fine cracks in the tire sidewall indicate aging, thinning tires.

Also, don't overload your boat. Trailer tires (and hitches) are rated for the weight of your boat with some light gear. If you're headed out on vacation and you've loaded up the boat with luggage, food, camping gear, a few bikes and a canoe, your trailer could be overloaded and a weak tire or a lightweight hitch won't handle the weight safely.

A lot of boaters forget to check the trailer tire pressure. If these tires are underinflated, they build up more heat as they rotate. This can cause the tire plies to separate. Also carry a spare trailer tire and the proper kind of scissors jack or hydraulic jack to lift a loaded trailer in case of a flat tire or blowout. And make sure that the

weight in the trailer is properly loaded so only five to 10 percent of the weight of the boat, motor and trailer is pressing on the hitch (tongue weight).

Also check the safety chains from the car to the trailer and from the winch to the boat.

Your boat

Early spring is a great time to check out your boat. Check for signs of mice, raccoons, mink and woodchucks that have all been known to hole up in covered boats over winter. Start at the bow and work your way back. Inspect the hull, pulleys, carpeting and fittings. Grease pulleys and check them for signs of wear. Check and lubricate any steering cables. Move on to the electrical conduits, live well, compartments, chairs, benches, transom and the motor. This is the ideal time to enjoy the pre-boating season by installing better anchors and anchor cranking systems, improving the electrical hookups, installing rod holders, cleaning gauges, and getting your motor tuned-up for the season.

Treat yourself by attending a local boat show. Looking at other rigs is a fun way to see new equipment and get ideas to fine-tune your boat. Pick up hints for storing or organizing your gear to keep the boat as open and spacious as possible.

Charge up your batteries, hook up the systems and check navigation lights, bilge pumps, tilt controls and your accessories – navigation systems, locators, horn and interior lighting.



Check all your lines too. Is the anchor rope frayed?

Rust-free fittings like this pulley will make your boating adventures safer. T-Maker, © 1998

Is it long enough? Are knots securely tied to the anchors? Are mooring ropes in good shape? Are all boat fenders and bumpers in working order?

Don't overlook the fuel lines. Check lines for wear and cracks. Press the fuel bulb and look for hairline cracks that indicate the rubber has dried out, has holes or is losing elasticity. Check all metal fittings and fuel line clamps for leaks and corrosion. Put in a fresh fuel filter. Inspect your fuel tanks and cap vents.

If you stored fuel in your tank over winter (not recommended), check that your fuel stabilizer worked. Open the fuel tank and smell the gas. Old gas that has separated can smell more like varnish than fresh fuel. If you have any doubts, take your fuel tank to a mechanic, marina or hazardous waste disposal site that accepts old fuel, empty the tank and start fresh.

Safety equipment

Next, check your safety equipment. Is your fire extinguisher still working and fully charged? Is your flare kit still dry? Does it need replacing? Do you have fresh batteries in flashlights and an emergency tool kit? Does your first aid kit need replenishing? How about the condition of your life jackets? Are they all pliable? Has the fabric rotted or the vinyl cracked? Are all straps and snaps in working order? Do you have enough? Have you tried them on to check that your PFDs still fit your growing family?

Your hitch and your attitude

Now that your boat has had a good once-over, check the car or truck you will use to tow the rig.

Is the ball and hitch assembly secure? Has the hitch rusted? Are the brakes on your vehicle in good shape? If you are using a new car to pull your boat, make sure it is rated for the proper towing weight to pull your boat.

Next, check out your sporting equipment – Are your rods, nets, tackle box or skis ready for the season?

Finally, get yourself ready. Review the boating regulations and consider taking a preseason refresher course. The Coast Guard Auxiliary, the U.S. Power Squadron, and the Department of Natural Resources sponsor courses on get new skippers and old salts ready for safe on-water fun. If some of your family will be operating the boat this season for the first time, consider taking a course together.

If you have access to a computer with Internet connections, check out some of the boating sites. For instance www.boatsafe.com has an excellent pre-departure checklist, suggestions for stocking a boater's tool kit and even offers online boating safety courses. And keep in touch with us at the [Department of Natural Resources](#) for up-to-date advice throughout the boating season.

Before the weather heats up and you get the urge to hit the water, take the time now to prepare for the season to keep your boating experiences safe and enjoyable.

About the author

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