

# NIGHT CRUISING

New boat writer Nikkulas Day from Skippers School has some handy hints to help you get started into cruising the river at night.

**W**hen twilight fades into darkness and familiar landmarks are no longer visible a cruise along the river can become a challenge for new boaters. The only hint of coastline may be the flickering of lights on the now invisible horizon, which can easily distort the vision of even the most experienced skipper.

Taking up the challenge from daylight into the night is when distance, speed and sound take on a complete new meaning. As a qualified skipper I would like to share with you a few handy hints on how to enjoy a safe cruise at night as you navigate your way through our local protected inland waters.

If you are one of the 50, 000 people who have already taken up the Department for Planning and

Infrastructure (DPI) Recreational Skippers Ticket (RST) Challenge in true West Australian spirit, then what better way to test your new skills and knowledge than a night cruise on the Swan River.

I find cruising along the tranquil waters of the Swan River during the night a most relaxing and enjoyable boating pleasure. An enjoyable change escaping from the suns scorching rays that make your eyes squint and skin burn, as well as the confusion caused by the wake of many boats.

Night boating requires special attention for skippers, as with all restricted visibility situations such as fog or heavy rain. To avoid a collision you have to take the appropriate steps to make sure your vessel is more visible to other vessels.

This is where your navigation lights

help. Not only will the vessels visibility account for your safety but also by maintaining a lookout at all times with your eyes, ears and navigation equipment while traveling slow. This will make dealing with any potential hazards much more stress free and enjoyable.

Skippers must be ready and allow for plenty of time in case they need to take action to avoid a collision with another vessel, jetty or even a daylight (unlit) navigation mark.

I have witnessed on more than one occasion vessels operating at night without lights. It's your responsibility to see them as well. It's not good enough to say "I didn't see him" as an excuse to explain why you had a collision with an unlighted vessel at night. The key being 'you' must take action to avoid any collision.

If you were involved in an incident of that nature and your navigation lights were on, and the other vessels were off, both skippers could be 50% responsible and vice versa. "I didn't see him and he had no lights on!" is not a valid excuse as 'you' didn't take action to avoid the collision and your speed must have been unsafe.

Your insurance policy may not pay for incidents involving negligence and that could be expensive. Adding to that, if loss of life occurred you could be held partly responsible even though you were doing the right thing with your lights on. Why didn't you slow down or alter course to starboard? If you had it would have been a better situation even if the collision still occurred. Small tips like this are worth knowing.

### SAFE SPEED

You must travel at a safe speed and that's not necessarily the maximum open speed limit in parts of the river. It depends on your experience, the conditions at the time and your vessel. You must, for example be able to avoid a person in a small canoe training for the Avon decent at night. This could include factors like the current pushing 12kts behind him with no lights or a

dark stormy night. Could you see him and what speed would be safe?

In the open speed limit area of the Swan and Canning Rivers, the speed is reduced to 10kts between sunrise and sunset. This doesn't mean to travel at 10kts is safe for all vessels as I mentioned before it depends on the weather, your vessels size and your experience.

Slow down. You cannot judge distances as easy at night and this will give you more time to figure out what all the lights mean. For example if you saw a white light flashing 3 times, being an east cardinal marker, you must first have time to see the light, check it and then take the appropriate action before you pass it. .

### NAVIGATION LIGHTS

Always check your navigation lights work before every trip and ensure you have spare bulbs. The actual position of your lights should be checked to see if they are within the visibility regulations. Don't assume just because you have a new boat that it is set up right, as I have seen some new vessels in show rooms that are far from safe.

A good example of this is you should be able to turn your sidelights off independently from your

surrounding white anchor lights. This is so at anchor you don't have your sidelights on indicating a false signal to other vessels that you're under way. If drift fishing at night have all navigation lights on to make your vessel visible.

When a vessel approaches you from the starboard side it will show you its red port light, like the traffic lights 'stop' signal. Your vessel will be showing a starboard green light, like the 'go' signal at traffic lights, to the other vessel. This helps with a direction path between the two vessels.

### SPOTLIGHTING

I can understand the natural tendency for skippers to use a spotlight at night or assume vessels must have headlights like cars. How else can they see where they are going? However, headlights or spotlights do not work on water while a vessel is under way. In some circumstances, using a spotlight to pick up a mooring in a controlled mooring area is prudent.

