

Early spring weather in Minnesota gives us peaks and promises of open water and warmer days to come. These warm April days cause many boat owners to think about the coming season in their watercraft and to intensify the call of the water for prospective boat owners looking to hop aboard a craft of their own. COVID related closures of other entertainment options have pushed participation in boating and water sports to new levels. The surging interest in boating is reflected in a wave of boat sales taking place across the country. The National Marine Manufacturers Association recently reported that nearly 320,000 new boats were sold in 2020. This represented a 13% increase over 2019 sales. Signs point toward that trend continuing in 2021.

It is a good bet that Minnesota waterways will continue to see heavy boating use this open water season. This increased boating traffic highlights the need for all boat operators, regardless of age or experience, to make boating safety their top priority on the water. The single most important choice anyone on a boat can make to increase safety is wearing a life jacket. According to a US Coast Guard 2017 report, 68% of all deaths on the water were a result of drowning. The same report indicated that 82% of drowning victims were not wearing a life jacket. Life jackets save lives.

New operators and experienced captains will both benefit from a review of the Minnesota DNR Boating Guide. This booklet details the rules of the water for boat operators. The guide can be found at most DNR license agent locations or on the DNR website. Additionally, the Minnesota DNR has a number of boating safety courses available on their website. These courses introduce students to the rules of boating and important safety topics. These courses are required for youth ages 12 to 17 who wish to operate certain motorboats. Adults will also benefit from these courses and those who do complete the courses may be eligible for a discount on their boating insurance. Check with your insurance agent to see if taking these courses couldn't mean a little more money in your pocket for gas, minnows, or snacks this summer. Know the rules of the water.

Before hitting the water, ensure that your boat has all the required safety equipment. Every boat must have one life jacket of the appropriate size for every person on the boat. Depending upon the size of your craft and what you will be doing on the water, your boat might be required to have a throwable floatation device, a horn, a fire extinguisher, a carbon monoxide detector, or navigation lights. The DNR Boating Guide is a great reference for helping you understand what equipment you will need to operate your boat safely and legally this year. Make sure you know your boat's capacity rating. The fact that you and your 17 closest friends can physically fit on your pontoon doesn't mean it's safe or a good idea. Know your required equipment and your boat's limits.

Finally, safety on the water comes down to the boat operator making good decisions. Operating a boat, especially a motorboat that can move at speed, requires constant attention from the operator to ensure the craft avoids natural hazards, other watercraft, and people in the water. Compromising the ability of the operator with alcohol is never a good idea. The Coast Guard has consistently cited operator inattention as the most common contributing factor in boating accidents and alcohol use as the most common contributing factor in boating fatalities. Boat safe and boat smart this year on the water!

For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.