



Boating At Night Without Running Into Anything

by Hank Foglino

caught a striped bass was when I was fishing for something else.

Nighttime is no exception, only things are not pleasant, for me anyway. Nothing is where it's supposed to be and you have to grope about to find tackle, tools, flashlights, bait, etc. The eels you are using for bait take their revenge by first wrapping themselves around your arm, coating you with a slime that is a powerful attraction to all the gnats, mosquitoes and bugs from near and far. I swear that I have swatted some that seemed to be carrying passports. After the eels are unwrapped from your arm, they invariably slip out of your grasp onto the deck. By the time you get the flashlight and find them, they have covered your bottom with slime trails fore and aft. Put them in ice, I'm told, or stun them with a small club. This, I believe, only makes them madder, for when on the hook and deployed, they start twisting and turning, all the while picking up line, and when you retrieve your line, you'll find a slimy ball comprised of monofilament and eel. Try to unravel that in the dark.

However I'm going off on a tangent. Seeing all those lights from the ferry made me realize how hard it would be to navigate at night in unfamiliar waters. When we learn how to operate our boats safely, we learn about aids to navigation, among which are buoys that light up at night. They are different colors, telling us on which side to

pass them. They go on and off in different patterns to give us more information re: their purpose. This sounds really great. However, go out on Long Island Sound at night and try to find them. With the background lights on shore and the boats with their illuminated running lights, which are the same colors as the buoys', finding a lighted buoy is no easy task. I used to go out of the Nissequogue River on Long Island that had a mid-channel buoy marking its entrance. This buoy has a white light flashing a Morse code A signal, one short and one long. Many is the time I would be coming back from a late afternoon fishing trip that went on into darkness and I would try to find that light against the background of shore and boat lights to no avail. What can we do to make things better to be able to operate a boat safely at night?

First, let's look at the design of our eyes. Light enters the eye through the cornea and eventually reaches the back of the eye called the retina, which senses the light. The retina is made up of two types of cells, rods and cones. The rods handle the vision in low light and the cones take care of color vision and detail. When stimulated, these cells send electrical impulses to the brain and we see. When we have to see at decreased light levels, the first thing that must happen is that the pupil, the dark part of your eye, must dilate up to its max-

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Many years ago I took my 19-foot run-about around Manhattan ("Long Island Boating World" 1/02) and a great cruise it was. My next effort, I thought, would be to do it at night. However, one night I was returning from Governor's Island at about 11 p.m. from an N Club meeting and.... I got scared. Looking out from the ferry's bow, I saw the collage of lights from the southern tip of Manhattan, passing boats, aids to navigation and their reflections from the water's surface. Again, I got scared. My only experience at extended night boating with my boat was fishing for striped bass. Theoretically, the bass feed at night and will bite on anything you offer, making for a successful trip. In my case, the only time I've

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imum opening to allow as much of the available light to enter. The light then gets to the rods and cones. The rods cells contain a pigment called rhodopsin that is sensitive to very low light levels and gives us maximum vision at these levels. However, when we're in this low-light vision mode, the whole system can be short-circuited by the sudden entrance of bright light. This causes the rod cells to saturate, destroying the sensitivity of the rhodopsin and eliminating any night vision we might have for up to 30 minutes. This is why NavRule 20b states that it is an offense to use a light that will impair visibility and/or interfere with keeping a proper lookout. Rhodopsin is less sensitive to red than any other component of visible light. That is why instrument lights are red. In my cabin I have the choice of a white or red overhead light; the red light will give enough visibility to locate what I want but not take away my night vision.

One must is to keep your windshield clean. If you can see it, as opposed to through it, it needs cleaning. Salt spray is notorious as a windshield fouler. Stop the boat if necessary and clean it off. Wear a life jacket with a strobe light and an attached whistle. A person in the water is a lot harder to see than a navigation light.

Wear sunglasses until the sun gets a bit lower in the skies in late afternoon. Normally it

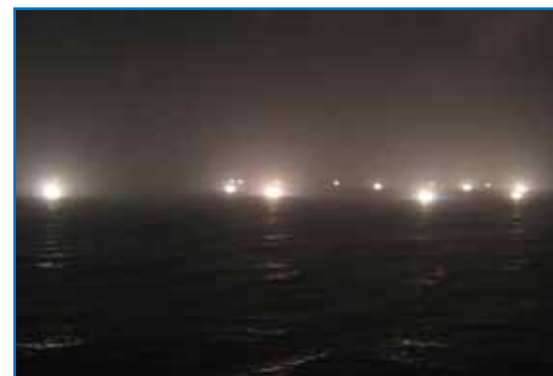


takes about a half-hour for your eyes to adapt to maximum night vision, but a few hours of bright sunlight can delay this for hours.

When you look directly at an object, the reflected or generated light entering through your cornea will fall directly on your cone cells. That's great in the daytime since you want enhanced color vision. But at night with minimal light you want to have the incoming light on your light-sensitive rods. There are more of these on each side of the central portion of the retina. To prove this, look to the side a bit when looking at or for an object. This is referred to as averted vision and was the rule for lookouts aboard US Navy ships when I was in the navy and I suppose it still holds. Look

at faint objects with averted or direct vision for about a minute. The eye seems to build up an image over time like a time exposure on a camera. Finally, I read in the January issue of Car and Travel, the AAA magazine, that truckers sometimes cover one eye when they gas up at night. This preserves the night vision in one eye. You might want to try this if you have to approach a dock or other lit area.

Unfortunately, we cannot do anything to genuinely improve our night vision and the older we get the less night vision we have. It takes twice as much light for a 50-year old than a 30-year old to see well. Hopefully, as we get older and don't see as well at night, we will have gotten smarter with age and use more caution when we are at sea.



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