If you use your spotlight when under way and it catches your eye then it will cause temporary loss of your night vision and also other skippers who you may inadvertently

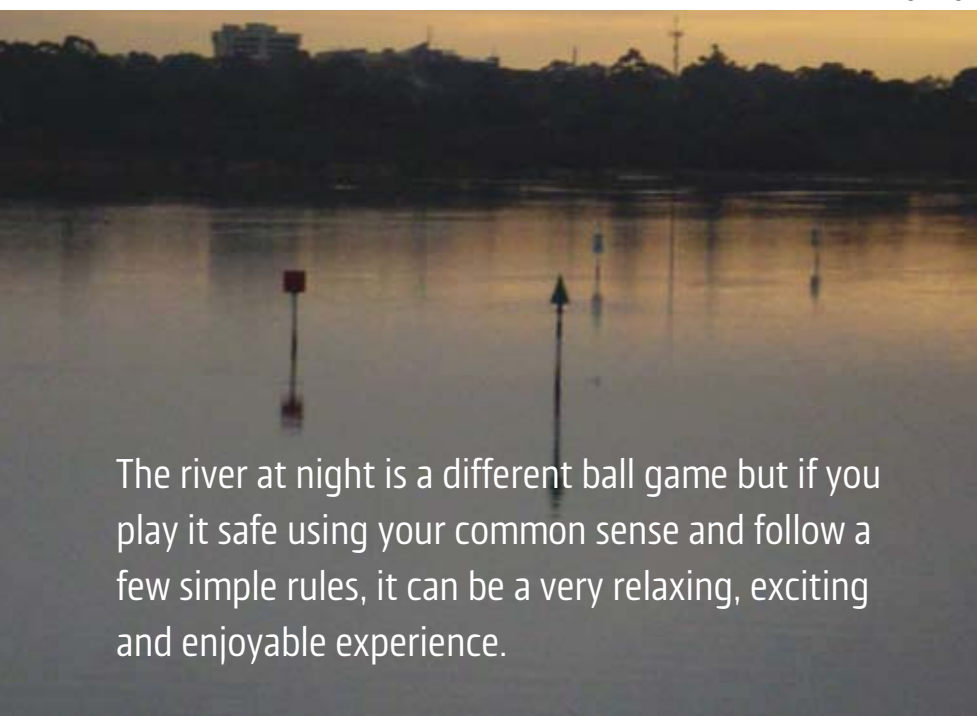
**It takes about 30 minutes for your eyes to become fully accustomed to the limited light available at night and any bright light will destroy your night vision in a fraction of a second.**



CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE: One of the many scenes night cruising has to offer; A well lit up dash can cause backscatter; Pay extra attention to other vessels operating in the water at night.



THIS PICTURE: Unlit channel markers need to be taken into consideration when traveling at night.



The river at night is a different ball game but if you play it safe using your common sense and follow a few simple rules, it can be a very relaxing, exciting and enjoyable experience.

spotlight. This has to be taken into consideration when using spotlights on the water.

## NIGHT VISION

Night vision means that your eyes receive and interpret a different type of light than light during the day. It takes about 30 minutes for your eyes to become fully accustomed to the limited light available at night and any bright light will destroy your night vision in a fraction of a second. This will lead to the initial process of your eyes adjusting to the darkness again. A red lens torch is best used if light is necessary as the red spectrum of light has the least effect on your pupil's contraction.

## BACKSCATTER

The first time I skippered a vessel at night and as soon as the moorings were dropped I couldn't see where I was, where to go, or where I had been. I was completely blind! Not only had my night vision been unable to develop, the reflection (backscatter) on the inside of the wheelhouse windows made it impossible to see outside. I had heard about backscatter but did not know how critical it was and how much it impaired my vision.

If it wasn't for the quick thinking decky sensing something was wrong and guiding me away from danger, I would have learnt my lesson the hard way by crashing into another boat or beaching it. The positioning of navigation lights on small open vessels can have the same effect on the skipper if the light is visible from the steering position, particularly the surrounding white light.

One of the things I had seen my boss do on many occasions was to turn on all the navigation equipment, GPS, depth sounder and gauges then place a few towels over the screens and gauges. I didn't really know the full meaning of this at the time until I first skippered his vessel at night.

The towels were actually used to dim the light in the wheelhouse allowing for your eyes to adjust. I always thought the towels were only used during the day to help protect

the equipment from sunlight, but as I found out they also serve a useful purpose for night navigation.

If you needed to monitor your vessels position, depth water or running gauges it's simply a matter of lifting up part of the towel keeping the wheelhouse light to a minimum. This type of equipment must be switched on at all times so you have your navigation equipment ready to use instantly and your cabin also remains dark. If your navigation equipment were turned off, you would have to wait several minutes before they worked, which could be too late.

## SOUND

Use your hearing to your best advantage as sound is amplified as it crosses water. A good example of this is, if your stereo system is pumping out tunes you could miss some important clues given out by approaching vessels such as engine

noise, sound signals, even music or laughter.

If your relatively new to the boating game but have gained your RST refer back to what you learnt particularly trip planning, navigation lights and have all the safety gear above the minimum standard for the river.

I recommend all people on board a vessel at night to have their PFDs on (life jackets type 1). There are some new PFDS on the market that are completely user friendly on all levels and well worth investing in.

The river at night is a different ball game but if you play it safe using your common sense and follow a few simple rules, it can be a very relaxing, exciting and enjoyable experience. If you find you need to develop more confidence, a trip on board a vessel with an experienced skipper can always help you to learn the ropes.

Enjoy your time on the water.