

OUTDOORS

Use your head to avoid that sinking feeling

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The irony didn't escape me: The same week in which an insurance company released study results on why sailboats sink, I found myself pushing the stern of a powerboat that had run aground. With boating it can be all about having too much water or it can be about not having enough of the stuff.

Sailboats look so sad when they're half sunk or listing terribly. Even though only about 10 percent of Lee County's registered vessels use sails, it seems those are the boats you remember because they're large and graceful on the water and completely out of place when they're not, well, floating.

A study of 100 sailboat sinkings from the BoatU.S. Insurance claims files show sinkings were divided evenly between those that sank at the dock and those that sank while underway. OK, not rocket science, but the report goes on to explain common reasons why.

Sailboats have deep drafts — that's partially why they're less popular in shallow Southwest Florida. That long and deep underside can hit a submerged object, which is what caused 40 percent of the sinkings in the "downed while underway" category. Dockside sinkings were mostly because of deteriorated, damaged or corroded fittings, such as intakes, seacocks and

drains below the waterline.

Funny how, regardless of whether we're talking sailboats or powerboats, it's operator error (hitting something) or lack of maintenance (darn that deteriorating factor) that end the boating fun too soon and cost money.

On the flip side, there's running aground. Which is rarely the boat's equipment's fault and is typically operator error.

Fortunately, Southwest Florida boaters are accustomed to run-ins with the bottom, and even more fortunately the bottom here is mostly soft. No coral reefs to clash with, but we do have those unforgiving oyster bars.

In my case recently, I was relieved to have not been the driver, so I didn't have to feel wholly responsible. (In his defense, though, he is an experienced captain with hours logged around the globe and the boat we were on was not his nor mine and it was without a depth finder.)

Anyway, we hit the sandy bottom, we surveyed the area around us that we'd nudged into, and then without a word, we emptied our pockets of cell phones and stepped into the water to push.

It took a while but it worked. Best part: No other boaters saw us.

So if you want to avoid running aground and being seen, here's some advice dished out to boaters at a recent education class Lee County Parks & Recreation and Florida Sea Grant sponsored.

Capt. Richard Paul of TowBoat U.S. said the Top 5 places to be careful are the Miserable Mile (aptly named), red Marker



COURTESY PHOTO

Sinking sailboat

11 outside the Sanibel Causeway, various shortcuts coming in and out of Cape Coral canals onto the Caloosahatchee, Big Shell Island area and Redfish Pass.

When you run aground, the choices are obvious: Get out and push or call for help. The former worked just fine for me last week.

Capt. Richard told boaters, though, there is another option: Get out the fishing poles.

"Just don't tell (you ran aground) and fish a few more hours," he said, "And wait on the tide."

Sounds a bit better than figuring out how to un-sink a sailboat. ■

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BETSY'S TIPS

Remember basics to avoid running aground:

- >>Carry a chart and read it.
- >>Take a boating education class so you can confidently read channel markers.
- >>Look for visual clues, such as birds standing on submerged oyster bars and shoals.
- >>Limit or restrict alcohol consumption.
- >>Have a backup plan, be it a friend you can call or a membership with Sea Tow International or TowBoat U.S.

Tips for prevent a sailboat sinking:

- >>Any time your boat hits bottom, immediately inspect the bilge and keel bolts or centerboard pennant and hinge. To be safe, inspect again an hour later.
- >>Routinely — twice a season — inspect all below the waterline fittings, hoses, and hardware. If the fitting is long enough, it's good practice to have two marine-rated stainless steel clamps on all hose ends. Any hoses showing signs of rot should be immediately replaced.
- >>Don't ignore through-hull fittings or hoses that are installed above the waterline. While they may appear to be "safely" above the water level, they can leak when heeled over in a seaway, or when a storm forces the boat under.
- >>A seasonal haul out is the perfect time to inspect the prop shaft and cutless bearing.

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