

SAFETY ALERT

D17-05-04

Fall Season Safety Concerns for Hunters and Boaters

Background: The Seventeenth District Safety Alert program is intended to bring timely safety issues and “Lessons Learned” to the attention of boaters. It is not intended to judge or reach conclusions regarding the ability or capacity of any person, living or dead, or any boat or piece of equipment.

Incidents:

Several recent incidents have highlighted the dangers of boat operation during the fall season. In one case, a boat with four people onboard got their anchor line fouled in their propeller, which sucked the stern of the boat down and swamped the vessel, which sank in under one minute. In another case, a boat with five people suddenly swamped from waves over the stern and sank. In each case, some of the people onboard died before they were rescued. In a third case, three people in a 16-foot skiff spent the night on the beach near Whittier due to bad weather, and were the subject of a Coast Guard search.

Lessons Learned:

1. Monitor the weather closely! Be prepared for rapid weather changes and rough sea conditions, and pay particular attention to the stern of your boat. Sudden weather changes in the fall season can take calm seas to gale conditions within minutes. In one of these cases, the skiff safely made it to shore on a nearby island when the weather abruptly changed. In the two fatal incidents, wave conditions were sufficient to quickly swamp each vessel when the stern turned into the waves.
2. Dress for the water, not for the weather. Particularly in the fall season, folks on boats must be prepared for possible water immersion. Understand that even if rescue comes, you may be in the water for over an hour, and survival is unlikely unless you wear protective clothing, such as an exposure (commonly called a “Mustang suit”) or dry suit. Consider how to get out of the water, and ensure equipment is ready, such as a loop of webbing to serve as a boarding “ladder.”
3. Always carry a VHF radio for communications, and keep it ready for use on channel 16. In one of these cases, a distress call was made on a non-distress frequency, and was not heard by the Coast Guard. In another case, skiff operators actually had a VHF radio, but dropped it overboard earlier in the day. Remember handheld VHF radios are particularly useful if you lose power due to swamping.
4. Prepare carefully for each trip, and add safety to the checklist of getting ready. Think about mishap scenarios and practice what you might do if your boat capsizes or you fall overboard. Remember that “going hunting” in a boat is still boating, and needs the same safety consideration that you give to the land-based hunting and camping portion of your adventure. Additional risks that you should consider include the colder water temperatures, sudden weather changes, and the fact that fewer people are on the water to help assist if you get into trouble.
5. Never anchor over the stern. Additionally, always try to keep the anchor line and other lines from getting too close to the propeller, where they may get entangled. Any line with a bottom weight over the stern of a small boat serves as a pivot point, and the stern quickly turns into the waves and makes it easy to swamp or capsize. This can be a deadly scenario, and not worth an easier anchor pull.
6. Always wear a PFD while boating! In the fall season, an exposure suit is the best option for the protection discussed above. A PFD provides key buoyancy to recover from the shock of falling into cold waters and helps keep your head out of water when you experience the gasp reflex.